Storm King

by slinden

Summary

Two children are rescued from a kidnapper and murderer after years of torture and abuse. The oldest, formerly Ben Solo and now Kylo Ren, feels a desperate need to protect four-year-old Rey as they enter the freedom, as well as the new terrors, of the outside world. How will they recover from what they experienced? The years to come will challenge them both as the scars underneath refuse to heal.

This is a modern-day AU that will follow Ben and Rey as they grow up and deal with what happened, as well as their feelings for one another and how they transform over time.

Notes

I haven't posted in a while because of my workload (teaching, research, meetings, general
despair about my career, etc.). Thought I'd let you guys know that my WIPs are not forgotten, but I needed to get something else going to get myself back into writing as I fight through exhaustion and general blahs. Maybe going into dark places isn't the best way to go but here we are :). Thanks for reading! I've really missed posting so hopefully I can keep pushing through everything that's going on right now!

Note from Future Sarah to Past Sarah: Oh God, what have you done.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Two children, after years of torture, start their journey to recovery.

Kylo Ren stared at the scratched patch of paint on the wall across the hospital room. It was a discoloured spot of pale green in a sea of ivory, rising up from another time to taint the present.

It was only about the size of a coin: a small scratch that no one else seemed to notice, but he did. The room had been quiet for an hour, the first silence that he could remember in years, but the damned spot was starting to scream at him over the dull buzz of the overhead lights. His dark head tilted as he felt himself getting drawn into the green. The edges slowly started to blur as he focused on the infuriating blemish, spreading and growing in a way that paint couldn’t. The colour started to spill over its confines and bled strings of disruption across the blank expanse that filled his vision. It thrummed with his pulse, seemingly want to draw him in to touch it.

He blinked hard and glared, finally swimming up from numbness back to rage. Someone scratched the damned wall and hadn’t bothered to fix it.

People who were free to do whatever they wanted never worried about taking care of what they had.

“Why’re you looking at the wall?”

The tiny voice in the bed next to him broke his trance and the expanse of the web contracted in a snap, leaving only the obscure and unnoticeable green dot.

He forced his face to be neutral when he looked down at Rey’s wide, yet tired, brown eyes. She yawned and looked from him to the wall, before meeting his eyes again.

That morning the police had told him she was about four years old. That morning, they were wrapped in blankets and put in the back of an ambulance. That morning, for the first time in seven years, he left the horrors of his captivity. That morning, he heard the sounds of their captor choke out his last hateful breath as he choked him to death.

That morning, they were free.

Looking into her eyes made it all wash over him again and he took a shaky breath before finally answering.

“Couldn’t sleep.”

She yawned again and took his hand. “Why?”

He settled into the bed next to her and traced her hospital bracelet with his free hand. The flimsy plastic band sat loosely over the now-hardened cast for her broken arm. Hours ago he’d raged at the nurses about the name on that band. They put Jane Doe, even though he insisted that her name
was Rey. He only stopped fighting when he saw the tears in her eyes and took a slow step back to drop his head and let the nurses win.

Shrugging, he let the bracelet go. “It’s too quiet.”

Her small face was solemn. “No screaming.”

He didn’t want her to cry again. It hurt too much. The entire day had been overwhelming. The ecstasy of being free rapidly faded into disillusionment of basically being in another prison. This one wasn’t haunted by an abusive murderer, but instead guarded by police, doctors, and social workers.

He had forgotten how many people there were in the world and now it seemed like they were meeting them all at once.

Kylo didn’t want to believe he’d been gone for seven years. That would make him fourteen — half of his life had been stolen from him and all of Rey’s life had been spent in that hell. Even in the clean and hushed hospital room, he could still feel the pressure and pain well in his chest at how fucking unfair everything was. But just the brief spark of selfishness on his part pulled the corner of his mouth into a frown. He’d only been able to save her. He had let the other kids down and now they were the only ones left.

Even in the big world that they’d escaped into, everything still felt so small.

He felt weak in both of them.

“You need to sleep,” he said, lowering his voice. “It’s late.”

He used to hold her in the dirty corner of the sleeping room and could always talk her to sleep. He’d tell her stories that he could remember from his past and she’d smile brightly before cuddling closer and finally resting. He would spend the rest of those nights resisting sleep to keep watch on the door. Anytime one of the others moved or cried, he was worried that the terror would come down on them again. She used to be covered in dirt and blood. He could still almost taste it when he inhaled the scent of her hair.

“But you’re not sleeping,” Rey answered, even as her eyelids started to drift shut. They’d had to reset her arm before putting on the cast. The doctors had looked on in horror as she didn’t flinch at any of the needles or prodding. He would have smiled if he’d felt anything in that moment. She’d been like that the entire day, even when he’d scooped her up from the floor and made his break for the door. But there was no reason to smile at the carnage he’d left behind in that crimson-stained horror compound.

He’d fought so hard not to react around her. Now, all he could feel was a growing need to scream or cry. The feeling to run started to crawl up his throat; he never should have flagged down that stranger on the lonely dirt road. He should have just kept running. The only mistake he hadn’t made that day was killing Snoke, a man whose cruelty sunk below horror and existed in a space of hollow evil. He would suck in the screams and turn them into a vicious energy to consume more blood, tears, and torn flesh. Just the flash of the man's dying eyes in his head made his urge to flee grow. Otherwise, he would break everything in the room. His hands started to quiver as he pulled away.

“I need to go ask the nurses something,” he replied. “You’re safe here and I’ll be right back.”

He’d fought to stick by her side the entire day, but he was too restless to stay in that room. Rey had
insisted that they leave the lights on and it was hurting his eyes. The buzz from the lights was angrily scratching at his ears as well.

And that damned spot was staring back at him from the corner of his eye.

Rey seemed to shrug and accept it. She trusted him too deeply and knew that he’d return.

“Be back soon, Kylo.”

Her words were soft and sleepy as he eased himself off of the high hospital bed. It was hers but he didn’t want her to sleep alone. His bed was empty across the room. The police had questioned them late into the evening, he guessed. He remembered the sting of the sunshine on his face. It wasn't the first time he'd felt the sun and breathed in the grassy tones of fresh air, but it was the first breath he took without fearing being shot in the back for stepping out of line. He'd grabbed Rey tighter and achingly moved down the driveway into the future. The sharp stones stung his bare and bleeding feet but he still ran even though the old man was dead.

The memories were getting jumbled now because all he could think about was running right back into hell, her in tow.

As his bare feet hit the cool floor, he had to take a long, deep breath to steady himself. He had forgotten what linoleum felt like after walking on dirt and wood for seven years. It was smooth and slippery and too clean. Any spec of dirt seemed to dig into his skin as he walked quietly across the room. Real pain came from something one couldn't see, not the open wound of being violated and destroyed from the inside out.

He put on the slippers they’d given him and took one last glance at Rey before pushing the door open.

His hand stilled after it swung open an inch.

He could freely open a door.

There was a lock, clearly, but it was just a single lock. It wasn’t rows of rusty and heavy padlocks.

He could just get up and go out into the hallway.

His hand fell back and the door slid from his hand. The door scratched at the floor, loosely swinging back into place. He could hear his own breathing again when it slid to the frame. Just looking at the floor outside made his heartbeat quicken. He took a slow step back and just stared at the large window in the centre of the pale orange door. It wasn’t blocked; he could clearly see out.

People had come in and out of that room all evening and he couldn’t do it.

Frustration took over and he quickly pushed his way out of the room, violently hitting the door. He would force himself to get used to this for Rey. She had no idea what the outside world looked like. He had to make it through his own fears to prevent the darkness from getting to her.

A tired-looking police officer sat in a chair outside their room. They were being watched once again. Even as he narrowed his eyes, the cop sat up a little and quirked his head at him.

Kylo felt his legs stiffen again and he dropped his head.

“Something the matter?” The officer asked.
His mouth wouldn’t work and the slippers were too small for his feet.

“Kid?”

He took a ragged breath, hearing his back teeth clack together as he steadied his jaw.

“Need to go for walk.” It all came out as one hasty word. Exhaling sharply out of his nose, he met the man’s eyes just to prove to himself that he could do it. “I need to take a walk. Can I go to the nurse’s station?”

The officer looked confused but then nodded. “Sure. Do you know where it is?”

“Yes,” he answered quickly. Then he paused, still making himself look at the other man. “Rey is asleep.”

“Want me to check on her?”

He shook his head instantly. “No, no. She’s still not used to other people.”

The officer, still with his puzzled expression, nodded. Kylo snapped his eyes away and started down the hall to the nurses.

He didn’t really need to go there. He just wanted to go somewhere.

His feet slowed as he neared the first corner. He still kept waiting for Snoke to jump around every wall and drag him back into the darkness.

Kylo again looked at his uncomfortable slippers as the brightness from his hallway clashed with the dim lighting around the corner.

Pursing his lips, he forced himself to get through the area and continue towards the station.

Snoke was dead. He couldn’t come back for him. He’d killed him. He had finally been strong enough to stand up to him and…

“Do you need something?”

He blinked and realized that he’d reached where he had wanted to go. His body had worked even when his mind didn’t.

But there had already been too many questions today and he wanted to snap at the voice that greeted him. He swallowed it and shook his head.

The young nurse sat up and looked at him with gentle eyes. He still didn’t want to know what time it was, but with the lack of running feet and quickly exchanged words, he knew it was night. The station had a brightly toned desk with small toys sitting on a soft-pink countertop. The nurse was wearing magenta. He surprised himself by remembering the names to colours he hadn’t seen in years.

“Can I have some juice?” He needed to ask something to avoid looking stupid. The nurse was looking at him like he was a broken idiot. His excuse was bullshit, but at least it was something.

She smiled brightly, setting her book down. “Of course. You can wait right here.”

She disappeared into a side room, leaving him alone in the large, empty space. The lights were dimmed in the waiting area on the other side of the station. There were no visitors. It was late at
night. The world was asleep, still forgetting that they existed.

Except for some.

He eyed the distant door that led to the elevators and thought again about running.

He’d made a mistake with one of the police earlier. She was a pushy detective that had threatened to keep him from Rey until he told her who he was. He had hated her and her awful blonde hair the second she had pushed her way into the room and now that hatred again cracked through his mind.

He told them his real name. His parents were coming.

But he’d been Kylo Ren now for as long as he was Ben Solo.

Narrowing his eyes at the door, he slowly clenched his hand into a fist.

The quick return of the nurse made him jump back and stumble. He didn't think it was that bad but her hand came to her mouth and she apologized. He still stared wildly at her as he fought to get his heart under control.

“I’m so sorry,” she said. “Here’s some apple juice. The next time you need something, you can use the call button in your room, okay?”

He saw his hands shake as he took the cool bottle. Avoiding touching her hand was the hardest part.

Retreating without another word, he heard Snoke’s voice in his head as he took furious strides back to their room. He was worthless; he was damaged; his parents clearly didn’t want him because he was weak and stupid enough to be caught in the first place.

He ignored the police officer and entered his room again.

Rey was still asleep.

He wanted to scream, but instead let his hand tighten around the bottle. He couldn’t wake her up.

The juice was too sweet as he took two long clunks. He winced at the taste and then closed the lid before tossing it onto his empty bed. As gently as he could, he crawled back into bed with Rey. She whimpered and pulled him closer as he lifted the light sheet over them both.

Forcing his eyes closed, he felt the gentle rhythm of her heartbeat against his chest.

She had been the reason he survived the last four years. Before Snoke brought her into the compound, he was a numb body, existing just for another beating, assault or the other brutalities that he could dream up from his rotten mind. Snoke took Rey out of a rage at him and his unwillingness to respond to his torment. The grizzled old man had ripped off one of Kylo’s fingernails and he’d hardly reacted. He’d hardly flinched as the wrinkled hand brought the pliers down onto the next finger. There was pain, he remembered dully, but he didn’t really feel it. It was another drop into the void. He didn't realize why Snoke had pushed him aside and left suddenly. When he stumbled back to the others, they were mostly grateful that he'd taken the brunt of the anger again. He'd stared at them and nodded before sitting down and letting his eyes blur until he must have fallen asleep. The next day, an infant appeared and Kylo knew that it was his fault. Another child had been taken because of him; that hadn't happened before, when he'd obeyed and cried and screamed. Snoke had just taken children at whim before but that was a message. He had to behave, but he also had to get her out of there.
It took him four years, but he’d done it.

But what was he supposed to do now?

The thought kept him awake until exhaustion finally started to pull him down into an uncomfortable sleep. This wasn't huddled in a corner until his shoulders grew stiff. This wasn't stealing minutes on a floor that was tainted with the scent of blood. This was a place where they should be and feel safe. He should be happy. Instead, he didn't know where that feeling came from anymore. He knew how it looked: he saw it on the face of the police and the doctors and everyone else that had paraded in and out of their room in the last hours. He also knew how it looked every time that Rey looked at him. But for some reason, he couldn't find his happiness in the dark swirls of his mind as he reached for rest that his body desperately needed.

His first free sleep in years would be spent in a hospital bed, protecting a young girl who had ended up where she was because of him and his mistakes. Hugging Rey closer to him as he finally started to drift off, his last thoughts were about why his parents never did the same for him.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Kylo deals with the dawn of the first day of freedom and reconnecting with people who he thought had forgotten him: his parents, and his best childhood friend.

Chapter Notes

I am finally feeling better again and getting back into writing! More chapters are coming here and to my other things. I can’t tell you guys how much I missed writing here. I really hope that I can keep working through the stuff that is bringing me down and give you guys more! Thanks for the comments so far! I am actually writing this on my iPad with a Bluetooth keyboard that keeps switching languages between French, English, and Swedish so sorry if some of the punctuation gets wonky...

They were watched while they ate breakfast. A woman with pursed pale lips and sharp eyes kept her distance, but Kylo felt her gaze like a needle underneath his skin. It prodded him every time she exhaled. That meant she was going to speak and all he wanted was silence.

A nurse had checked on them early that morning, just after dawn, and he sank into an instant foul mood at the reactions of the adults around him. Everyone was questioning them. No one was really helping them.

After showering and dressing in the soft pyjamas given to them to wander around in, they crawled back into bed and managed to fall asleep again.

Then, the meal had been wheeled in and he had reacted without thinking. It had taken only one or two breaths and he was moving. The two hospital staff had gawked at him as he had pulled sleeping Rey off the bed to the corner, to shield her from an attack that wasn’t coming. It was only when Rey smelled the food that she gently tapped him out of his panicked stupor.

His hands loosened and he realized that his knuckles were tinged white.

How was he supposed to be normal? He needed to get them out of there and he was still acting like everyone was going to hurt them.

He had finally stood up and instantly looked at his feet.

That was when the woman trailed in and started making notes as they sat together on the bed. They’d slept there that night like that because Rey had cried lightly when he had left her for a few minutes to stare at the mirror and understand what he was now. It was the memory of his own hazy eyes that made him look up and look around himself again. He heard her underlining something on her stacks of paper as he started helping Rey rather than instantly digging into his food. The
doctors had told him that despite how tall and strong he was—and he knew he was strong because he’d killed Snoke—he was underweight. He’d eat eventually, when everything being served to them stopped tasting so overwhelmingly saccharine.

The woman shifted and he was drawn from his memories back into the room and her prickly presence.

“Why aren’t you eating?” She asked again.

He squinted at her. “Not hungry.”

Rey was happily picking up the sticky pancakes that he was cutting up for her. She didn’t question where the food came from or who the woman was, at least not openly. Whenever they were alone, they would talk. It was a relief not to whisper and to hear her voice and how perfect she spoke. Whenever Snoke was out, he’d try to teach her terms and concepts that he remembered; she had to go to school when they got out and couldn’t look stupid like he did when he was a child. Now, however, at the dawn of the first full day of freedom, she would revert back to the silent language that all of the children had developed over the years whenever there was someone else in the room. Communicating by blinking was quite often the only way to get through some nights without being punished. They had tried using hand signals or touches, but Snoke would figure them out. He never caught on to the blinking. Or maybe he had and just ignored it for the bigger plans that he had for them.

The idiot across from him hadn’t figured it out either. And he hoped that she never would.

She was some sort of therapist or psychologist. He hadn’t been listening when she came in behind the breakfast trays. He knew that there would be more names and faces throughout the day and had woken up in an awful mood because of it. His adrenaline still hadn’t faded from his earlier instincts to protect Rey. Just looking at the food made his stomach harden.

He finally gave up and picked up a single grape, glaring at the woman as he popped it into his mouth.

She scribbled something down and he clenched his teeth, biting against the sourness in his mouth.

“Are the pancakes good, Rey?” She asked, focusing on her again. Look for the weaker one, as Snoke would say. “What do they taste like?”

Rey quirked her head and turned to him first, asking what she should say. He blinked back, giving her the simplest answer.

He was smart enough to know that they would have to be there a long time. The whispers between the police and the doctors had already led him down that path. They had to act like they weren’t broken, even though he knew better in the back of his mind. Rey had never been outside and he was stubbornly ignoring the fact that every distant sound from the hallway made him twitch or jump.

Rey turned to the woman and shrugged. “Sweet. I like them.”

“That’s good. What else is sweet?”

“Juice. Fruit.” Rey returned to eating after her answer. He started cutting up his portion for her and let her enjoy the treat. He had to keep himself from snapping the flimsy cutlery as he edged through the soft cakes. His mother or sometimes the housekeeper used to make pancakes every Sunday for him. Tasting them now would bring back even more memories that he didn’t want to
“Candy is also sweet,” the woman said. “Maybe we can have some candy later.”

Rey didn’t answer the baited question. Kylo could tell that the woman was waiting for them to answer something about the compound or their captor. She knew full well that Rey had never had that much candy before and it cemented his resentment towards the leading questions that the woman posed and her in general. Rey had never had a childhood and this woman was going to make her ashamed of that lack.

It was strange to hate someone new. But it was also freeing.

He could hate again.

She stopped her questioning after a while and turned to flipping through papers and forms, checking off random boxes and sighing whenever she caught Kylo’s eyes boring into her. Eventually, she gave up and left them alone.

The next face was one of the detectives from last night. She reintroduced herself as Phasma and sat down on the now-vacated chair. Kylo’s shoulders stiffened at her reappearance.

“We’re going to go to the playroom, if you’d like, now that you’re done your breakfast,” she said, her voice light but Kylo could see that they didn’t have an option. “We have many more questions for you, but it’s a good idea for you to relax first.”

“Will there be other children there?” he asked. Then, he dropped his head and added a second part, pressed by her presence. “I’ve heard them,” he said, looking back at her again with narrowed eyes.

Phasma tilted her blonde head and pursed her lips before speaking. “Would you like other children to be there?”

This was another trick. He was being given a choice. “Maybe later.”

“That sounds good. Would you like to come with me?”

He didn’t. But he went anyway.

They passed by now-opened doors to other rooms. There were curious eyes following them and their entourage of uniformed police officers. He had to keep his head down to avoid catching a face that reminded him of someone who would still be alive if he wasn’t so stupid.

The sun shone brightly in the playroom. Rey’s hand tightened in his at the sight of toys, playground equipment, and a television set mounted to the wall. She looked up at him and almost blinked too rapidly for him to catch what she meant. He finally gave her a small smile, the first one that felt real, and nodded.

She gently took her hand from his and strode confidently up to the plastic bin of dolls and play clothes. He lulled by the door before following after, sitting on a low plastic slide to watch her. The police lurked by the doorway, but he focused on Rey. She could finally play.

He made her a doll when she was three. He’d pulled out and saved clumps of his hair, combining them with scraps of forgotten and ripped cloth he’d pocketed. It was small enough to hide in one of the holes they’d scratched into one of the walls.

She cherished it.
And had named it Kylo.

Snoke found it, burnt it, and tossed the hot ashes in her face.

The vision made him shudder and he caught Phasma’s frown. That made him lower himself from the red, plastic slide down onto the carpeted floor. Rey had sorted out the dolls and clothes into neat piles and was counting them, awkwardly moving her broken arm as she completed her task.

“There are too many,” she frowned. “Why too many?”

He picked up one of the soft, fabric dolls and tried to come up with an answer. “The children here are sick. They need things to help them feel better.”

“Doesn’t, um,” he watched Rey work out the word and caught the line of frustration that creased her forehead, “medicines do that?”

He wanted to smile but the eyes of the police made him only quirk his lips slightly. It hurt not to be proud of her. “That’s for their bodies. This is for…everything else.”

She nodded and reached for the doll in his hand. “It’s still too many.”

Kylo watched Rey dressing and redressing the dolls for a few minutes before he noticed how the police officers, detective Phasma included, kept looking through the open door and into the hallway, before glancing down at their phones. The small bricks in their hands intrigued him. He vaguely remembered how his mother would let him watch videos or play games on her device. But he also saw her speaking on it, barking orders or rolling her eyes at something. But that one had been small. When did they get so big?

That’s when he heard the distant echo of his mother’s voice.

When Rey’s head lifted, he knew it wasn’t just in his head.

He reached for her and she instantly went into his arms. Anytime he moved with determination, it only meant bad things. Even though the police were watching him, he spurned their gazes and went to sit in the large chair in the corner. He had Rey in his lap and his eyes on the door. He didn’t want to be sitting on the floor when he saw them again.

The clattering of shoes and nearing of voices drummed on his ears. They seemed to match his rapid heartbeat, filling up his senses until he could only hear his own breathing. White clouded the corners of his eyes as he stared at the floor, willing himself to disappear into it.

“Ben!”

He didn’t look up. It was his father’s voice. A shiver coursed through his body and he sunk down further into the chair.

“Ben? We’re here. Oh my God, we can’t believe it. You’re here. You’re safe.”

Now his mother’s voice joined the first.

He heard them step forward and he turned his head to the side and shut his eyes.

If they were there, he’d have to leave with them.

None of this should be happening. He could take care of everything. He already had and always would.
He heard the detective clear her throat. “They’ve been through a lot. Give them time.”

“Who’s the girl? We heard about her, but have you found her parents?” His father spoke and he hugged Rey closer.

“She’s mine,” Kylo finally shouted. “She doesn’t have any parents.”

Phasma sighed heavily. “We should go talk somewhere else…”

“No!” he snapped, finally turning to look at them as Rey squirmed in his lap. His stomach turned as he looked at his parents.

They weren’t the same; they were supposed to be the same. Strands of grey arched through their hair and he saw lines that he didn’t remember. He didn’t know them. He wasn’t leaving with strangers. He swallowed and shook off his stare. “Talk to us. Don’t just talk about us.”

Phasma licked her lips and then nodded, after glancing between his parents. “It’s…it’s like this, Mr. and Mrs. Solo. Like we told you before your flight, there is still so much to go through. They are still decompressing and we have to get full statements once they’re ready. And that might take a while. We are working with the FBI. They’ve been looking for this guy for a long, long time.”

His mother took a deep breath, which grated on his nerves, and then nodded. “We won’t hide anything from him. He’s our son. And we just want him to come home. That’s all we’ve wanted for so long.”

He sucked in air through his teeth and nuzzled Rey’s neck. He wasn’t going home with them. He was going to find a way out, get a job, a place to live, and they’d be fine. He would be a better parent than they ever were to him. He wasn’t going to forget important things. He wasn’t going to let Rey get taken in an open parking lot and forget about her.

Phasma looked at Kylo, meeting his eyes with a glance that he didn’t expect. She actually looked at him like she wanted him to hear what he was going to say. He pushed the feeling down, but knew that he wouldn’t forget it.

“We need you to talk to us, Ben. And we want it to be on your terms, but you need to give us something. Your parents have travelled a long way to be here for you. Believe us when we say that they’ve missed you and never stopped looking for you.” Phasma’s voice was firm, but not threatening.

His lip trembled and he bit down hard to keep from responding. He had to think. “I want a phone.”

“Can he have a phone? He can have mine.” His father spoke again and rage swept across his eyes as the old man dug his hand into his pocket.

“I want my own phone. I haven’t had anything that has just been mine for seven fucking years. I…I will talk. If I get a phone.” He dropped his head again and breathed in heavily against Rey’s shoulder. She was murmuring lightly to him and he cursed himself for speaking so harshly. He pressed a gentle kiss on the back of her neck and looked up again. “Rey needs the washroom. We can talk later.”

He placed his charge on the floor and then stood himself, noticing how he came up to his father’s shoulders. Forcing his eyes down, he gathered Rey up again and started to cross the floor. His head forward and his strides determined, he fought to keep his dizziness from knocking him to the ground. His mother’s perfume, his father’s cologne…the colour of their eyes. All of it pressed on his senses.
Cutting through the small group, no one stopped him.

Once they were in the private washroom of their room, he could finally exhale. Rey gently pushed away and out of his arms when he slid to the floor. Taking long, slow breaths, he found a water stain to study. Colour finally tinted the walls again, bleeding through the black and white tones that had been his vision since he brushed past his family.

“Kylo,” Rey demanded. “You lied.”

“I had to lie,” he answered, pulling his knees up to his chest and resting his head on them. “I’m sorry I made the lie about you.”

“Who’re they? Those people?” Rey lowered her high-pitched voice into a whisper, kneeling next to him. She put her hand on his bare foot. He didn’t want to wear those awful slippers again.

He didn’t want to show weakness around her, but she was the only one who saw it. It wasn’t fair. Yet, a part of him wanted her to know that it was okay to feel bad, angry, and sad. Life shouldn’t be fake happy. Rey had to be normal; she couldn’t be like him.

“They’re my mom and dad.” He looked at her and his vision started to blur. Tears stung his eyes and he dug his fingers into the corners of his eyes to try to hold them back.

She stared at him, her mouth sagging open. “Why?”

He felt heat rise to his cheeks. “To…take us home.”

“Are my mom and dad…where are them?”

“They. It’s they, not them, angel.” He finally let one of his hands drop to take hers. Their hands folded together and, for once, they didn’t have ragged and torn fingernails that were caked with dirt. They were clean and their wounds were healing. “You’re my angel, right Rey?”

She grinned broadly, awkwardly leaning forward to wipe at his eye. “I came to Earth to save you. Then you saved me.”

“Yeah,” he managed to say with a light smile. “We don’t know where your parents are. But the police will find them.”

“Can I stay with you until then?” Her eyes suddenly twitched in panic. “With your…mom and dad?”

He nodded, his own worry settling in his temples again. “Yes. And if they won’t let us, I’ll save you again.”

Rey swallowed and nodded, her small head bobbing up and down. “Kylo…can I go play again?”

Blinking, he sat back, resting his head against the tiled wall. It was slightly warm from their shower that morning. He remembered the piercing look from the nurse as he took Rey to clean and dress her without her help. The same questioning eyes followed him when he helped her to the toilet later. Then he made the scene at breakfast.

Maybe it was better that Rey learnt that she could be away from him.

She’d just be a few metres away, he told himself. They weren’t going to take her away.

And if they did, he’d hurt them. Just like he hurt Snoke.
He finally looked up at her with a gentle smile. She grinned back, so it must have looked real.

“Go. We can go wherever we want now.”

She giggled and threw her arms around him, sloppily kissing his cheek before reaching for the heavy hospital door. He had to push himself to his feet to help her; her casted arm still made her weak. He’d have to wait until that was healed, at least. She gave him one last grin and skipped out into the hall.

He watched her go and sank back down to his knees. Weakly, he crawled back into the washroom and locked the door.

A sob rose up from his chest, exiting his mouth like a trapped demon. He sounded like a little boy, like the tortured cries from the older children as Snoke tortured and violated and then murdered them. He was crying their tears. He scratched at his cheeks, forcing on pain so he’d have a real reason to weep. The ache stretched on, burning his throat as he gasped for air. Forcing his hand into a fist, he punched the floor. The first time, he felt nothing. The second and third time, a slight tingle spread up to his wrist. Finally, the fourth and fifth time brought blood and the true, releasing sensation of pain.

Sitting up, he looked at his torn and reddened knuckles.

Snoke’s gapping mouth flashed across his eyes and he looked away, catching the bottom of the small mirror at child height.

He slowly stood, looking into the taller mirror.

Scraggily, raven-coloured hair. An awkward face and jaw. Ivory skin, now patched with red. His ears peaked out from his too-large head, mocking him from between his curls.

He could only meet his eyes for a second before looking away.

Maybe it was better that they find Rey’s parents.

She had to look at him all the time. She needed someone better.

Slamming his hand against the faucet, he forced his injured hand under the water. Hissing at the warmth, his heart finally calmed. He wrapped a towel around his hand and shook off his doubt from a moment ago. Rey was his. She wasn’t going anywhere. She was his.

He waited inside for what felt like hours but it couldn't have been that long. It felt good to be by himself for a while, to gather his thoughts and hurt himself enough to get through the rest of the day.

Unlocking the door, he decided he would sleep for a while until Rey got bored and returned to him.

A small white box was resting on his bed.

The note on top said ‘Love, mom and dad.’

He tossed the note in the trash and slid open the box. A gold-toned phone fell into his hand. It looked more like one of the few hand-held video game devices that he had as a kid. It was light, but the screen was massive. Fumbling to turn it on, it finally sprung to life. He knew how to do this. He had to do it right. The white screen and black logo grounded him. It was his. He had another thing that was his.
Reaching into his memory, he pressed the key that brought up the dial pad. He knew only three phone numbers by heart: his grandmother’s, his father’s office, and his best friend.

He went with the last one.

Kylo had only bothered to memorize the area code because of an awful vacation that they had taken the summer before he was taken. They went to Hawaii and he hated the sun. His father taught him about long-distance charges when they got the hotel bill. He didn’t care then and he didn’t care now.

When the number started to ring, his voice crept down into his throat and tried to flee into his stomach.

A familiar female voice answered. “Hello?”

He couldn’t speak. He couldn’t make a sound. But he wasn’t about to fail at this so he forced out something.

“Hey.”

“Hi, who’s this?”

“Is Armie there?” The words weren’t bunched together, but felt as much. His teeth clenched down as he waited for her answer.

“Armitage? He’s at school. Who is this?” She sounded annoyed. He spent so much time at the Hux family’s home that he thought that she would recognize his voice. He guessed that since he didn’t look like himself, he didn’t sound like it either.

“It’s…” he paused, sucking on the back of his teeth. “Ben.”

He heard a low gasp. “Ben Solo?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh my God, Ben, we prayed for you. We prayed for you for so long. Are your parents there? Did you call them? Where are you? I haven’t seen anything on the news…” She started weeping and he needed to roll his eyes. Why did she care? Prayer did nothing. She should have been out looking for him, not wasting time with an imaginary god for idiots.

“They’re here. Can…can I call Armitage later?”

Every word sounded dumb on his lips. The words only echoed in his ears. It was like she wasn’t real, just another daydream that he had when he was recovering from being beaten and chained in a room without sunlight or the closet filled with terror. He once again questioned if this was a dream; if it weren’t for the weight of the phone in his hand and the scattered loose threads of the bedspread beneath him, this place could have been another fantasy. But it had to be real; somewhere out there, his best friend was at school. He was sitting in a classroom, having a normal day. He ran his hand more rapidly against the bed, rubbing small circles until his palm felt slightly numbed.

“Ben, call him. You can call him at school. I’ll give you his number. I think…oh my God, Ben, you’re alive. Oh my God, he’s going to be so happy. I will…I’ll call the school so he can leave class. Here’s his number, are you ready?” Her voice was sloppy, drooping over every word. So at least he wasn’t the only one who couldn’t speak.
“Sure.”

She rattled off the number. He locked it into his head. She emphasized the area code again causing him to grunt likely.

“Ben, where are you?”

He silently looked at the phone.

He hadn’t wanted to ask.

“It came up on call display, sweetheart. You’re in California.”

The realization washed over him first as a gentle wave, then as a pulsing wind that pushed him further into his reality. California was across the country from Connecticut. How had he gotten there? Is that why no one could find him?

“I know,” he lied. “Can I have the number again?”

She gave it again.

He hung up without saying goodbye and quickly put the number up on the screen. He looked at it until the digits started to blur.

He waited ten minutes.

The phone screen went black and he panicked, quickly hitting the middle button again. It sprung to life and he stared again at what he wanted to do.

He just needed to know that he was missed by someone who he trusted.

He could trust Armitage. They had a sleepover the weekend before he left his life and talked about their plans for the summer. They were going to the same baseball camp for the first time. He needed to apologize for not keeping that promise.

He finally hit dial after another five minutes.

The phone rang once and an out-of-breath voice that he didn’t recognize answered. It took him a moment to realize it was his friend. He hadn’t spoken to him in seven years.

“It’s me,” he finally said, answering the hurried hello that he strained to comprehend.

A long and confused sigh was his response. “Who? What?”

“It’s…Ben.”

Armitage, who still didn’t sound like he should but it had to be him and Kylo had just forgotten everything about the boy who he used to know, let out a choked cry. Kylo let the sound travel down his body until the hairs on his arms rose. Someone actually missed him. Someone loved him.

“Is it really you? I…I got to leave class. Mrs Holdo just said that I was getting a call and it was emergency and it was so weird and I didn’t know what was going on and now…holy shit, man, you…you are alive. I don’t even know…” his friend’s voice trailed off as he started to weep. When his voice broke, he heard the echoes of the boy that he remembered. Once again he swallowed his own tears and cleared his throat.
“It’s me. Yeah, I…I have so much to tell you.” He listened to his friend cry, but then an odd hardness washed over him. “I need to go now. My parents are…here. I will call you later.”

“Yeah, sure. Please. I need to go to class, I guess.” Armitage chuckled through his tears. Kylo could almost picture the spray of built-up saliva from his mouth. “I can’t wait for you to come home. I missed you so much.”

He heard the words, but swallowed his instant response of I miss you too. Hux couldn’t know about how hard he cried about his friend. He couldn’t know how many times he hoped that he would be kidnapped too. It was only when Rey came that the sensation of permanently piling feelings into the empty hole of his absence was finally quelled.

“I will be home soon.”

Then he hung up.

The phone buzzed oddly in his hand a minute later.

*Good to hear from you, bro. Everyone here is freaking out.*

Kylo didn’t know why the sentence seemed to echo into a void as he stared at it.

He was still looking at the now blank screen when Rey returned, with his parents in tow.

If yesterday was the longest day, then today was already competing to surpass it.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Kylo's first encounter with the FBI agent working on his case sees him still struggle for control, as well as deal with his memories.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kylo found a piece of escape in the thing he had been denied most: solitude and sunlight. They let them outside, into a seemingly hidden and private garden behind one of the back entrances to the hospital. It had been a fight to get there. He had grit his teeth as his parents protested and the nurses fuss over Rey; she needed to wear a facemask and she couldn’t go near the fountain because of her arm. They let her breathe in the sick air of the hospital and had no idea about the mould, dirt, and grime of their former prison. But, suddenly, the outside air was too dangerous. He finally agreed if it meant they could go outside and be alone. They could watch from the door, but they had to be alone.

He bargained for it, telling them he wouldn’t eat or answer anymore questions if they didn’t give them some space.

Sitting beside the small bubbling fountain, he let out a long sigh. It drained from his body into the warm air, mixing with the scent of blooming flowers and drifting blades of grass. It was early in the afternoon and the sun split through the shadows into the small courtyard. There were traces of cigarette butts by the entrance and he felt his mind slipping into the annoyance of how wasteful people were. Just after they had sat down, one nurse, who he didn’t recognize, slipped out and slammed the door open, making them both jump. He lit a cigarette and Kylo narrowed his eyes. He didn’t let the man out of his sight until he went back inside. That’s when Kylo could relax.

He wanted things to be normal and couldn’t figure out how to put the pieces back together. All of the edges had been worn off.

Rey looked up from her investigation of the water fountain. He heard her head move with the swish of the paper, breaking through the other sounds and the lingering turmoil of the earlier morning and awkward lunch.

Detective Phasma had been whispering to other police officers when he sat too close to Rey again, to help her eat. His mother and father didn’t seem to notice or care; they instead asked what Rey’s favourite colour was.

He was almost satisfied when Rey had said black and both of their faces cringed in unison.

“So much water.”

Her voice now was soothing, combining with the gentle rhythm of the lapping water. It didn’t echo
like it did inside the sterile halls of the hospital. He had yearned for so long just to be able to hear something outside of scratched and scarred walls. There was stillness in nature that didn’t exist in confinement.

Rey didn’t seem to have an opinion, other than it was wonderful to be free.

Every second of freedom for her had been adventure that he was taking her on, keeping her safe. It had meant food and hugs, the power to have conversations without needing to blink or whisper, and new inventions and sights. She looked at everything with wide eyes, amazed in the fantasy world she now had access to; however, she still knew that when Kylo reached for her, it meant danger. He couldn’t let her think that everyone in the world was out to help her.

That’s what got him in trouble. That’s what broke him.

The delicate chirping of birds brought him back to the sunshine and he looked down at Rey.

He could see her smirk from behind her mask as her chinks wrinkled.

She splashed lightly at the water, watching it shimmer. “I like being clean.”

“Yeah, it’s nice,” he said, managing a small smile. “I’m…sorry for being angry before.”

He’d shouted at the doctors, the nurses, the detectives, and his parents. He used words that he didn’t want her to learn, but just had to. He had killed to be uncontrolled and at every turn he was being watched and prodded. If he didn’t lash out, his insides would turn to stone.

And if they took Rey from him, the last part of him would crumble and become dust.

She tilted her head. She looked so covered, her arm in a cast and her face obscured by the green and flimsy mask. The pyjamas still looked oversized and swallowed up her undersized body. Even in his darkness, he found happiness in the fact that she ate so much. Discovering cookies was a joy for her. He didn’t look at the plate in the same way when it was offered to them, but he ate one after she gave him a long look. Those eyes were the same ones that he had seen when he refused to tell her what had happened in the basement, after he had trudged upstairs on legs that could hardly function. In those darkest hours, his eyes were dry but his lips were quivering. Still, he’d still curl up to her in their little corner and she’d pick the blood out of his hair and hum lightly until they heard the heavy footfalls that meant silence until the storm had passed. Three sets of feet would go down into the basement; it was always only two that came up.

Until the last time when only one set did and those had been his.

As the fountain bubbled, he could still hear those footsteps and sucked in a quick breath as the memory shuddered through his body.

“You’re not angry. That’s normal,” Rey finally said.

The words cut through his tattered feelings so deep that he had to look away. He pretended to glare at the grove of trees at the edge of the yard. There was a parking lot on the other side, just peaking through the heavy brush. He’d already seen the photographers and strangers lurking there earlier.

Upstairs, his father had looked out the window and glared, muttering to himself before calling over his mother. She’d simply just shut the curtains. Then, she wouldn’t answer his question about what was happening and he’d locked himself in the washroom with Rey until she apologized and said that it was the media. She mentioned that the police wanted to have a press conference and he turned his anger towards Phasma. The other woman had the decency to say that it might not be a good idea.
He’d left his phone in the room. Armitage had sent him messages, telling him about how there were pictures of him in the news. People were pretending to know what had happened to him and the police were spreading stories. When his friend asked about the little girl, he turned the phone off and hid it in a drawer.

He didn’t know what to say to him.

And, now, he didn’t know what to say to Rey.

She knew the difference between good and bad, he had made sure of that. What was happening to them was bad. Protecting one another was good. He couldn’t do much more than that.

But was anger what she thought was normal for him? He hugged her and told her that he loved her. He was gentle and as kind as he could manage. Blinking back tears, he let the thought tumble around his head as he turned back to the soft circles of water, swirling in the fountain. Rey dipped her hand in and giggled and he smiled at her, dropping his fingers into the cool pool. He had to smile more, if only around her.

But the thought of smiling still made him ache. Crying did the same; they were both showing weakness when they wept. The only thing that he wanted to feel was anger and hurt, he wanted to let it burn through him until it sparked and travelled to that damned compound and let it torch the ruins of his childhood.

They both jolted as the outer door opened, hard metal cracking through the air. Instead of a smoker, it was a man in a dark grey suit and bright green tie. His shoulders were broad, but he was older than the nurses. He locked eyes on Kylo and a satisfied look crossed his bearded face. He was tall, taller than his father. Silver streaked through his beard and hair. His suit looked slightly wrinkled – it wasn’t like the crisp suits that Han wore in the morning on the way to work or the stylish outfits that his mother wore at dinner parties. It looked more like the late-evening state of their clothes, showing the wear of talking to too many people and doing too much of anything that would keep them out of the house and away from their awful son.

Standing from the cool fountain bricks, Kylo eyed the man. Rey sat still, but edged closer to him.

“Hello,” the man said, taking the three steps down to the ground in sturdy, quick motions. “I’ve been looking for you.”

“We can’t leave. It isn’t hard,” Kylo replied, raising his chin. He felt Rey move to stand beside him, forgetting the wonders of the water for a moment to hop down onto the ground. His feet were bare and hers were in a pair of shoes that his mother had bought her. It enraged him that she had bought her pink shoes when Rey had clearly said that her favourite colour was black.

“That’s not what I meant.” The man was closer now, feet crunching against the gravel. But he looked at them in a different way than the other adults. He stood a few metres away, stopped, and then took a slow step back. “May I speak with you? It’s been a long day.”

“Are you another cop?” Kylo asked, tiredly. He had stopped caring about being polite, but didn’t snap. Rey was there. He had to remember that. “We’ve talked. You should know everything now. You’re telling it to everybody else.”

The man looked quickly at his black shoes, then back up to them. He was carrying a black satchel, held loosely in his large hand. His eyes were kind, but Kylo could also see the creases and the darkness under them. But the space that he left between them made Kylo dare to sit down on the fountain’s edge again. The man gave him a small nod and approached them both. He sat down,
still at a comfortable distance. Rey looked at the man, her forehead creasing, before Kylo gently pulled her closer, helping her up onto the ledge again.

The sound on the streaming water settled over them as Kylo eyed the stranger.

“I should introduce myself. I’m Supervisory Special Agent Jinn, from the FBI. We’re like the police for the police, helping them with very serious crimes,” the man explained, mainly looking at Rey. He paused and his eyes drifted up to Kylo and, if he didn’t know better, he would have sworn he saw the man’s eyes shimmer. “I’ve been looking for you for as long as you’ve been gone, Kylo. I want to apologize for never getting to you sooner.”

The man’s voice was deep and Kylo thought he heard sincerity in the words. His blue eyes flicked from Kylo to Rey and he took a deep and tired breath. “And I’m sorry to you too, Rey. I never knew that I was looking for you too.”

Kylo nudged Rey. She first looked at him, then at the agent.

“Are you police too?” Her voice was curious rather than weak. He’d heard the doctors remarking that she was very advanced for coming out of the situation, but they were worried about the over stimulation she was getting. Too many things would happen and she couldn’t sort them out in her head. She needed to ask more questions, Kylo decided. She needed to figure out her own pace.

He knew her better than the doctors and she could do anything.

“Yes, yes I am. This is my case. It turns out, we were looking in the wrong place. And I’m very, very sorry for that.” Jinn briefly looked down at his hands, setting the satchel on the ground before placing both of his large hands on his legs. Kylo watched as the man wiped his palms against his trousers and frowned inwardly.

“Why?” Rey’s voice broke his concentration again and he was thankful for it.

Jinn bit his lip at Rey’s question. “Terrible, unimaginable things happened to you. And I can’t undo them. Time doesn’t work that way. But me feeling bad doesn’t fix anything, right?”

Rey scratched her head. She pulled at the mask, looking up at Kylo. He shrugged and she slipped off the paper; the agent didn’t react. They could have entire conversations in mere looks and that gave him release. Adults always talked, and there were too many questions. Rey was his harbour in this maelstrom. He watched her take in a deep and long breath, sucking in the fresh air. The smile that she gave him when she turned made him realize that his heart was still beating and he’d always have her. The painful memories of the stabs from the stones on the driveway leading away from Snoke were dwarfed by the beaming grin she gave him at the sensation of the sun and warmth on her face. They would fade, but her light would never dissipate, if he could help it.

Still, she turned back to Jinn with a question on her mind. “We hurt but you feel bad?”

Kylo would have called what he felt pride, but he tried to resist it. He couldn’t think that everything that Rey did was his doing. He’d done what he could and would have to keep working at it. The second they left with Han and Leia, he’d be looking for ways to get him and Rey away from them. They were useless parents, but he still needed them for a while. The best solution was to force himself to play along. He’d go home, he’d be with Armitage again. He’d ask him for money or how to get it. He must know. He was always the best at coming up with plans and organizing things.

He played out his intentions as the agent delicately spoke with Rey. He was telling her about how
he’d been finding clues and following leads. The soothing sound of the man’s voice lulled him into his fantasy. He thought about how he’d have to finish school first. He could do it. He’d be out of school by the time that Rey was eight. He’d have to give her a real childhood after that. She needed birthday parties with friends, and a yard to play in, and a dog…

His ears slowly tuned back in on what the agent was saying as his imagination threatened to fade into the sunlight. But still, his perfect life lingered in his mind as the words filtered into his mental images. Who was with you at the house, Rey? He had pictured the apartment he’d get at first – it would be like Uncle Luke’s but without the hollow emptiness that his home gave off. They’d have to get that at first in order to save money. When did he hurt you the most? There would be a small kitchen with a solid table for two in the corner. He’d help Rey with her homework – he wouldn’t make someone else do it. He’d make dinner after work from real things; it wouldn’t just come from something in the freezer on weeknights and save the fancier things for guests at party that only showed off the surface of how things should look. They would make it on their own. When was Kylo hurt the most? He wouldn’t cry at night and he’d never be weak in front of her. He wouldn’t let her hurt. She would be allowed to cry. That’s what girls were allowed to do. Boys shouldn’t be filled with tears that they didn’t know what to do with.

But even in his imagination, what Jinn was saying to Rey continued to break through the fog of his mind. The fountain bubbled and the words faded back into reality, the now: The last boy, what was his name?

He knew about the others. He caught the end of what Rey was saying, how she didn’t know, and shook his head.

“Angel, you remember him. He had dark hair and gave you the stone,” he spoke as the sunlight warmed his shoulders. He still pictured himself in his imaginary kitchen, as an adult and a whole person.

When he finally turned his full attention back to the two sets of eyes looking at him, he realized that he said the wrong thing.

He’d been weak again, lost in fantasy. He’d spoke instead of blinking.

Snoke was right about him.

But Jinn didn’t move for his bag. Instead, he leaned back and stretched his arms out and seemed to be enjoying the sunshine.

“We are going to have a hard conversation, but let’s not rush it. I think that you two have earned some time in the sun.”

Kylo looked at the man with guarded amazement, and just nodded.

A rustle from the bushes made all three turn. Kylo heard the snap of a camera and was on his feet, ready to charge barefoot across the grass. Jinn stood too and frowned in the direction of the interlopers rather than Kylo’s twisted fists.

“I guess there’s no escape anywhere,” the man mumbled.

Rey tugged at Kylo’s hand and he let his fists release. “They never cared. Why now.”

He heard Jinn chuckle lowly. “I think that you’re going to be amazed by how much this country
has cared about you. If you’re comfortable, we can talk here. They want me to bring you to the
office, but I don’t really like following the rules. We would like to show you some things that
might help you. And the others.”

Kylo slowly turned to look up at the agent, his suspicions crawling up his spine to escape from his
mouth: “We don’t know who you are.”

“Right,” Jinn said and the quickly produced a badge and ID. Kylo pretended to know what all of
the information meant. He looked at it like he’d seen on television, and then handed it back with a
quick shake of his head. “Great. Let’s sit down and talk a little. If you want to.”

Kylo slowly sat down and took a deep breath. Rey climbed up onto his lap and he hugged her
waist. This man knew the other half of the story, which was one he didn’t want to hear from his
parents. They still looked at him with glossy eyes so what they would say would be coloured by
their own mistakes. But the only way to get his answers was to be willingly interrogated again. He
felt his pulse start to quicken. He had been able to keep things from the other police, but the way
that this man looked at them told him that he wouldn’t be as easily fooled.

He was in trouble.

It was as if Jinn could hear his thoughts and he shook his head. “I just want to hear your story,
Kylo. You don’t have to worry.”

But he did. He dropped his forehead against Rey’s small shoulder and shrugged. “What if I don’t
want to tell you anything?”

He watched as the agent reached into his bag to pull out a recorder. It was small and silver and
reminded him of the phone he’d hid in his hospital room. He placed it on the edge of the fountain
and gently pressed a button. The device beeped to life and Kylo sucked in a breath.

“Then I can answer your questions instead,” he said, lightly. “But to be fair, for every question you
ask, I get to ask one of my own.”

“Rey gets to ask questions too. So, two questions.” Kylo shoved his selfishness aside and hugged
her a little as he spoke. “Then you can ask something, I guess.”

“Fair is fair.”

He nudged Rey a little and she squeezed his hand in agreement.

“Have you found Rey’s parents?” Kylo asked, bluntly.

Jinn’s face was unreadable until he sighed. “We are still looking. Remember when they took the
swab of your mouth, Rey? We’re looking for something called DNA; that will help us find your
parents. It’s like a plan for how you were made. It will match your mom and dad. It will take a
while to search everywhere on our computers. But this is where answering one of my questions
will help us all. Kylo, which house did he bring her to? This one, or the one in Colorado?”

Kylo swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. “We were in Colorado before?”

Nodding, Jinn reached for his satchel again. “I’m going to show you some things now, just to
prove to you that I’m not a liar. I know that you hate liars.”

Kylo didn’t react. He just waited for Jinn to show him the pictures.
He just wanted to know what he remembered was real. It all couldn’t have been the blur that he wanted to think that it was.

He showed him what looked like a nice house, in a nice neighbourhood. Jinn then handed him the next picture: the basement. Swallowing the urge to throw up, Kylo quickly nodded.

“She wasn’t there. She was only here, at the last place. We were only in that house for a little while.” He dropped his head. “He’d…he could…I mean…only six kids died there. He only took me to this place.”

Nodding, Jinn put the pictures away, only to produce another one.

“This,” Jinn paused to hand him the picture, “was where you were in Connecticut.”

Kylo kept his hand straight, denying his body the relief of shaking, as he took the sheet. It was just the outside of a rundown house. It looked small and falling apart. But it had been so big. The day he was brought there, he thought that the house had been huge. He stared at it and then shook his head.

“Why didn’t you ever find me then?” he asked, willing his voice to be firm. Yet, the hurt was starting to creep up his throat. He held Rey closer to keep himself in the moment.

Jinn briefly closed his eyes and then leaned forward to rest his elbows on his thighs. “We missed you by two weeks.”

His vision tilted and his body went rigid.

Two weeks.

Instantly, Rey turned in his arms to hug him. Rage blossomed in his chest and she did what she always had. She pulled her small arms around him and nuzzled his neck.

But he couldn’t take his eyes off of the agent.

His life had been stolen from him because they’d been too late.

He let the picture drop into the dirt and wrapped his arms around Rey. He stood from the fountain and marched towards the door to the hospital, but stopped short. He dropped to his knees and lightly started whispering to her that he was okay, he wasn’t angry at her, he was going to be okay. Her arms gradually loosened and she sat back onto the ground.

He met her eyes and blinked the next part to her.

Need to talk to him. Don’t be afraid.

Not afraid. She answered. Can I play?

Yes. But stay near me.

He stood, leaving her to follow after him. Pausing, he frowned. He must have taught her that word. She needed to know how to play. Shaking his head, he bit his lip and sat down with hard eyes on the agent as Rey dawdled towards the other side of the fountain. Her head was towards the water, but he knew her eyes were still on him.

“Why couldn’t you find us?” he asked. “There were six kids there. Didn’t anyone hear anything?”

Jinn licked his lips. “It was very…remote. But I want you to know that we never stopped looking.”
“You missed us in Connecticut and Colorado. You weren’t looking hard enough.” Kylo rubbed his eyes and sat back. “You can ask a question now.”

“Who else was there, in Connecticut? The first house.”

He was at least asking the right questions. Kylo sighed, bringing his legs up to tuck under his chin.

“I don’t know their real names. We all got new names. We could never say our real names,” he mumbled. “But when he took me, there was an older boy that helped him. Cassian. He…he died.”

Jinn nodded and pulled out another picture. “I think this is who you’re talking about. His real name was Erik Carter. He disappeared when he was ten and we think that he was about fifteen when he died. We found him with the others there. We could identify three of the bodies, but we haven’t been able to figure out who the other four are. We need you to help us with that, give us clues about when they were there.”

Kylo just stared at the picture of the boy he had briefly known as Cassian. He was younger in the picture, but it was him. The same eyes that he remembered fading into death were locked into an eternal gaze of the photograph. He had been the one to trick him out of his father’s car. He had been the one to convince him that his father didn’t care about him and he needed to come with him to play a game. Kylo remembered being angry that Han was taking so long. They had been waiting in the empty parking lot of the baseball diamond for forever; everyone else was gone and Kylo had felt embarrassed that his father always needed to talk to someone, somewhere all the time.

He shook out of the memory of being helped into the back of Snoke’s van. But the moist, dismal smell of the interior followed him. One of the corners of the hospital’s stairwell had shaken the scent loose from his mind and now it was trailing him everywhere.

“Four?” He choked out, shifting his weight. “So we were…eight?”

“Yes, four.”

Kylo dropped his head. “I only knew five other kids when I was there. He…he said that there couldn’t be more than six.”

He trailed off, letting his eyes blur. He had made seven, so there was someone else there already dead before Snoke had taken him. At first, he wasn’t afraid of Snoke. He was tired and wanted to go back to his room to play Nintendo at home. That was the first time he saw Snoke’s rage and Kylo saw the terror in the eyes of the other six children in the empty living room. The windows were boarded up and it was hard to breathe. Kylo complained about that and Snoke had slowly stood from the single chair in the corner. Wordlessly, his hand went out to Cassian. He was the tallest and stood in front of the others. Kylo didn’t know who they were and they were dirty and smelled weird. He didn’t want to be there anymore and had yelled at him for being a weirdo.

Cassian’s eyes were locked on his; Kylo was ignoring the warning to shut up.

Snoke took a knife from his belt.

He made Kylo come closer, saying that he couldn’t hear him.

Cassian stood between them, suddenly snapping that Kylo would behave. He was new. He’d work with him to be better.

Something warm splashed on his face a second later. Cassian dropped to the ground, clutching at his throat. Kylo remembered wondering why there was red syrup on the floor, all of it coming from
Cassian’s neck. He was looking down, hearing him gurgle and saw tears streaming down his face.

He was hurting; the strange man had hurt him.

It was blood. There was blood seeping onto the floor. Snoke’s arm then shot out, grabbing Kylo’s arm. He forced the knife into his hand and told him to end the other boy’s suffering.

Kylo didn’t know what that meant.

He had to learn quickly after that; listening to Snoke was the only way.

He had to wear the other boy’s blood for weeks until it finally flaked away only to be replaced by his own.

The agent cleared his throat and his eyes fluttered at the sound.

“Listen, Kylo, this isn’t a normal thing that you went through. I’m not speaking as a police officer right now, but as a human being. You didn’t do anything wrong by surviving, okay? We know that. Everyone here is on your side. The fact that you’re alive made us realize that there isn’t always emptiness at the end of a hunt for darkness. We have you and Rey. We can’t undo the cruelty to the others, but we can help find where they came from.”

“I don’t think I know,” Kylo said through gritted teeth. “I’m just…bad at this.”

“No, you’re not,” Jinn said. “And I’ll help you, I promise.”

“Why?” He asked, feeling his annoyance at himself start to grow. “It’s like everyone wants me to be normal and I haven’t been normal in seven years. I want Rey to be normal and I’m trying my best, but I know it’s not good enough. I don’t think you can help me because I couldn’t help anyone else out, just Rey. I don’t need your help, but she does…and they do too.”

Jinn’s face was neutral, but Kylo could see a hidden smile in the way that his eyes wrinkled. “I told you that you weren’t bad at this. That’s why I’m on your side. Helping the others find their way home will help so many families. I know why you’re angry at your parents right now, and you are allowed to feel that way, no matter what the others say. But other parents will never know what happened to their children. They don’t get to be mad at their parents again. You can be mad, happy, and everything else for them. But you can also help me, Kylo, and I can do what I can to help you in return.”

After glancing over at Rey, who was sitting in the grass and carefully plucking blades one by one to study them, he looked back at the agent. “Everyone else keeps calling me Ben. Why are you actually listening to me about what I want?”

Shrugging, Jinn swept his eyes over to Rey. He then reached down to pause the recorder and Kylo felt a jolt of panic. “I’m going to tell you something that I think that you both should hear.”

Still processing the gesture, Kylo acted before he could over think it. He just had to tap the stone of the fountain lightly to bring Rey to her feet and over to him. She frowned as she looked between the two of them. Jinn shifted closer and leaned towards them. It was clear to Kylo that a secret was coming.

He probably didn’t want to hear it.

“I read about what happened at the house here and what you did, Kylo. It was unbelievably brave and that shows you’re a stronger person than you’re thinking right now. But what happened is
making the others nervous. What I want is that you both stay together — healing only comes from building the bond that you have and letting it grow healthier. I can do what I can to make that happen, that you all go home as a family. But you have to at least pretend, for now, that you’re feeling better. I know you’re not, they know you’re not, but they need to see something called progress. Sometimes what can start as pretending will feel more real over time. Do you understand?” Jinn’s voice was serious, but steady.

A rigidness spread through his arms; the agent didn’t know how good he was at pretending.

Jinn didn’t seem to notice how his posture changed and clicked the recorder back to life. “I think that it’s something we can work on, all of us, to help you learn to be Ben again.”

“Yeah,” Kylo forced out the word, the agent’s earlier words settling into his chest. “I can do that.”

“Good. I think that’s enough for now. Let’s go inside and speak with the others for a while,” he said, before clicking off the recorder and stowing it in his bag.

Kylo didn’t follow for a few moments, returning his eyes to the water. His arm twitched and he had to force himself from slamming his fist against the surface, wanting to disturb the delicate waves with his own power.

His shoulders were low as he walked beside Rey to follow the agent inside. His mind was still drifting between fantasy and memory as he left nature to return to his new prison.

Chapter End Notes

Again, apologies for the lack of updates on everything. April went by in the blink of an eye and I’m still buried in work. Hugs and thanks for all of the comments and kudos on this and everything else! May will be another crazy month of teaching, research, a conference...I'm exhausted in advance but miss writing so it will be hard to keep away from things that bring me joy. :)
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Kylo starts therapy. He obviously hates it.

They were building a scooter. A new therapist had shown up that morning with the plans and the large box and said that they were going to do it together.

She said to call her Maz.

Kylo didn’t understand the point of building something and reluctantly sat on the carpeted floor of the therapy room. Rey sat down next to him and looked at the stranger with a puzzled look on her face, but he could see her hidden excitement in constructing something new. She was wiggling her fingers, eager to take on the challenge. The woman was older with large, thick glasses. She wasn’t exactly smiling; her mouth was quirked into a friendly look. Kylo picked up the piece of paper and levelled a look at her.

“I don’t get it,” he said, tossing the paper back down. “We won’t be able to use it. We’re stuck here.”

“We’re going to work together,” she replied. “It’s part of healing and getting better — working in a group, talking about what happened, while doing something constructive. Maybe it will make you feel better, maybe it won’t. But it’s worth trying because I’ve seen it help other children like you work through something traumatic. You agree that what you went through wasn’t normal, right?”

“Normal? Of course it’s not normal,” he shot back. I had to kill someone. I bashed his head in and then choked him until he died. But he was a bad man and was going to hurt Rey, he thought to himself. He sat silent for a moment, flexing his hands until he noticed her watching. He stuck his hands in his lap and lifted his chin. “We were in a house of death. We never thought we’d get out. And now we’re stuck here. It’s not normal to be trapped everywhere.”

“See? It’s not normal to feel things like that,” Maz replied, opening the toolbox beside her. “Let’s get started. You can answer my questions if you think it will help you. Or, we can just build something fun.”

It didn’t look like fun, Kylo thought as he rolled his eyes. He was getting tired of the therapy room. They were either there or in the playroom, or their room. Even going to the cafeteria was becoming difficult; there would be reporters lurking there, so they ate in their room. But the therapy room had an odd smell; it was clean, but there was a dryness in the air that made him uneasy. Most of his thoughts that morning had been about the press conference he was going to be forced to do in the afternoon. He didn’t want to do it, but Agent Jinn had convinced him it would help him to get out and go home: that’s all he wanted. He needed to leave California behind him and finally agreed. He’d known the agent less than a day and it was a release to put his trust in someone who could affect things. His parents were just moping around, looking at him constantly and expecting him to change.
Still, the therapist was staring at him. He slowly reached for two pieces of long, thin pipe and looked down at the paper. The steps were easy enough to follow; he wasn’t stupid. He still didn’t understand why they needed to build the thing, but pushed down his annoyance to let it turn into numbness.

“Do you have any questions, Rey?” Maz turned her attention to Rey as he fiddled with the first two parts. “How are you feeling today?”

He handed Rey the two pieces of pipe he was screwing together. She turned her focus to him as he showed her what he was doing. She quickly followed his instructions, carefully holding one of the pieces with her broken arm and continuing to turn the other piece. He looked forward to getting her real things to build and fix. Thoughts about the future, and the lingering words from the FBI agent, kept him from snapping at the annoying routine they were falling into.

They were healthy. The doctors had given them both painkillers at the start. Rey needed more vitamins, but their bodies were finally healing. They were talking about resetting his broken wrist and broken ankle. The lingering broken rib, which he didn’t even feel anymore, would continue to heal by itself. They found tiny scars on his skin—thin as spider webbing in parts, thick as repeated slices from a blade on others—but reasoned that they would fade with time and care. His broken bones were bigger problems. He was starting to notice how stiff his wrist was in the docile environment. The day that it happened was years ago, but it still shone in his mind. Snoke had grabbed his hand and struck him with a hammer to hear him scream and to test a new idea he had come up with in his twisted mind. Without thinking, he started wringing his arm as Rey continued to tighten the two metal rods together.

“I feel…I don’t know,” Rey finally answered, finished her task. “What’s next?”

Maz nodded and sat back, shifting her hands to rest behind her. “Next is the base. Can you do it?”

“I can do anything with Kylo,” Rey answered, her face brightening. “He stopped Snoke. He’s going to teach me how to read.”

Maz smiled and sat up again, reaching for a medium-sized bag of metal, a mixture of pieces, nuts, and bolts. “How would you feel if you went to live somewhere without him?”

Rey’s face fell. “Are they going to do that?”

Rey’s head snapped to him and she blinked rapidly. I don’t want to go anywhere without you. You’re not going to. Jinn promised. He quickly answered, gently putting his arm on her shoulder. The touch calmed her and she exhaled, turning back to Maz.

“I’d be scared,” she carefully said. “He’s my family. I love him. You don’t leave love.”

“No, no you don’t,” Maz replied, nodding. She handed the bag to Kylo, who had set his eyes on her with a growing hatred. “What does it mean to love someone?”

The question made him drop his head for a second, then he looked to Rey. For once, she didn’t look to him for the answer.

“You kill for them. You save them. I got saved by Kylo and I saved him.” Rey was lifting her chin, mirroring his posture. “I want to kill Snoke. He hurted us.”

“Snoke’s gone. Would you hurt anyone that hurt Kylo?”
“Yes,” Rey said, looking back down at the pipes in her hand. “I want to hurt Snoke cause he made everyone dead.”

“Tell me about your other friends, Rey, the other children,” Maz asked with a calm tone that kept pushing Kylo towards the edge.

He put his energy into opening the bag and spilling its content on the floor. He pulled Rey onto his lap and she sorted the pieces into small piles. She needed to be focused on something else. They’d asked him about the others and he knew what she felt and thought, but also wanted to know how she’d explain it to someone else. He’d have to be prepared when he took her to school; teachers asked so many stupid questions and never stopped if they didn’t get the answer that they wanted. He remembered saying that his parents didn’t love him when they were late in picking him up. His teacher would frown and tell him that’s not what he meant. Why would he say it if he didn’t mean it?

“I liked Tallie. She was my friend.” Rey was still sorting as she talked. “I didn’t want her to be gone.”

Kylo cleared his throat, needing to release the growing itch under his skin. “The day it all happened was the worst day. I told Agent Jinn about this, but I guess you want to know too because you won’t listen to him. I think that Snoke knew something was happening. Agent Jinn told me that they were getting closer to finding him, like they almost did before. I think the FBI are better than normal police — they were actually looking for us.

“We woke up that morning and Snoke was already in the basement. Something was wrong. He was never down there so early. He hated being awake during the day. We could eat during the day. We could sleep and talk. He gave us food so we wouldn’t die before he could kill us.” He was helping Rey build the base for the scooter as he spoke, letting his larger hands help her smaller ones fit the nuts and bolts together, following the plans. Maz was watching them and he had to ignore it. “But that morning, he was going nuts. I mean, he’d go nuts all the time, but this was fucking insane. He was going to have to move somewhere new again, I think. He didn’t want to because he really liked that place. It had a giant basement with these barrels.”

Maz was nodding. “Was Tallie put in a barrel?”

Rey looked up. “Kylo had to put her in one. He said she’s in heaven so she needs to be safe so she’d go there. Can I go to heaven so I can play with her?”

“I think you’ll be very, very old when you go to heaven, Rey. Older than I am. And you’ll get to have that life because Kylo got you out.” Maz’s tone was even and she wasn’t writing anything done. It made Kylo worried. There were too many unknowns when something unexpected happened.

He watched her eyes as they drifted from Rey and how she was assembling the parts, back to him. He felt her expectations start to press on him and he continued.

“I…Snoke grabbed Tallie first. She was almost my age, maybe? I don’t know. Her stomach started hurting and she made a mess with blood. It made Snoke really mad. She couldn’t go with him, he said. It was stupid that Tallie made a mess. She was sleeping with us, in our spot. I thought that he wouldn’t hurt her if she was with us.” He frowned at the memory. “He took her and made me come with him. I knew what he was going to do if he brought me.”

He paused, picking up a random nut and bolt. He slowly started twisting the hexagon onto the notched spike as he spoke. “I knew he wasn’t going to stop. He was packing up to leave and
finished with us.”

“That must have been hard when you went upstairs to the others.” Maz’s voice almost sounded like she cared. Kylo just looked at his hands.

“Yeah.”

He didn’t want to speak more after that. He let Maz ask Rey questions and instead focused on the task of finishing the thing. If they were done, they could go. He handed Rey pieces and she worked with them as she answered the questions. They weren’t painful questions, yet they still wore down his energy. It was like he was too angry to be mad that someone was intruding on what they had lived through and shared; all of the thoughts were getting clogged at the same spot and couldn't spread to his mind. The memories were heavy, erupting into nightmares at night and conjured by scents. Talking about them just made them real and harder to forget.

He watched as Rey’s hands slowed on her progress at one question.

*Did Snoke ever touch your private area?*

Rey held the pieces firmly in her hand and lifted her head. At first, he wondered if she understood what the question meant; her next actions told him that she clearly comprehended what the therapist was asking. She let the metal pieces drop, got herself to her feet, and looked at Maz with rigid temerity: her hands balled into fists and she dropped her chin.

“No.”

He finally saw Maz flinch at the tone from the small girl; Rey’s answer was firm and wasn’t open to be questioned.

But it was also a partial lie.

The tense tableau of Rey staring down at Maz was finally broken when he stood up too.

“We’re done. He never touched her like that. When can we go home?” He put his hand on Rey’s shoulder and she turned to hug his leg, rubbing her face against the soft fabric of his trousers.

“Soon.” Maz managed a small smile as she stood. “I think that you two did a great job. You're a good team. And I think that you’re both really brave.”

“Lady,” Kylo huffed. “It’s not brave to just survive.”

The door opened behind them and he gave her one last glance over his shoulder as he turned to go. She was still looking down at the finished scooter that they had somehow managed to build while shedding bits of darkness into the arid room.

His mother was sitting on their bed when they finally got back. They must have been early because she looked up with tired and tear-filled eyes when the nurse let them inside. Seeing his mother with her guard down made him pause for a moment. She was so old. She wore clothes like his grandmother. Her blouses at home were always colourful; now, they were just white. They were plain. He never thought of his mother as someone like that before.

“Well?” Her face suddenly changed when she stood up, her mask returning. “Does it feel like progress?”

“It doesn’t feel like anything,” he said with a shrug. “We’re tired. If that means anything.”
He glanced around the rest of the empty room and raised an eyebrow.

Leia nodded. “Your father had to go home, but he’ll be back.”

His stomach soured at the thought of Han returning home for business. Leia shook her head as the feeling spread up to twist his face into a deep frown.

“He’s fixing up the room for Rey.”

Rey’s head shot from Leia to look at him. He looked down at her as the hairs on his arms rose.

“She can stay with us?” The question left his lips in a bare whisper.

Leia looked at him with a careful smile. “Sit down. Agent Jinn had to deal with something, but he wanted me to tell you what happened to Rey’s parents.”

With slow caution, they moved to the bed. He helped Rey up and then she was in his lap again. She was always warm and comforting, even when the world crumbled around them.

“This is just what he said, and you can ask him later if you don’t believe me. They narrowed down the time when Rey was taken. You said she was just a baby and they started there. You’ve done such a good job, Ben. You’re helping everyone.” His mother’s voice was gentle, but she emphasized the last part, much to his irritation.

“Are they…where are they?” Rey asked. She didn’t care about the rest of what Leia was saying. He could feel her heart fluttering at the mention of her family. Maz’s earlier words must have still been rattling around in her head.

“Sweetie, they’ve passed away. They were living a hard life, but they weren’t bad people.”

“Of course they were bad,” he snapped. “They let their child disappear and didn’t find her.”

He locked eyes with Leia and saw the flash of hurt in her eyes. He wanted to press harder on the wound, to rip up her heart more. Their lives had always been too full for him. He was always in the way. He needed them too much; what was wrong with that?

“But I think the main thing we have to think about is that Rey can stay with us,” Leia said, her voice not breaking. “We should know soon when we can all go home and be a family.”

He didn’t react outwardly, but inside a spark blossomed in his chest.

The world wasn’t just going to be police and hospitals forever.

But he didn’t say that he felt hope to his mother.

“Can you go away now?” His voice was flat and Leia closed her eyes before nodding.

“I’ll come get you for lunch. Have a good nap, sweethearts.” Leia looked at him with clear brown eyes, but he still knew that he’d found the right point to push on to get his way.

Finally alone, he stretched out and yawned. Rey sat still on the bed, fiddling with a loose thread on her pants. Her eyes weren’t really focused on anything and it made the earlier conversation even more damaging.

“Nobody has to know what really happened,” he said, stroking her back in gentle circles. His hand looked enormous against her slender form. “You don’t need to talk to everyone about everything.
Talk to me about it.”

She sniffled and nodded, turning to snuggle up beside him. Her head rested on his chest and he heard her take a shaky breath.

“Am I bad too, Kylo?”

“What?”

“I never looked for my family.”

Shutting his eyes, his own words blasted him in the chest.

“You didn’t have to look for them. I’m your family and you found me instead.”

He felt her nod and closed his eyes, worried that tears would fall if he didn’t.

“If you were gone, I’d look for you.” Rey’s voice was small, heavy with sleep.

“I’d look for you forever,” was what he managed to answer, following her into unconsciousness. "I won’t ever leave you."

But the words followed him into sleep and his dreams.

They were older, but still the same. Rey’s eyes set in an adult face, large and brown and filled with rage. She was yelling at Uncle Luke — but how could she know him? They were in his house, but the walls were blurred and shifting, phasing in and out of his vision. It was a blur of his childhood home and his childhood prison, walls shifting from the soft lilac that he’d helped pick out to the rotten, wooden pillars of Snoke’s torture chamber. He focused on Luke and couldn’t hear what he was saying, but felt clear panic at the hazy words.

He was taking Rey away.

He was dangerous and always had been.

When a strong hand gripped his shoulder, he shook awake. His head hurt as his eyes shot open to see Agent Jinn looking down at him. He threw his arms around the other man’s neck, hugging him as the dream echoed in his head. He heard himself whimper and gripped Jinn’s shirt, burrowing his head against his strong form.

“It’s okay, Kylo. It was just a dream.” The soft, soothing words broke the rhythm of his gasping sobs.

Rey stirred at the movement and sat up. He could feel her move to hug his side as he took deep breaths, taking in the agent’s cologne.

He felt frozen, surrounded by caring arms, not willing to give up the sensation for the chaotic gloom that was everything else.

“I just want to go home,” he mumbled.

Jinn lightly pulled back and looked at them both with quiet sympathy.

“You’re going to get through this, I promise,” he paused to look from Kylo to Rey. “Both of you.”

“But why is it so hard and unfair? Why do I want to hurt everyone? Why am I always mad? Why
doesn’t anything feel good?” He spat the words out, wiping at his eyes with his free arm. The other was around Rey, holding her tighter as his emotions spilled out.

“You’re not supposed to feel good right away. It doesn’t work that way. If there was a switch that would turn everything bad to good, I swear that I would flip it for you. But that’s like your dream, the one that just made you cry out in your sleep. It’s not reality. No one will ever know what you went through, but we’re trying. And I want to keep trying to make things feel good again.” His words were soothing and Kylo lifted his head towards him. “This is just the start. There’s a long, long story left for you both to write.”

Even as he let the words comfort him, he realized that the other man wouldn’t be there forever. The bitter thought helped ebb his tears as he shook his head. He gripped the bed sheet before releasing it.

At least someone understood.

Or at least pretended to.

He slowly looked from Jinn to his mother, who was lurking of the doorway with the same expression of pain as before. He felt his mouth twitch. He had hardly touched her and now he was throwing himself at an authority figure. After briefly meeting her eyes, he looked away.

“We’re going to be okay,” he leaned over to whisper to Rey. “He’s going to help us.”

Nodding, she hugged him lightly.

He couldn’t linger for much longer. Rey needed lunch and he had to prove to Agent Jinn that he could perform at the press conference.

The despair remained, but at least the future was a little less blurry. Rey was going to stay with him, and that’s what mattered. He would deal with his own emotions when he was home and not surrounded by people asking questions that he didn’t want to answer.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Kylo fails a challenge and slowly begins to accept help.

“Here, I got this for you.”

Kylo looked away from staring at his face in the mirror to the figure in the open washroom doorway. He was already tired and angry; the intrusion wasn’t exactly welcomed. But the familiar voice set his shoulders at ease.

Agent Jinn stood there, a sweatshirt in his outreached hand. “I didn’t think you’d want to wear pyjamas.”

Kylo licked his lips and ran his hand through his hair, pretending that he wasn’t trying to figure out if he wasn’t ugly or not. It took only a moment to turn so he hoped that the agent didn’t see the dampness at the corners of his eyes. To make up for it, he took the shirt and unfolded it, forcing his delight at the gift. It was what he actually felt, but wasn’t sure how he wanted to react normally. “It says FBI.”

Jinn winked, buying his charade. “It looks more official when you’re sitting beside me.”

Kylo gripped the shirt and nodded thanks. He had some idea about why he was given the shirt; Jinn wanted him to trust him and feel comfortable. The idea of just sitting in front of the media — which was all he had to do, he didn’t have to talk—made his stomach turn.

He stood there for another awkward moment before pulling the shirt over his light shirt. It was a little too big, so he looked back to Jinn with a shrug. The other man just gave him a light smirk and turned back to his mother and Rey. Kylo knew that they were there but kept his head down, afraid to see Rey’s eyes as he put on the shirt.

“We don’t know if it will help, but we’re going to show a picture of Rey. There might be someone that recognizes her or her parent’s names. We’re still looking to see if she has grandparents or other family,” he spoke with firmness and turned to glance at him. “We just want to make sure that this is can be a permanent arrangement.”

He didn’t want to know her real name — it was clear that he would know it soon, but to him, she would always be just Rey.

No one was saying anything so Kylo tilted his head. “I don’t want anyone to find her.”

A strange silence that he didn’t expect settled over the room. He finally looked at Rey and she looked at him with bright and happy eyes. When he turned his head in the other direction, he found a different reaction.

Jinn’s mouth firmed into a line. “Why don’t we ask Rey what she wants?”
He could only blink in response, nodding meekly. He needed Agent Jinn to like him and protect him at the same time. If he could help get Rey home with him, he might be able to help him in the future. Looking down at the gold letters on the sweater, he tilted his head. If he was an FBI agent, then he could help other kids in trouble, as well as punish evil. He could help protect them from being trapped in a den of evil and terror. No one else would have to die except for murders. No one else would ever be taught how to kill. Only he would do the killing.

From where she sat on the bed, Rey was looking at him with a question in her eyes as he phased back into the conversation.

He shook his head. She had to answer for herself, at least in front of the agent.

She turned away, gazing up at the taller man. “Okay.”

Kylo saw the agent’s face quirk for a fraction of a second. It was a brief look that could have been easily missed, but his eyes caught it, trained after too many years of looking for the slightest change. His hands clenched in a burst of panic; what was he supposed to do? He had been stuck for so long in a situation that he had understood so deeply that his feelings were glued to the musty floors he had been forced to walk. Jinn was not Snoke; he was there to help them. The desperate urge to have someone on his side clashed with his pure lack of control. He had survived for so long knowing how Snoke could and would act, erratic as it was.

His shoulders slumped and he rubbed his arm. “Can we go now?”

Jinn nodded lightly. “Mrs. Solo, can you stay with Rey while we’re downstairs?”

Leia sighed, looking from her son back to Rey. Kylo avoided her eyes but still felt them on him. “He wouldn’t want me there anyway.”

Whose fault is that? He wanted to snap. Instead, he clenched his hand into a fist and glared. The tension that was building in his body would hopefully leave his body once he was away from her. Part of him was still torn with how often he left Rey alone with other people. The nurses and therapists, the cops and the agents, and his parents were the only adults they were meeting. His thoughts kept returning to getting away and tried to push them out of his mind. He could be patient. He had to be patient.

He followed Jinn out into the hall. After dully greeting Detective Phasma, he started fiddling with the sleeves of the sweater. He only half listened to the officers as they spoke, joined by an older short-haired woman in a suit. She kept glancing at him and he met her eyes, forcing her to turn away. Whoever she was, he didn’t care to know. Just get this over with, he told himself as they rode the elevator downstairs. Say hi to Armie, and get back to Rey.

His thoughts returned to that morning. He’d finally turned on his phone again that morning. His eyes had blurred at the string of texts from Armie. He stubbornly tried to read through them, eventually giving up and just sending a short message that he was going to wave at his friend at the press conference. He shut the phone off and hid it away again.

He had always been good at reading and writing; it had been one of the few things he had excelled at in school and that had just led to teasing and bullying. When he arrived, he had been the youngest in the house and was quickly cast into Snoke’s insanity, complete with pages of ravings he’d typed out on an ancient typewriter. The typewriter was one of the few items that followed them to new places, he slowly realized as he pieced his memories together and tried to follow the timeline that Jinn had told him about. The other was a tomb that was drug around with them: a Bible. Once in a while, a newspaper would appear. Even just the slightest glimpse into the outside
world, or the world that his imagination created from words on a page, gave him a glimmer of hope that he’d have the strength to escape and still make a life for himself. When Snoke realized that he could read, he’d put him to typing some of his extended rants.

*There is power through pain, suffering.* If he missed a word in the rambling dialogue or misspelled something, Snoke would grab his arm and press a lit cigarette against his skin. The smell of harsh tobacco against burnt flesh was what he thought of now when he just imagined a typewriter. Kylo would have to look deep into the monster’s black eyes to know if he should scream or not. Sometimes, he still guessed wrong.

*What they did to me, what they still say to me, all of it will end in darkness. I will silence them all. The screams will drown it out.* Kylo never figured out who they were. Snoke would mutter to himself constantly, scratching patterns into the wall with a dull blade. It must have been the police, he assumed after the first few years.

*There is no death, just black nothing. They’ve shown me. Now I have to show the others.*

The words, clear on the page, glimmered before his eyes as the elevator door dinged and he jolted from the memory. A firm hand on his shoulder brought him back to what he was walking into. Dull murmurs of many voices from down the hall made him gulp a quick mouth of air. They heard it, even though he tried to hide it. He was being worn down by freedom, growing lazy under buzzing and constant lights. Maybe there were some truths in darkness and his grip on them was loosening.

“Even if they ask you questions directly, don’t answer them,” Jinn said, whispering only to him. “I will take care out it.”

“What if I do want to answer?” He replied, too quickly again. He stilled his face and finished his thought. “If I can?”

Jinn glanced at Phasma and Kylo’s fist clenched in the sleeve of the shirt.

“Just ask me first. Okay?”

He nodded, still conflicted about easily falling under someone else’s command. They talked about that in therapy with Maz. He hadn’t responded, but she somehow understood how he was able to give tendrils of trust to the adults around him, especially regarding Rey. He understood that he needed to cooperate, but the days had worn him down. He was growing less vigilant as he was constantly prodded with questions; even though they were phrased in kind and gentle tones, they were starting to split him open wider than any of Snoke’s blades.

He hadn’t seen the grand entrance to the hospital when they were brought there just over a week ago. It had been blurs of hallways, needles, blankets, EMTs, nurses, doctors, and police. Now, he caught a glimpse of the high, glass ceiling and atrium that would greet normal visitors through the small window on the door. He could see the reflections of green, high above him. They hadn’t been allowed to even peak at the area on their explorations. He understood why. Mixed with the green were blurs of human beings. If he believed in heaven, it was what he’d think it would have looked like: green meshing with blue, unseen and blurred faces. It would just be shapes without consequences.

Jinn and Phasma were talking to the strange woman and he hadn’t been listening, staring up into the empty hopes of nothing. He refocused his ears, still keeping his head up.

“…he’s fine, really,” Jinn was saying. “The Bureau’s psychologist is working with him. There’s
progress. He can handle it.”

The annoying woman huffed and he rolled his eyes to himself. “He is distant from his parents and won’t even respond to his name, George. I know that there’s trauma there, but in all of our previous cases like this…”

“That’s not his name,” Kylo called, head still facing the window. He took a deep breath and turned, eyeing the woman. “I saw his badge. That’s not his name.”

He focused on her, but flicked his eyes quickly to Jinn. He was sure that he saw a brief look of pride there.

“You’re right, Kylo. My given name is Quinton, but other people call me George. It’s my middle name,” Jinn said. Kylo didn’t look at him, still focused on the look of growing annoyance on the woman’s sour face.

“So, it’s okay to use a different name if you feel better about it?” He answered Jinn but was still staring at the frowning woman.

“Yes, of course. I still know my name, and so do you.”

“I’m not stupid. I know my name,” he said. “I just don’t want it anymore.”

The woman took a deep breath and looked at the others. “This only proves my point.”

“I don’t think so,” Jinn’s voice was firm and Kylo turned his eyes to him. He felt his shoulders relax at the sound of the other man’s voice. “Go out there and see if they’re ready, Monica.”

Monica straightened her jacket and gave him one last look before exiting the hallway into the atrium. He felt a small victory in that moment, like some of the power was finally his. He’d seen her name badge — she was also in the FBI. She must have been afraid of him. Straightening, he finally felt a taste of balance. It was the same feeling that rushed through him when he first gained control of Snoke and gripped his hands around the old man’s neck, squeezing until he heard a sickly crack.

He took the feeling with him as Jinn guided him through the door. He felt Phasma following close behind him, like they both were guarding him. He heard Monica’s distant voice as they crossed the tile towards the table. His eyes blurred at the faces and flashes made him lose his initial jolt of confidence.

He wanted to stop walking, he wanted to run.

There were too many people.

Too many eyes. Too much judgement.

He faltered, eyes darting to find something secure to cling onto. The table, clad in a deep blue cover, was covered in microphones. Scattered water bottles glimmered in the sunlight, wavering like a mirage. A quick glance at the back wall only showed his face as a child. It was a boy he didn’t recognize. It was the face of a child who had died with the others. Dead and buried, rotting and decayed.

His hands were limp at his side, until he felt Jinn’s firm hand grasping his.

The world paused for him. There was no sound anymore. He felt safe.
He took a deep breath and was guided to the table.

Jinn’s hand left his after a final squeeze, taking his seat at the table. He sat down with Phasma beside him. She fixed her jacket and sat up straighter. He felt her cool eyes on them both as she settled her hands on the table, folding them on the fabric. Focusing on the blue cloth on the table, he tucked his hands under his legs.

“Good afternoon and thank you for coming. I know you have many questions, but we’re finally going to answer some of them now. I’m Supervisory Special Agent George Jinn. I’ve been working closely with Detective Denise Phasma from the Arcadia Police Department, who has been heading the investigation on that end. This has been a case that I’ve been following for years and I’m,” Jinn paused, briefly running his thumb down the corner of his mouth, “I’m satisfied that it’s over. Today, I’m sitting with Ben Solo, who survived the mass murderer, Edison Snoke. We’re here today to answer your questions about our still-ongoing investigation. As well as we can. To a limit.”

There was brief chuckle from the audience. He needed to see how many people were there.

He dared to look up, lifting his hand to wave lightly. It was for Armie, he told himself, as he felt his arm turn to stone as he lifted it. He needed his friend to know that it was really him. He had died and been reformed into this awkward and, apparently, broken person. He had to know that he was still him, despite his ears sticking out and his hair looking wild. It had been longer. It would have been longer if Snoke hadn’t had an idea months ago — it must have been months ago but to him it felt like weeks — that all hair was bad and evil. That idea died quickly and all of their hair grew back and Snoke decided that he didn’t feel any different. The only heads that did not grow new hair were the ones that wouldn’t let him shave them bald.

He saw two skulls that day, flushed into dull light with their owners still crying to live.

Flesh is only loosely bound to bone.

It was all so temporary.

It was just red blotches against white.

That’s all they were.

He had missed half of the questions by the time he came out of his mind.

He had heard his name — his former name — about a dozen times.

Along with a question about an accomplice.

Looking up at the ceiling, he tried to focus on the blurs, the blues and greens. It was all too much, everything was too much…control was slipping through his grasp at the press of eyes all around him.

A warm hand grasped his knee.

Phasma was talking; Jinn wasn’t.

He snapped his head to the older man and wished that he shared the language that he and Rey had developed. There were too many lights and the voices were overwhelming him. He tried to say that in his eyes and to his surprise, Jinn squeezed his knee lightly.
He wanted to believe that it meant: *It will be okay.*

He finally fully heard the brunt of questions after Phasma answered something about the house that they were kept in. It was a rush of voices that he had a hard time following. Monica finally raised her voice from her position in front of the table and pointed to one of the faces in the crowd. He hadn’t noticed her before and was still trying to figure out what she was doing there.

“Can Ben answer a question? I want to know if…”

“Ben has been through so much, as we *said,* before this press conference…”

He cleared his throat and leaned forward. “I can answer.”

He had cut her off again. The sound from the press made him sit up straighter and ignore how stupid he looked. His hair was too awkward and his ears matched it. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw the picture on the big screen behind him change to his second-grade picture again.

That boy was dead, but he had to speak for him.

Monica cleared her throat. “Okay, what is your question?”

The reporter stood up again and he locked eyes with him. He was trying to figure out why he was there, but gave up because of the light. He couldn’t focus.

“Ben, do you feel like a hero for what you did?”

He felt the eyes of Phasma and Jinn on him as he took a deep breath.

“I, um,” he started, then paused as dozens of flashes erupted from the crowd, “I guess I survived. I stopped him. I don’t think that makes me a hero.”

The reporter nodded and seemed satisfied, sitting down and nodding to the people around him.

They were talking about him, right in front of him. How can you be a reporter and ask such a stupid question? Heroes protected and saved people, even he knew that.

“But what do you know anyway?” He asked, annoyed at how lightly the reporter had taken the entire situation. “He was killing everyone. He was hurting us, brutalizing us. Who can be a hero in something like that? How stupid are you? Do you know what real pain is?”

The room hushed. The sound of shifting broke the silence and it pressed on his growing rage.

These were the evil people that Snoke ranted about. They were the dull forces that drove the world in its monotonous rhythm that was inescapable.

He shot up from his chair and heard it squeak against the tile. “Do you know what it’s like to watch your friends die? To watch *children* die? Do you know what it’s like to know that you can’t stop it without hurting someone? Do you? *Do you?*”

“Ben, that’s enough…” Jinn started saying.

Kylo just stood up straighter, his glare shooting from the audience to the agent. He jutted his chin up and bit his lip, feeling his heartbeat quickening.

Freedom was just another prison, desperate to break him again.
After a final glare at the reporters, he turned and fled down the hallway that had brought him to the meeting. His feet kept him moving as sobs bubbled up his throat. Angrily, he wiped at his eyes as he blindly stumbled across the hospital’s ground floor. He wanted to go outside and get away but couldn’t find the route to the garden again. Growling to himself, he finally found a back, emergency staircase and made it up one flight before falling to his knees. He’d messed everything up again. He was so wrong. His parents should just take Rey and go home. He was never going to get better. Nothing felt like it should.

Pulling his legs up under his chin, he cried. He hated his tears and each one made him want to feel something other than exhausted and mournful. He needed pain; it was the only thing that would put things right.

Turning, he punched the concrete and clung to the sensation that stung throughout his hand.

The door clanged open and he buried his head in his knees.

“Kylo, it’s okay.”

He felt Jinn kneel down next to him and drape an arm over his shoulder. He numbly leaned into the agent, mumbling an apology.

“Why isn’t everything better? Why can’t I do this?” He gripped his hands tighter together, annoyed at the weakness in his voice.

“It takes time to heal, like I told you. It takes time to let others help you. You can’t do this all by yourself. I’m here, your parents are here, and the doctors are trying to help you. They told you about the anti-depressants. I know you don’t want to take them, but they will help you work through this.” Jinn was rubbing small circles on his back, speaking in even tones.

He had resisted taking most of his medicine. He took the ones that would help his body heal; he didn’t want them to mess with his head.

But maybe Jinn was right.

He was so empty. The only light was Rey and he couldn’t take care of her properly if he felt this way.

“Okay.”

“Okay,” came the reply.

He was guided back to his room and collapsed on the bed. Rey pulled away from his mother and crawled up next to him.

If things weren’t better here, they probably wouldn’t be better at home.

But as he held her, he still wanted to try.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Kylo and Rey are finally allowed to leave the hospital.

It took another three weeks before they were released.

By the end of it, Kylo didn’t care that they were leaving. Time was jumbled now that he had new routines that rested in another sort of anxiety.

Rey would always want the light on and his mother would always close the blinds. For that part, he was back to never knowing what time it was.

Kylo didn’t think that torture could go beyond cutting, burning, and fear. Now he was trying to reason through a fourth category that wasn’t quite making sense, even though it was something he would never talk about with anyone.

The morning before they were supposed to leave, he tried to organize his racing thoughts. He knew it wasn’t really morning because the hall lights were still dimmed. He took to counting the tiles on the ceiling and awaiting the part of the day he dreaded: actually being alive.

Nothing was getting better, it was only getting more routine.

He’d wake up everyday and only get up to eat breakfast because Rey was frowning at him. Her look would turn darker when he would only pick at his food. He was never hungry. He just felt like the world was static. Despite what the doctors said, he didn’t feel like the pills were working. He’d either want to sleep all of the time, or too exhausted to rest. His eyes were itchy and his heart would start racing. The lights were still filling his ears with nerves and he started to hate the texture of his bed sheets. He’d get in trouble for wandering the halls at night and snapping at the night nurses. That would lead to a long conversation with either Maz or Phasma.

Turning over restlessly, he watched the light rise and fall of Rey’s chest as she slept in the next bed. The gentle rhythm made his eyes lose focus and he drifted off into memory instead of sleep.

His thoughts returned to the worst part about being there and the idea of being sent home: Agent Jinn had been called away a week before they were supposed to leave the hospital. That day, he’d come by their room and Kylo had his spirits lifted for the first time in a while; he’d thought he’d been there to celebrate that they were going to go home soon. But the investigation had to be connected more to the additional evidence that they had found in Colorado. Their last conversation had driven Kylo to tears of frustration, he remembered with embarrassment and then the sting of betrayal. He was being abandoned and left to do everything himself. Jinn had given him a firm hug and he clung to him, not wanting him to leave.

The last thing that he gave him was a leather-bound notebook and elegant calligraphy set, engraved with the words fidelity, bravery, and integrity. It was the motto for the FBI, he had said.

His blue eyes shimmered as he looked down at Kylo, telling him to follow the words and that
they’d talk soon.

Then he left.

Kylo still hadn’t opened the book or used the pens in the week between his departure and time when they were supposed to be finalizing going home. They were tucked in the drawer, along with his phone.

Three possessions, that’s all he had.

Rey had received a small backpack with a teddy bear. That part made him smile and then wince in his sleeplessness. She kept the bear perfectly clean and was cautious when she hugged it, always insisting that he help her wash her hands before she picked him up. He knew that he was letting his emotions show when she carefully snuggled the bear up to him on the bed, before climbing in. After her tiny hands had nudged it close enough to rest on his chest, she would finally hug them both tightly and murmur how much she loved them both. It partly lifted his fog to know that there was something else she could love. She slept with it in her bed and hid it under her pillow during the day, tucking it in with her clumsy yet careful hands. The nurses, or whoever made the beds, would try to put it on top of the sheets and he would watch the dread in Rey’s eyes when she saw that it had been moved.

She’d stop at the edge of the bed after coming in from the playroom. She’d plant both of her feet on the ground and swallow a whimper. He could still hear it echo in his mind as he watched her sleep; it always brought any positives he’d felt happen during the day crashing down.

No one understood.

Since he couldn’t sleep through the night, Rey had started sleeping in her own bed after cuddling with him until she was drowsy. Maz said that it was important that they allow some distance so they didn’t retain the total codependency that they shared.

What did that even mean? In his exhaustion, he actually rolled his eyes at himself as he shifted to look at the ceiling. He could only guess what the adults meant instead of actually asking. But why should he show weakness? If they were saying these things to him then he should know what they meant. He wasn’t stupid. He guessed that it all meant that Rey shouldn’t be too close to him.

And he hated it. It was stupid that the adults were pushing them apart. Didn’t Maz see that she had the bear?

Time seemed to slow down during the week after Jinn left; that’s when it all really went wrong but none of it was his fault. Staring blankly at the ceiling, he felt the aggravation at himself for being so weak. He would always glance at his drawer, wanting to write down how many nurses moved Rey’s bear and how often his mother frowned. He still kept the drawer shut. It would take him thirty seconds to pack so what was the point.

And after how badly things went at the press conference, he didn’t want to talk to Armie.

Everything back home was another nightmare. And since he couldn’t sleep, that meant it was real. No matter how many times Maz told him to think about the future and envision it, that just wasn't happening.

Han was still back in Connecticut. The thought of his father made him punch the rigid hospital bed. Kylo had never asked for an explanation, but Leia would tell him anyway what it was about: there was work (like always), there were changes to the house for Rey (why would that have to happen?
She would be in his room), there were meetings with the lawyer (who needs a lawyer? Snoke was dead), the dog hated the kennel (at least Chewie was still alive). He’d let his eyes slowly fall closed and then open with emptiness as she spoke, at least that’s what he did as he thought about her excuses. He had always hated how his parents would argue when he was younger, but what burned his memories most was seeing them happy when they thought he wasn’t around.

His mind couldn’t let him go and he fell into one of the few memories that weren’t about Snoke.

He’d snuck downstairs during a dinner party once, long ago, and saw them laughing and sharing a kiss and a hug. His father looked over his shoulder and caught him peering down from between the bars on upstairs landing to wink at him.

He must have been four years old.

His father had been his hero up until that point.

But after that, he felt like there was no one to love him. His parents loved each other. There was no one for just him to love.

Now he had Rey.

He wanted so badly for Agent Jinn to come back, he thought as he tore himself from the recollection. In one of his other sleepless wanderings, he looked too long out the far window down at the courtyard and started imagining something other than darkness. He thought about what would happen if Jinn could take them home. The agent had his job; police were supposed to be married to their work. So, he’d work but he would have the rest of his caring to share with them. And Kylo could take care of Rey as she grew up. He wouldn’t have to deal with what he was slowly realizing would happen: Rey was so affectionate and needed to share her heart. She was going to love Han and Leia.

And he’d be alone again.

In that moment, even though he knew they would be leaving the next morning, he gripped into the bed sheets and silently screamed. Why wasn’t this working? He was more agitated than he had been before, but he also fell into nothing easier. He had to hide the swings in his moods from the doctors, who were pressing him to show improvements. Not bothering to learn their names, he enjoyed their displeasure when he acted like he didn’t recognize them. But that didn’t mean he didn’t know what they really wanted.

Rubbing his face, he admitted to himself what he had done and knew it was the only way to survive. Like with Snoke, he learned their patterns and what they expected from him. It took him three weeks rather than a year this time. He was older and smarter now. He took the pills and made them think that he was improving. He’d sit in therapy and actually talked, knowing now that Maz had connections to Jinn, but still held back most of his true, deeper feelings.

The worst part about therapy was when Rey wasn’t there and his mother was instead. The last few sessions, she’d make noises or roll her eyes and he’d have to restrain himself from reacting. He was supposed to care about his mother. He was supposed to do so many things, but it just felt hollow when he tried. Snoke always hated when the girls got too old. They’d smell or scream or make a mess. It had confused him for too long about why Snoke would take the older girls for a night. He was stupid as a kid for far too long, blocking out darker parts from his mind. He knew that what felt wrong was wrong but he never understood girls until he was nine and the girl renamed to Renata explained everything to him, even though he already knew. He just couldn’t put it into words.
Snoke was doing something more to them.

It never really hit him how much that threat of violation would build his true hatred until Rey arrived and got big enough for Snoke to start eyeing her.

He left out how Snoke had made him watch after that. How Snoke had taken Rey and kept him from watching just to confuse and torture him. He didn’t want to remember. He had to forget. Rey had to forget too.

All of the sounds his mother would make would drag up those feelings. He was almost thankful to have his mother to focus on because there was no way he’d talk about any of this openly. It was something to deal with later.

He’d drive his nails into his leg and glare at her for a fraction of a second before dropping to a neutral expression. Then, he’d answer the question calmly, but felt his inner hatred start to gnaw at him.

He’d have to go home with them.

But he’d already decided they weren’t a family anymore.

That thought carried him through the routine of the morning: he ate a reluctant breakfast to make Rey happy, he went to the therapist and said what he needed to say, then the doctor came and said that they were being discharged early the next morning.

It all rolled off of him into the pit of blackness that he always felt lurking behind him.

And the day stretched on until he just let the emptiness crawl into the places that he couldn’t reach. He used exhaustion as an excuse as he just followed orders. He hadn't slept. He didn't want to eat. He just followed everyone around until Rey was dragging him towards the playroom and he remembered what was supposed to happen.

They were having a small party before they left early the next morning.

Even as he sat down in the chair in the corner, he saw how the other children greeted Rey with excitement and ignored him. He didn't want to be there but he had to for Rey; she had been talking about it all day; he'd just forgotten in the fog of his mind. The rest of the chronically ill children came and each gave her a small hug in the beginning.

Then everything descended into pure annoyance. He slumped in the chair in the corner and let himself zone out as Rey happily spoke with each child, calling them by name and saying how she hoped that they wouldn’t be gone soon.

Pulling out his phone, he aimlessly swiped back and forth on the screen. It was the first time in weeks that he had it with him and he felt more numb just holding it in his hands again.

He didn’t even have Agent Jinn’s phone number.

“Do you have games?”

A small voice broke his concentration. A tiny bald boy, who he vaguely recognized from elsewhere in the hospital, stood by his feet, tilting his head at him.

He shrugged. “No.” Why was that important?
The boy squinted at him. “You’re Rey’s brother right?”

Shutting his eyes, he took a deep breath and then gave a small nod. He had heard that question from newer nurses and he was trying to get used to pushing it to the back of his mind. “Sort of.”

“Can I get a game for her for the plane?” The boy reached out his sickly hand for the phone and Kylo gave it to him in a fit of exhaustion. The large phone seemed to grow in the boy’s slight and pale hands.

The boy rolled his eyes. “You’re not even on Wi-Fi.”

He watched as a six year old navigated his device with quick clicks. He called over a nurse and she briefly looked at Kylo before giving him the password. The boy kept the phone until there was a small tone.

“It’s a real fun game,” he said, thrusting the phone back in his direction. “Bye.”

Kylo stared at the phone as the boy ran off to the others, joining the giggling throng of ten other kids.

Looking down at the screen, he eyed the tiny Wi-Fi connection in the corner. It was more distracting than the neon-coloured game app in the other corner. He shut the phone down before the compulsion fully took hold to search for Snoke online. He shoved the phone in his pocket and crossed his arms, letting out a long sigh.

Rey’s head snapped up in his direction. She quirked her head, looking up from her group of friends on the playroom carpet. In that look, he was torn back to seeing her huddled in the corner with the other smaller children only a few months ago. He smelled the mould and the dirt and the fear in her eyes was identical: she knew he was afraid no matter how well he tried to hide it. She seemed frozen, waiting for him to say something.

*It’s fine,* he blinked. *Tired.*

Come play?

The room was filled with small voices, giggling and passing toys around. The small boy who’d handled his phone was sitting next to Rey and looked up at him with a bright look in his eyes. Kylo knew that the boy was clearly dying; he’d been watching the nurses from his spot in the playroom when they forced him to come there.

He smiled lightly at her. *Okay.*

Forcing himself from his chair he wandered over to Rey and knelt behind her on the floor.

She reached back and put her hand on his.

He let that touch guide him into nothingness to drown out the stares from the other children.

He didn’t say anything until it was finally time to leave.
Kylo’s jaw ached by the time they arrived at the airport. He had forced himself to keep his mouth shut to stop from shouting at his mother.

She was driving slowly on purpose. It was like she wanted them to miss their flight. All of the words she had said about missing him and loving him were just lies. His father’s absence was all he needed to confirm the same thing about him.

Rey was sleeping next to him in the backseat, her head resting on his lap. The sun was just starting to rise and he watched the sky start to redden. He thought about waking her up as he stroked her hair. She had never seen a real sunrise before.

“Are you going to want breakfast before we get on the plane?” His mother’s voice broke his thoughts again.

He shrugged, trying to keep his annoyance under control. “Rey will be hungry.”

“What about you?”

“I’m not hungry.”

She sighed. “The doctors need you to eat more, Ben.”

He was silent, his eyes focusing on the passing scenery. Buildings, trees, streetlights. There were no people. It felt good not to see anyone at that moment.

“Ben?”

“Fine. I’ll eat something when we get there,” he replied, his voice low. “If we get three.”

He could hear his mother counting backwards to herself before she spoke again. “We’re almost there.”

“Good.”

The car was silent again and he basked in it. Rey stirred when they finally reached the airport. He pulled up both of their hoods when they left the car. Phasma was worried about reporters; she hadn’t told him, but had spoke to Leia about it when they thought that he wasn’t listening. It meant taking an early flight, but it probably wouldn’t be enough. He’d also seen the bits of information about their flight, confirming that Leia didn’t trust him, no matter what she claimed.

“Just wait here. I’m going to finish returning the car,” Leia said, looking mostly at Rey as she spoke. Rey nodded, but her eyes were darting all over the expanse of the parking lot.

Leia finally looked at him. He saw the pain in her eyes and frowned. She really didn’t want him anymore. The feeling hadn’t come to him overnight. Even during therapy, Maz would ask constantly about his parents. He knew that it meant they were concerned about why he didn’t want to be around them. Even with the medication, he still didn’t feel like they actually cared about him. They cared about Rey and that was important. He clung to that as he continued to fake through appointments.

Now, standing in a silent parking lot, holding Rey’s hand, the full dread of going home settled in his chest.

“I’m hungry,” Rey said, squeezing his hand. “Where’s home?”
He looked down at her and tilted his head. “We’re at the airport. We’re taking a plane to Han and Leia’s.”

“That’s home?”

“For now.”

“Maz asked me something dumb.” Rey pouted and shook her head. “Am I supposed to call them mom and dad?”

He sighed. Maz had even brought that up with him and for once he spoke honestly with her. “I don’t.”

“Okay.”

He heard Leia’s shoes clacking across the pavement and shifted to watch her approach.

“We’re all done. Get your things and we’ll get going.” She looked pleased with herself and it annoyed Kylo. How hard is it to return a car?

Leia had bought him a small leather satchel for the trip. Rey had her backpack. He was determined to not have more things than what could fit into those bags. The plan to leave was always lurking in the back of his mind. It would still come to him when he couldn’t sleep, which was often.

In the long walk into the terminal, he kept Rey close. The glass and metal made everything appear like it wasn’t real, like it was just surfaces with nothing behind them. They kept walking by people hurrying with giant luggage; each one looked exhausted or annoyed, typing angrily on their phones. He kept following his mother and bit the inside of his cheek. They were fully dependent on her. She had all of their information. No one trusted him. He could have done this on his own, but no one had given him what he needed to know.

His mother stopped, gazing up at the massive information board. Rey’s hand tightened in his. More people were arriving, streaming past them in every direction. She shifted closer, grabbing onto his leg until he lifted her up.

Leia was still scratching her head and he groaned.

“It’s this way.” He gestured to the left.

Leia glanced over her shoulder. It was like she was questioning how he could know.

He rolled his eyes. “I saw the piece of paper in the car. With the flight number.”

Leia gave him a guilty smile. “I guess I should have told you instead of…”

“Yeah, you should have.”

He turned and started walking towards the check-in desk. He heard her behind him with her obnoxiously loud shoes. Rey tugged on his sweater and he slowed his pace, letting her catch up.

Anxiety was pressing on his lungs when he saw the line. He shifted his weight and glared at the two dozen people ahead of them.

Leia gently touched his arm. He was too exhausted to jump at her touch.

“We can use the priority lane,” she said, lightly. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you that either.”
He exhaled and trailed behind her up to the desk that had no line.

The clerk smiled at them and then went through all of their information. He tuned out her voice, it was too high pitched and oozed of fakeness. Her smile was too big and her make-up was too thick. She looked like a doll.

“…all right, your gate is B14. Have a nice flight.”

He watched his mother thank the woman and he had to follow her again. His feet felt heavy in the new shoes that his mother had made him put on earlier that morning. There were so many voices and noise around him and he tried to narrow his focus on her voice to keep himself from shutting down. She was telling Rey about how they’d go through security next and how there would be people there, but no one would hurt her. Rey was quiet, not wanting to get down from Kylo’s arms. She still nodded, even though she clung to him. They were sharing their nervousness. No amount of doctors and nurses could fix them; they would have to do it themselves.

The airport was an endless hallway, fake light mixing with real from above. He hugged her tightly as the security line came into view. He’d flown before, he kept repeating to himself. It was about having patience. He remembered squirming as a child, bored with long lines and people pushing him. Now, he kept his focus on just standing still and waiting.

Someone behind them bumped him and he spun, locking eyes with him. It was just a kid, he couldn’t have been much older than he was. The other boy’s eyes widened when he caught Kylo’s glare.

“I’m sorry,” he quickly said. “My bag fell over…”

Kylo just turned without saying anything, fixing his eyes on a stray thread on the back of his mother’s jacket. Her hair was starting to spill out of her carefully braided buns. Tilting his head, he watched her reach into her bag for their boarding cards and saw the three passports follow with them.

“Where did you get that?” he asked. They were almost at the front of the line, but the sight of the documents pressed on the already open wound from earlier.

“Oh, Agent Jinn was able to fix the paperwork for us. Don’t you remember when they took your picture a few weeks ago?” She tried to sound like it wasn’t something important, but it was. There were too many things happening behind his back.

He just looked at her blankly. “What does Rey’s say?”

They were finally at the front of the line and his mother just shook her head. “I’ll show you on the plane. Not right now.”

His eyes blazed as she turned away from him to put her bag in the small plastic bin. He watched it start to roll down and was thankful to have Rey in his arms. His hands clenched around her and she let out a little squeak.

“Ow, Kylo.”

“Sorry, love. You have to get down now anyway.”

Her sneakers hit the floor and she stumbled and his rage turned to panic. She shoved his clumsy hands away and picked herself up, casting a look his way.
“I can do it, Kylo.”

She sounded just like he did. It made him smile, despite the stress from having everyone behind them in line starting to shuffle. He shut them out; Rey deserved to take the time that she needed. He took Rey’s small backpack, containing only her bear. She didn’t question why he needed it. “You need to wait to follow me, okay? Just wait and then listen to the guards.”

Rey firmed her lip and nodded, gliding her eyes across the crowd ahead of them. She spotted Leia and finally looked up at him with a more confident turn of her chin.

“Sir, you’re next,” one of the guards said, pointing at his and Rey’s bags. He put them on the belt and watched as the guard scooped up the two bags and put them in a bin. Embarrassment burnt his cheeks as he walked towards the metal detector.

Nothing happened as he walked through. He looked up and around.

“Keep moving, you’re fine.” The guard on the other side spoke to him, waving him forward.

His feet felt heavy but he managed a strong stride forward before turning to wait for Rey.

Framed in the huge detector, with a crowd milling behind her, he saw how small Rey looked in the world. She pulled down the hood on the white sweater and looked from one guard to the other as he was motioning for her to come towards him. She walked through and didn’t look afraid, filling up the space around her with a confidence that he didn’t know that she had.

Nothing beeped and she gave the guard a grin. He stood at the end of the band and she strode up to him and grabbed both of their bags, standing on her toes to reach them.

She turned and gave him a little frown. Okay?

Okay. He blinked back, taking her hand.

Leia was looking at them both, smiling, as Rey navigated by a man struggling to put his belt back on. Kylo had just ignored him and Rey had stepped carefully aside.

“You handled that like a pro,” Leia said, still smiling. “Good job, Rey.”

Rey didn’t answer. She just nodded.

“I think that you’ve earned some breakfast.” Leia was already leading the way towards the gate. Kylo was still lost in the image of Rey looking both small and vulnerable and filling up the space at the same time.

Soon, she wouldn’t need him anymore.

The thought clung to his heels as he shuffled into the line behind his mother. He stopped listening as Leia read the options. It was all fast food. Rey’s eyes would grow wide at every suggestion and she tugged on his hand for help.

“The sausage is good,” he finally said.

“Okay, then three of those. With the hash browns. And two orange juices and a coffee,” Leia turned to speak with the clerk. Kylo narrowed his eyes.

“I want a coffee too.”
Leia couldn’t hold back her sigh. “That’s not good for you and you know it.”

Frowning, he shook his head. “Then I want to buy one myself.”

Leia’s mouth was set in a firm line as she looked at him. He watched as her look softened as she studied his face. She finally nodded and turned away, wiping at her eyes as she paid the cashier. Rey had been watching everything and tugged at his hand again.

*Leia loves you.* Her eyes blinked quickly, forming a word that they normally only shared about each other.

*I wasn’t mean.* He answered, then thought. *Was I?*

Rey shrugged. *You’re you.*

*But was I mean?*

She was struggling with her answer and looked from Leia’s back, then to him. *A little.*

He watched as their orders were placed on the tray and his mother turned. He tried to give her a small smile; even though it felt forced, he watched her face brighten again.

As they were sitting down, he turned to Rey again. *Tell me when I’m mean.*

Rey nodded and then turned to her food, happily switching from one mode to another. He looked down at the small wrapped package in front of him and did his best to hold back the heavy exhale at the smell of the food. Feeling his mother’s eyes on him, he peeled open the wrapper and took off the top bun. He reluctantly started eating the half sandwich.

“This used to be Ben’s favourite when he was your age, Rey,” Leia spoke up. “Every Sunday, this would be breakfast. We’d have to get up early and then we would eat in this park…”

“Can we go there?” Rey asked, after sipping at her orange juice. “After the plane?”

Leia’s grin spread across her face. “Rey, we’ll do anything that you want. We need to go shopping for clothes and see what you like.”

Kylo watched them talking as a memory from his previous life snaked its way into his head. A conversation between his parents. How his mother always wanted a daughter.

He’d fought and killed his way out of a hellhole. His skin had been burnt, cut, scratched, and bruised. His insides had been brutalized. He knew the smell, taste, and feel of death. The way that flesh would rot and sink into bone was one of the constant dark shadows that kept him company when he wasn’t angry. The pills had brought those thoughts out more, nagging on him not to be mad or sad but just relive what had happened in Snoke’s prison. Maz would ask him about his dreams and he’d tell her as little as possible, only mentioning that they were dark. She would sit back, take off her glasses, and told him to start making up a different story before he went to sleep. How he needed to imagine going back to school and seeing his friends. It burned him inside to admit that she was right. Really, seeing Armie and doing something normal were the only positive daydreams that he could come up with. That and doing things with Rey and watching her grow up normally. He’d stop his parents from leaving her alone, or at least make sure that she wasn’t alone. She would never be alone like he was.

Leia looked at the table and then motioned that it was time to go. He saw that the sun was filling the sky now. It was early, but at least it was light out. The pilots could fly the plane better and they
wouldn’t crash and die.

Rey let go of his hand to grip her backpack straps, giving him a self-assured smile as they followed Leia towards the gate. Her footsteps slowed by a coffee stand. She turned and handed him $5.

“Buy yourself your coffee, sweetheart.”

He took the bill. Rey followed him up and then turned to keep speaking to Leia.

He stood and looked at the menu, frowning at how many things there were to read. Shaking his head, he finally looked at the clerk.


“No problem. $3.55 please,” the clerk smiled at him, despite his embarrassment at not even being able to order something in under a minute.

She handed him the foam mug and he blinked at it.

“Is there something wrong?”

He felt the weight of the cup and how it fit in his hand. “I just…I never bought a coffee before.”

“It’s early. We all need our caffeine, right?” The girl was pretty. Her brown hair framed her thin face and her eyes were almost a kiwi-coloured green. She must have been something like twenty but he felt a little pleased with himself as she smiled brightly at him.

“Yeah, right.” He picked up his mug and sipped at it. He gave her one last look before turning back to tell Rey about how he actually felt happy about doing something normal.

But instead of his mother and Rey, there was an angry looking businessman standing behind him in the line.

He was alone.

He darted out of the line as the man shoved him. He took two steps to the side and could only hear his own heart beating. It thundered in his ears as he walked backwards until his back hit a wall. There were people streaming past him, not caring about the panicked look on his face. He could feel his warm breath on his lips as he exhaled; the feeling got faster and faster as tightened his grip on the paper cup in his hands.

He was left behind again.

There were too many people with too many secrets wandering around.

All he could hear was his own heart and his breathing. The sounds matched the distinct rhythm he darkly remembered from climbing the stairs down to Snoke’s basement for what he thought would be his death.

Desperation finally forced his mouth open. “Mom!”

He scanned the crowd, searching for any sign of her.

“Mom!”
After the second shout, he finally saw a greying head emerge from a door. A washroom.

He had only been half listening. But Rey needed to go to the washroom.

Leia had heard him and hurried over with Rey sprinting ahead to hug him. She had heard him and his fear. She could see how he looked.

“Oh, Ben, I’m sorry, I thought you heard me, but we…” Leia was rambling and he instantly shook his head and ran his hand through his hair. It was damp with sweat. He heard his mother continue to talk and then shook his head again.

“It’s fine.” He kept his voice low. “I’m sorry for yelling.”

He ran his hand through Rey’s hair and took a long sip of coffee. It was bitter and tasted awful, but he didn’t stop. Leia finally quit trying to make an apology and reached out to rub his arm.

“You can always call for me, Ben. I didn’t mean to…”

“I know you didn’t,” he interjected. “Can we just go now?”

Leia kept her face neutral. “Sure. We should be boarding soon.”

Rey held his hand the entire way to the gate. She kept trying to meet his eyes but he tried to make it look like he was distracted by all of the people around them. There was always some old man that would remind him of Snoke at every gate that they went by. The sunken eyes and bald head just brought him back to where they had been, and where he still felt like he was.

When they finally sat down, his cup was empty and he was feeling the opposite of energized. Rey climbed onto his lap as Leia went up to talk to the gate workers. He watched how the determination set in her face; even though he couldn’t hear what they were saying, he could tell that it was something for them.

“Were you scared before?” Rey snuggled against his chin. “We thought you knew. Leia said…”

He kissed her forehead. There were no lies. He could never lie to her. “I was. I wasn’t listening. I was…I wasn’t thinking. That’s why you always need to listen. I don’t want you to be afraid.”

Rey nodded, her small hand reaching up wrap her hand into one of his curls. His hair was too long but he never wanted her to stop doing what she wanted to. “I won’t. Sorry you were scared.”

“It’s okay now.” He was finally feeling tired and having Rey in his arms put him closer to actually sleeping than he had felt for weeks. “We’re going home soon.”

“Will I be scared on the plane?” Rey was sounding tired too. Her head was drooping on his chest.

“Maybe. You won’t know until we’re on it. But I’ll be there. It will be okay.” He took a deep breath. “When I was…worried before, everything was okay when I saw you again. We’ll always have each other. Things are less scary when you share them.”

Rey nodded. “Like when we were at Snoke’s. Everyone shares. So it hurts less.”

“Yeah, angel. Just like that.” He said as Rey yawned and put her head back down on his chest. Her breathing slowed down and he felt her fall asleep.

Leia finally came back and sat beside him. “We’ll be boarding soon.”
He didn’t even have the energy to snap back at her. “Good.”
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

The kids arrive home to start their new lives.

His room was the exact same.

He’d spent years feeling the memory of the place start to fade and blur, tainted by skinned knees on dirt floors. Some of the other kids would cry and whine for their old homes, bringing up their rooms and their families. They would always want to go back; he just wanted to get out. But still, the memories clung on, leeching away his strength. It was clear in the beginning — then it had been beaten into a fraction of a remembrance that had to be tucked away in a corner of his mind that hadn’t been touched by darkness.

If he didn’t think about it, then maybe it would be okay to never be there again.

But as he sat down on his bed, which had been too big when he’d left but now looked small, he felt like he hadn’t been gone for all of those years. He took a deep breath as the emotions rolled over him. Even when he’d opened up the back door and came up the mudroom to the kitchen, it hadn’t felt real. He only had Rey’s hand in his as he took deep breaths and crept into his brightly lit house. Only it wasn’t anymore. It had been his parents’ before he was born and only his for such a short period of time. But everything was where it more or less should be. When his parents decided that he should be alone — and why should they get to decide — that he could take the tentative steps into his room. There was no one else there. It was only the four of them. But they were still telling him what to do. Rey was chatting with his mother, looking at her room across the hall. He heard her. He wasn’t afraid for her. The new fear that rose up was being overwhelmed by his lingering nostalgia. It was more like being away for a weekend or a sleepover. The echoes of screams and ripped edges of pain were still there, lurking, except now, they were sandwiched between his life before and what he was now. Running his hand along the bedspread was like having the sunlight warm his face when he’d pulled Rey outside; parts of him that he thought could no longer feel were still intact, but muffled.

It was a sensation that Kylo never expected.

He wanted to be more confused. He wanted to be more angry that nothing had changed. He wanted to be more enraged that Rey was somewhere else without him.

Instead, he just felt empty.

At the same time, the void was hazy. He stared at the wall of his bedroom, an annoying auburn tone that he never liked, and tried to figure out if he was there or not.

On the plane, he’d almost decided that he was a ghost. It would have been easier if this were some version of the afterlife. He was already dead. He might as well accept it. He was crammed into a barrel in the basement alongside all those he’d let die.
His face was blank, but inwardly he felt a faint spark of hope at seeing the book he’d left on the
nightstand still sitting there, waiting for him.

Maybe he wasn’t dead after all.

How could he be dead if he hadn’t finished reading that book?

He reached out, brushing the cover. It was a silly story about a dog trying to find his way home. It
wasn’t his first chapter book. This book had been one from his grandmother so it was different
from the others that his parents had decided would suit him. He had wanted to finish it before
baseball camp.

It was still there.

He wasn’t dead.

His father cleared his throat from the doorway and he pushed the sensation down, frowning as he
turned.

Han looked uncomfortable, shifting in place where he stood.

The last time he’d seen him like that flashed in his mind. It was an argument about how he hated
math homework, and how he couldn’t get anywhere without math.

As he looked into his father’s grey eyes, he realized that he needed a lock for his door. One that
worked.

“We’re going to get you a new bed. But you need to settle in first and then we’ll pick something
out. It’ll be something that you like instead of, well, whatever we would have chosen,” Han said,
trying to lean casually against the doorway. His hands gave him away. He had shoved one into
the pocket of his jeans and the other was motioning aimlessly. “I’ve already looked at beds and
none of them were you, son.”

Han had been nervous the entire drive from the airport. Kylo had been silent, actually more content
to be exhausted than anything else. No one on the plane had recognized them. Rey had looked at
everyone with determination, studying them for him. His lingering anger at himself for calling out
for his mother had left him distracted, dwelling on how useless he had felt in the moment of panic.
It couldn’t happen again. He numbly let Rey show her strength, looking for dangers that he was
too weary to evaluate and judge. Kylo had felt his helplessness rise as Rey’s own exhaustion took
hold. She was fighting tears by the time the other passengers had finally taken their seats.

He had to remind himself that she was allowed to cry.

He couldn’t. But she could.

Especially in the real world.

People were loud and took up too much space. Looking at his father now, all he saw were their
faces again as memories from the plane took hold. Even as his eyes grew heavy and his thoughts
ebbed from anger to emptiness, he managed to pay some attention to the world that he’d have to
help guide Rey through when they reached the other side. These people weren’t all dangerous in
the ways that they were used to. Most didn’t look at one another as they passed by, ignoring
anyone who needed help with luggage and instead focusing on their phones or steadfastly looking
anywhere else. The others had faces flushed with annoyance at having to wait for anyone or
anything.
They were sitting at the front of the plane.

He saw everyone.

And now he was seeing that same emotion briefly flash on his father’s face when he didn’t respond.

He saw the dust rise in the late afternoon air as his father exhaled.

He let the moment stand, enjoying the rising tension as he kept his eyes locked on Han’s. His father never gave up an argument and would try to bargain his way through anything. He would start talking without knowing what to say when his mouth first began moving, however in the end he usually won over whoever he was trying to swindle or charm.

But there were no words that he could use on Kylo at that moment.

When Han finally broke eye contact for a brief second to glance out the window, Kylo nodded.

“It’s fine,” he said, “I guess. For now.”

“Good.”

Han turned and left and Kylo sighed, the air leaving his lungs with the slow satisfaction of giving his father what he deserved.

He heard Rey’s footsteps and managed to smile, wiping the blank look from his face when she walked gingerly into his room.

Rey tilted her head and smirked at him. Her hand reached for his as she stepped to the edge of his bed.

“I need to…an ask,” she started, pausing to take in his room. “Why two?”

Kylo shook his head. “It’s not my idea. I’d change it if I…were allowed to.”

Rey frowned and he helped her up to sit on the edge of the bed. She should be asleep. She had dozed lightly on the plane, curled up on his lap. He had allowed himself a few moments of sleep that were constantly interrupted by the sounds of breathing all around him.

Tight, dark spaces and deep breaths were an eerie constant that he realized he’d never be able to outrun.

“Are we free now? In our house?” Rey took in his room before settling her eyes on him. “I don’t want two.”

“I’ll find a way. I won’t let them make all of the decisions.” He hugged her to him and heard a pair of footsteps descend the stairs to the lower level. The shouldn't have two rooms, but here they were. There would always be someone deciding how he should be. Until they could get out of there. But then what? Would it always be running, the second he felt uncomfortable or panicked?

Rey nodded, snuggling closer to him. “I’m hungry.”

“Dinner is soon,” he said, stifling a yawn. Having Rey’s warm body next to him brought his exhaustion to the surface. The heавiness of the layers of his mind rose in his chest and he couldn’t resist the pull towards sleep. He didn’t need to ask Rey as he shifted to stretch out on the bedspread. His feet were almost at the edge; he ignored his father’s words as Rey settled next to
him.

“I don’t understand.” Rey’s head rested on his shoulder and her small hand gripped his shirt. “Today’s strange.”

“I know,” he replied. “I don’t feel like I’ve ever been gone from this place. It’s all the same, except for me. I don’t fit anymore.”

He rubbed her back as he closed his eyes. The memories came as a rush: The knob was the same to the backdoor, but he didn’t have any problems reaching it. His feet had firmly hit the floor of the backseat of his father’s silver truck like they’d never done before. The railing up to the kitchen from the mudroom of the back entrance couldn’t have been moved, but it felt so much lower and awkwardly placed.

His toe brushed the edge of his bedframe and squeezed his eyes shut, willing the tears not to come.

“You don’t fit ‘cause we’re two now,” Rey mumbled, letting sleep win over her questions. “Need to make it bigger.”

“Yeah,” he answered, kissing the top of her head. “We will have to do that.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

There are guests at dinner forcing Kylo to try to give up some control and reach out for a friend.

He woke up when he felt Rey stir at the sound of his mother’s voice softly calling from the doorway. He would always find Rey before her.

“Wake up, kids. Dinner’s ready. And we have a few of guests we’d like you to meet.” Leia’s words were clear yet still echoed dully in his ears. “You know them, Ben. It’s nothing to be worried about.” But he’d heard the familiar creaks in the hallway from the landing to his room. He didn’t realize he’d been awake for longer than he grasped until he had counted back all of the sounds in his mind.

The light flicked on as he sat up.

He didn’t remember turning it off.

They had watched them sleep.

He bit back the annoyance and tried to put it into what he’d heard from the therapists. They were supposed to find routine. It was all about adjusting. That word had come to the forefront during their last few weeks at the hospital. Doing the same things over and over again was supposed to help them. Yet, at the same time, he was floundering in it. He mostly blamed the pills. He would take them, trying to trust Agent Jinn, despite his lack of contact. He hated the pills. They were supposed to make him better and he still felt like this.

Sitting up, he wiped at his eyes. Rey was already awake, but not moving. It was like any other wake up back at their torture chamber: Snoke would storm in and scream at them, or would hiss at them without words. Should he tell his mother about this? Should she know? Waking them up like they were normal was what they were supposed to do. But, he couldn’t. This wasn’t the hospital with its controls. Here, they were at their assumed home. They had rooms now; it wasn’t just a bit of floor to curl up on and wake up afraid of what was to come. And still, his mother awoke them with a rapid knock on the door and an intrusion into his space.

There were lines that he needed to draw.

Maybe he could do that now.

“Are you okay?” He managed to ask, shifting off of his bed. He narrowed his eyes at another change. There was a stack of books at his desk. Tilting his head, he watched Rey get up and stretch, her tiny arms hardly reaching up towards the ceiling. Her broken arm had long healed, but a brace was still there, keeping her together. He saw it peaking out from beneath the awkward pajamas they’d slipped her into.

She wasn’t wearing that before.

They couldn’t touch Rey without her wanting it. Were they stupid? Were they evil? How could
they do this do her?

Still, he focused on the books, trying to keep the rage at bay: chemistry, biology, English, calculus, history. Between each subject were extended study guides. How did they get there? He didn’t remember them from before. It was another act of betrayal. His parents were acting in favour of what they wanted rather than what would work. Sure, he wanted to study. He wanted to finish school and move away. Part of that thought made him look up at the mirror across his room and then quickly turned away. No, they shouldn’t just be guessing what he wanted to do.

He longed to call Agent Jinn and hear if this was something that he’d thought up and told his parents to do. It would make sense then. It would all fall into place. Someone at the FBI knew more than his big-talking, minimal action parents.

Rey was running her hands over her clothes, breathing in quick gulps of air. Someone else had touched her. With all his parents talked to their therapists, they clearly heard nothing.

“I wouldn’t have let them do it if I’d been awake;” he mumbled, stepping away from the bed. “They’ve moved around things here too. This wasn’t how it was supposed to be.”

Rey looked at her legs, her tiny hands still tracing up and down the strange fabric. “I…I don’t… ugh.”

She gave up turning to him and blinking quickly how she felt. No one should touch her if she wasn’t awake. No one should be in her room or his room if the door was shut. She didn’t know the word privacy, but she knew space. She knew that there were places where others could and could not be.

“What will make it better?” He finally asked, aloud.

She sighed, tilting her head. A tiny smirk broke her serious features. “Food.”

“Then let’s go. You can yell at them about the pajama things. Leia just does what she thinks will work. And it doesn’t,” he said, reaching for her hand.

For once, she frowned before slowly rising up from the bed. He scooped her up into his arms and kissed her cheek. It was all he could do. He was tired and locked off from his emotions; he blamed most of that on the stupid pills he’d been taken. Agent Jinn had promised that they’d helped him feel better but why hadn’t it made anything right? Instead, he’d just felt tired or stunned. He’d either tumble through panic, or he had slid through something that should have been overwhelming.

Now, instead of wanting to yell or fight against his parents, he had only blankly looked at the books, at the way someone had changed Rey without telling them. Annoyance was there, sure, but the blind anger he was used to feeling since the taste of freedom had faded.

He wasn’t sharp.

He couldn’t protect them and that’s all he had left.

He shut the door to his room behind him, hugging her closer as they neared the top of the staircase. Kylo searched his mind at the voices that he heard and his slow pause made Rey hug him tighter.

One was familiar; he’d only heard it a few weeks ago.

Armie was here.
When they emerged from the protection of the hall, he felt too many eyes on him. Briefly, he pushed his face against Rey’s neck and then sighed, too curious not to see the face of a friend who he thought he’d never see again.

To his surprise, there were two other people at the table, other than Han and Leia.

“Grandma? Grandpa?”

His voice felt soft, lost in the past, as he took in the faces at the table. The teenager, with shocking red hair and a wide-eyed look on his face, must have been Armie. He’d changed. He was almost a grown up. His jaw was firming and his hair was nicely combed. Kylo’s feet stilled and he hugged Rey closer. People weren’t supposed to change.

Still, Breha and Bail Organa were rising to meet them at the end of the staircase, shifting from the light of the kitchen table to the darkness of the hallway.

“Darling,” Breha said, tears springing to her eyes. “You’re home.”

Kylo took a deep and cautious breath. “Rey doesn’t know you. You need to…introduce yourselves. If she’s okay with it, I mean.”

Armie still lurked in the background, shifting closer to Leia and Han. Kylo, in the back of his mind, filed away how he was suddenly taller than his childhood friend. But maybe that was because of the staircase.

Rey hugged him tighter and he slowly sat down at the top step. Breha and Bail, with their expressive eyes and neatly pressed clothes, slowed at the bottom of the staircase.

“Hello, Rey,” Bail said, resting his hand on the railing. “We’re Ben’s grandparents. We’d like to eat dinner with you. If that’s okay with you, and you’re hungry.”

Rey lifted her head, eyeing the dark-eyed man. The moment drew on as she studied everyone downstairs, Armie included. She finally sucked in a deep breath and then turned back to Kylo.

Her eyes were pleading for him to ask who had undressed and redressed her. He softly answered that he’d do it once they were downstairs. With a guarded look, she accepted and he stepped down the final few steps. A hateful look took over as he eyed his parents.

“No one can take off her clothes if she’s not awake,” he said, ignoring the looks from his friend and family. “You don’t know what we’ve been through.”

Leia, to her credit, stood up and nodded. “It will never happen again. She just looked so…”

“And don’t go into our rooms. Ever.” He lifted his chin, firm eyes shifting from his mother to his father.

Han licked his lips. He saw Armie shifting uncomfortably at his side until Han finally nodded. “We won’t. Come and eat. We’re going to…do what you…we’re going to make sure you get what you need from now on.”

That wasn’t an answer. His eyes burned, but his mind couldn’t find the same rage that he should feel at the betrayal. He was defending Rey only because she couldn’t do it herself. All of this made him just want to go back to sleep.

But, inside, he knew he couldn’t show weakness. With one final kiss to Rey’s forehead, he set her
down and he lifted his head to the people around the table.

Armie was the only face that he could focus on.

Until the Organas took his attention away from the boy with the lingering features of his friend, but the body of a teenager, back to his love. Was that how he looked?

Dropping to his knees, he settled beside Rey as Breha slowly neared them.

“Hello, Rey. I’m Ben’s grandma,” she smiled, her brown eyes crinkling in the faint summer sunset steaming in from the front windows. “You must be wondering how I know you.”

Rey shrugged and pursed her lips. “But…not mine?”

Breha, reaching out for Bail, frowned and then shook her head. “We can be yours too, if you want to. You’re welcome in this family, dear.”

Rey’s forehead creased, trying to work through all of the new information. A pang of guilt crawled through his body. How do you explain grandparents when parents were never really established? He wasn’t sure anymore what he’d told her or what the others had told her. He wanted to keep his head down but there were too many eyes on him. All of them were familiar and he couldn’t avoid them. Weakly, he met Armie’s eyes. In the brief look, he knew that he was the same friend he’d left behind at seven years old. At the edges of his gaze, he was still the same friend, his only friend, who’d helped him at baseball and listen to his strange stories in the backyard as he dreamed about flying away into space. He watched as Rey slowly eyed all of the adults in the room, her hands curling into fists.

“I…can I eat and…make answers?” She asked the entire room in a voice that only he knew that she could possess. “Answer questions, I mean. I’m not dumb.” The ability to process everything that was happening shouldn’t be something that she was capable of and yet, here she stood, looking forward to eating and getting it all over with.

With her gentle eyes, his grandmother stepped back, his grandfather following. “Well, we hope you like lasagna.”

As if Rey knew what it was. He still half hugged her and stood close the table. He gingerly looked at his friend to apologize as Rey found her seat and the other strange, younger, face at the table.

“He’s my best friend,” Kylo said, empty confidence quickly draining away. “I hope that you still are.”

Armie looked to Leia and then quickly back to him. “You look so different. But yeah…I never stopped missing you.”

“I missed you too,” he mumbled, slouching down.

The table was set, like it always was for family dinners. He’d sat in this seat so many times, eating breakfast, lunch or dinner. But something was missing under his feet.

“Where’s Chewie?”

Han and Leia had sat down at either end of the table. Han bit his lip and lifted his greying eyebrows.

“He…passed away, son. He was an old dog. But you know what? He was always looking for you.
Everywhere we’d go, whenever we’d get home, he’d go straight to your room. He died beside your bed. He wanted you to come back and now you’re here.” The pain in Han’s voice almost shook him. Almost.

“You couldn’t even tell me that *my* dog died? And then you *lied* about it?”

The bitter tone settled around the table until Armie cleared his throat.

“My parents got divorced. I was alone a lot. I used to take Chewie for walks. I took care of him for you. Don’t worry,” his friend said, sitting up straighter.

He met the other boy’s face and the treachery shuddered loose. “Thank you.”

After a long, extended silence, his mother nudged a serving spoon in his direction. He nodded, realizing how hungry Rey must be. He quickly filled up her plate, taking only a small portion compared to her. She eyed the garlic bread with an expression of unbridled excitement. She took a bite and grinned at him.

“It’s good,” she giggled. “How much can I eat?”

“All of it, sweetheart. All of it,” he replied, instantly handing her his piece.

Rey ate and he picked at his food, listening to the adults talk. They were trying to discuss mundane things, but his head perked up at the talk of lawyers and police. His mother noticed and she nodded at him. Armie mirrored his motion as he sat up, clearly curious about what had happened to his friend.

He didn’t know what he’d done.

He hadn’t just materialized from space.

“…but the law in California, Leia, you can’t deal with that with a family lawyer?” Bail had his elbows on the table. He took a long drink of red wine. Kylo quirked his head at the man; he never drank before, as far as he knew. But he only had dumb kid memories.

“We’re getting help, Bail, and since they were taken across state lines, it’s not just California that we’re dealing with,” Leia answered, firmly, before taking a drink from her own glass.

He looked up at Armie, quirked his eyebrow, and lifted his water glass. The other boy smirked and mirrored him.

Across the table from one another, they clinked their glasses.

Breha cleared her throat. “So, kids, what do you want to do first, now that you’re home? Do you want to meet with lawyers, like these boring people are talking about?”

Rey was flicking at a tomato on her plate. “Can I see a horse?”

“A horse? Oh, we’ll take you to the pony ride at the fair!” Breha was ignoring the guarded looks from around the table.

Kylo leaned over to Rey, wanting to remind everyone about where they’d come from. “Tell her about who told you about horses.”

Rey nodded, then quickly looked at her lap. “A girl came one day. She kept crying and Snoke smashed her. He smashed her real hard. She was on our floor and Kylo took care of her. She told
me about her horse. He was white and really pretty and big. Then she went away. He killed her 'cause she was crying.”

This time, the silence was deeper and more cutting. He heard the shifting of feet and the sounds of wine glasses meeting lips.

“We’re going to take you to a horse, Rey,” Han said, sitting up and clearing his throat. “And it will blow your mind.”

“I’d like that,” she said before lifting her head.

Leia stood from the table, starting to gather the plates. “Why don’t you kids go upstairs and play. We’ll call you when grandma and grandpa are leaving. If it’s okay with you?”

Kylo was already standing, reaching to scoop Rey into his arms. Then, he paused. “No dessert?”

Leia, her hands filled with dishes, gave him a broad grin. “Armitage, grab what you brought. You can eat them in B—Kylo’s room.”

The other boy nodded, only pausing slightly, before reaching for a plate of brownies on the counter. The three were heading up the stairs before his friend whispered a question about his name.

“I…um…I can’t be Ben anymore,” he finally answered as he closed the door. “I can’t tell you everything that happened, but I’m…I don’t even know. The therapists try to tell me what to do and say and think and I’m…I don’t know.”

Rey was sitting on the bed, munching on a brownie. “You’re Kylo. I’ve only known Kylo.”

Armie shuffled his feet and then sat down on the floor beside the bed. He looked from his friend to the television on the cabinet across from the bed. “Han made me set up some games. Can we play and talk? I’m…I also hated my name. Everyone calls me Hux now. At least, everyone who understands.”

The tension in Kylo’s shoulders loosened and he nodded. He grabbed a brownie from the plate resting on the bed and watched as Armie, no Hux, turned on a gaming system. His friend handed him a controller and he finally felt more at home.

“Wow,” he said. “It looks like a movie.”

Hux glanced over and smiled. “You don’t even know, man. You don’t even know.”

He sat back, watching Hux start playing, declining to try at first.

“I hang out here a lot, since my parents split up.”

Kylo nodded, glancing up at Rey on the bed. Her eyes were glued to the screen, amazed at rush of lush graphics and a very real world of a man cutting through a forest with a sword.

“I’m sorry,” he managed to say.

Hux paused the game and looked at him with wide eyes. “Don’t say sorry. I read what happened to you guys and it sounded…I don’t even get most of what happened. I saw the press conference, but they cut out the part when you...yeah...from the clips so nobody really remembers that, don’t worry. How are you still alive? A divorce won’t kill someone. A crazy fucker does.”
Blankly, Kylo stared at the images, stilled on the screen. “He…he…I can’t even believe that we’re alive. This doesn’t feel real. They’re making me take these stupid pills and there have been too many doctors. I don’t even know who I am anymore.”

After a short sigh, Hux started the game again, letting the dull music kill the silence. “They made me see doctors too. And take pills. My grades were sucking and I didn’t want to do anything. Dad was gone and he hated mom. Who does that? They’re supposed to be in love and then he’s just leaving?”

Slowly, Kylo nodded. “Things aren’t supposed to change.”

Rey tapped his shoulder. “Sleepy. I’m sleepy.”

He nodded and stood. “We need to brush your teeth.”

Scooping her up, he heard Hux clattering his teeth. “You should say goodbye to your grandparents. My stupid therapist is trying to teach me to think about others and how they feel good…or something.”

Rey, in his arms, shook her head. “Will they feel better? If we do?”

Hux looked up at her and smiled. “They want to get to know you. They’re nice. They bought you guys this.”

His head was cloudy as he emerged from his room. He saw the adults at the table, drinking coffee. Both Breha and Leia looked tired, eyes still lingeringly red. He cleared his throat at the top of the stairs.

“Rey’s going to bed. She wanted to say goodnight,” he said before Rey nudged him. “We wanted to say goodnight. Can Hux stay over?”

Leia looked up and then nodded. “We’ll call his mom. But I’m sure it’s okay.”

He brought Rey down to the last step and sat down again. Breha and Bail stood, looming over them.

“Goodnight, Rey,” Bail said, extending his hand. “It was wonderful to meet you. We’ll see you tomorrow, and also see what we can do about that horse.”

Breha seemed to be holding herself back after Rey had shook his grandfather’s hand. “You’re a wonderful girl. We’ll be here for you, we promise.”

Rey sat on the step, looking at them, until she nodded to herself and turned to climb the stairs again. Kylo looked at them both, briefly shook his head, and then followed her.

“Adults suck,” he said, the second they were inside his room again with the door shut. “They just keep doing things that they think are right.”

Hux laughed lightly. “At least they don’t change.”

“I’ll be right back,” Kylo replied. “I need to make sure Rey is okay.”

Rey was looking between the two and had a thoughtful look on her face as they left for the washroom. He wasn’t surprised to find a small pink toothbrush and children’s toothpaste waiting for them. He handed her the brush as he sat on the edge of the tub. She had quickly gotten a hand
of how to brush her teeth since their escape. He’d taught her, even though the nurses had tried.

“I like him,” Rey said, foam spilling over the edge of her mouth. He laughed, an actual laugh, as he reached to help her up to spit and rinse her mouth.

“He won’t go away, I promise.” His voice was still light as he looked at their reflection in the vanity. This part of routine he could handle.

Back in his room, he settled Rey onto his bed. Under the covers, he kissed her forehead. She played with his hair and giggled as her eyes drifted shut.

“Who is she?” Hux finally asked, quietly, after she’d fallen asleep.

“She’s Rey,” he replied, settling beside his friend. “I want to try playing now.”

Nodding, his friend quickly exited the game. “Okay, we’ll do the companion mode. We help each other.”

“I was watching you.” Kylo took the controller and settled into the game. “This is…weird.”

“So weird,” Hux answered. “You know, we had a memorial for you at school. You were just gone. I didn’t think that you were dead, but they made us talk to all these counselors and shit. And it was so dumb. They made us plant a tree for you and I thought it was the stupidest shit. If you were dead, why would you care about a tree?”

Kylo was fumbling through the game, but Hux was there to clear up anything he didn’t finish. They worked through the quests and he gradually learned the path and the point of what they were doing. There was a treasure at the end. Despite the advanced graphics, it was the same thing they’d played as kids.

“What happened to the tree?”

“It died,” Hux said, a low giggle starting in his throat. “It died so fast. Then they secretly replanted another one because kids are stupid and were upset that the tree died.”

“Of course it would die.” He turned to grin. “But I’m not dead.”

Hux sighed and then paused the game, thrusting the controller aside. “I still don’t believe that you called me.”

“You could have told me that you’d be here,” he answered, cautiously. “The stupid doctors keep talking about trust and I’m…everyone is the enemy to me right now. My parents, they put Rey in those pajamas. They shouldn’t have done that. Snoke would always…”

His voice trailed off.

He took a deep breath. “I shouldn’t have said his name.”

His bottom lip started to quiver and he felt lost. He didn’t want to cry, he couldn’t cry. But, it was still there. What if he’d taken Armie too? What if he’d been forced to help end his friend’s life? What if he’d been forced to carry his body and dump him into a barrel? What if Snoke had done to Rey what he had threatened to do? What if he did that to him again?

A whimper escaped his mouth and Hux reached his arm behind his shoulder, pulling him closer.

“Sometimes the doctors are right. Sometimes, you can cry.”
He still bit back the tears, shaking his head. “He killed everyone. If you looked at him the wrong way, he’d kill you. He ripped my fingernails out. He cut up my arms until I couldn’t feel anything. He broke my arm and would burn me until I screamed and he would just laugh. He took the girls and would…”

Hux just held him. He was like one of the others in their space. He could talk to him. He wasn’t just an ideal-filled adult.

Finally, the dam burst and he wept. He cried, shakily into his friend’s shoulder. He grabbed onto him, feeling arms settle around him as he did.

“It’s okay, Kylo. You’re safe now. Really safe.”

Shaking his head, Kylo sat up, a hiccup escaping his mouth. “But why do I feel like this? Like things can’t stop? I feel tired, then I feel angry, but then I can’t get angry?”

Hux just nodded. “What pills are they giving you?”

He quirked his had. “I don’t know. I’m too…there’s too much to do and I didn’t ask. I don’t want to take them.”

Slowly, Hux shook his head and then sat closer to him. “When my parents broke up, two years ago, they put me on these pills that just made me feel awful. They didn’t help. I started tricking them. You just pretend to take them. You shove one off to the corner of your mouth, swallow the water and then spit it out. I didn’t need them anyway. It’s like you said, adults just think what they want. I’m okay now. And you’ll be okay. I see my dad once a month, but I have my mom and your parents. And our friends.”

Kylo frowned. “They’re not really my friends. They haven’t seen me in…forever.”

“No, no. They really want to see you. We’re having a party at Paige’s, next week. I’ll add you to the group chat.” Hux sat up and let out a happy sigh. “Paige has a little sister, Rose. Maybe she can be Rey’s friend.”

“Why do you care about Rey?” He asked, wiping away the last of the tears from this nose.

“She’s…like your sister. I want her to be happy too. Or at least, um, normal?”

Looking up at the frozen television, Kylo nodded. “We’d like that.”

A careful knock broke their tableau and he sighed before grunting a response.

“Armie, your mother is here to drop off your things for the night,” Han said, looking at how close they were. Kylo shifted away, glaring.

“Thanks, Mr Solo,” Hux answered, standing up. “Do you want to say hey to my mom?”

He shook his head. “Tell her thanks from me.”

“For what?”

“For everything.”

Alone, Kylo quickly moved to change. He noticed how half of his closet was filled with newly purchased clothes, still with the tag, while others were still what he’d left behind. There was always change, but in some places, no change. With frustration, he grabbed a pair of pants and a t-
shirt. They fit. They were soft and didn’t itch. He eyed himself in the mirror and let his shoulders sag. He was too tall and too thin. Rey needed food more than him.

Hux returned, a bag slung over his shoulder. “She says hi.”

“I guess she at least looks the same?” he asked, sitting on his bed, beside Rey.

Hux moved to turn off the television and gaming system, before opening his sleeping bag. He spread it out and Kylo frowned. He grabbed a pillow from his overfull bed and handed it to him.

“Thanks, man.”

Hux changed quickly and Kylo turned away to study Rey instead. Just looking at another half-clad body brought him back to the death house and the smell and ache of pain. When Hux cleared his throat he turned back.

“Do you still play baseball?” he asked.

Hux laughed lightly as he laid himself down onto the floor. “No. Soccer. You’re going to be good at it. And hey, I’ll help you with school too. We can study everyday.”

Kylo shoved himself under the covers and shrugged. “You want me back in school?”

Nodding, Hux sat up, resting his head on his hand as Kylo looked down at him. “I helped Han with the books. You can have my notes from last year. My dad thinks that I suck at school but I know a lot more than he thinks. My dad… I miss him…but…”

“He shouldn’t tell you that you can’t do something,” Kylo replied, finally putting his head down. The emotions still bubbling in his chest, he let out a thought he wanted to keep secret, but his mouth wouldn’t let him. “Are you really still my friend?”

“Yeah, of course,” Hux’s response was quick and then he paused. “When I came to your house, after you were gone, it was like everything didn’t make sense. I thought you’d be home the next day or something, but it kept going on and on. Your mom and dad… they were so sad. I didn’t think that they’d ever be okay again. Like, I’d come here and walk Chewie and they would still just looked the same. Everyday, it was like their hurt got bigger. I know that I’ll never know what happened to you, but I am your friend. You’re a hero. I wouldn’t have survived.”

Kylo met his eyes, realizing that tears were threatening to rise again. Thankfully, a soft knock came at his door.

“Come in,” Hux called, after Kylo waited too long, lost in thought.

“Everyone settling in here?” Han asked, poking his head through the door. “Rey’s not in her room?”

“She’s fine here,” Kylo’s voice felt hollow as he answered.

“That’s…okay. Just brush your teeth and go to bed. We love you, Ben.” The last statement disappeared with the closing door.

“Do you believe him?” Hux asked, sitting up.

“I don’t know,” Kylo answered. “I want to figure it out and I just can’t.”

After forcing themselves up to brush their teeth, accompanied by playful shoving and comparing
who was taller, they went back to his room. Hux sighed, looking up at him with a small grin. “Maybe you, me and Rey can figure it out.”

“I hope so,” he replied, before reaching up to turn off the lamp beside his bed. "Goodnight."

"Night."

For once, darkness wasn’t so empty.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Kylo tries to navigate the world, still struggling with the past.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Kylo woke up to someone shoving him. He jerked back, ready to reach for Rey and take the beating. Grunting, he gripped his hands across his face and held his breath.

Instead of Snoke, Hux stood there with wide eyes beside his bed.

“You were…sorry. I guess you shouldn’t wake up someone who’s having a nightmare but…” his friend started rambling out of embarrassment, but Kylo just sat up and shook his head. He took a deep breath and tried to calm his heart. He couldn’t remember the dream that he had just escaped from, but the lingering fear had left a bead of sweat rolling down his back.

Gazing around the familiar, yet achingly uncomfortable room, he sighed. “No, this is just how I wake up.”

Ignoring Hux’s curious gaze, he glanced at the clock. 6 a.m. Groaning, he flopped back down. With a huff of frustration, Hux slowly sat down on the floor and looked at him with tired eyes. He leaned back against his closet, causing the slatted door to rattle. It was strange to be in a place where such a simple sound could make so much noise. Even after the weeks in the hospital, Kylo still strained his ears for the faintest gasps or strangled screams. Instead, there was just silence, broken only by Hux drumming his hand on the floor.

“Guess it wasn’t a dream,” Hux mumbled. “Guess you’re really home.”

He was fully awake now, sore but well rested. His body was always tense, the lingering breaks and wounds were healed by now. Yet, some of them didn’t quite agree with how he moved and slept. Turning, he reached out and rested his hand on Rey’s chest. At least her body wouldn’t suffer the long-term pains that he carried. He had felt her wake up in his panic, but now she was breathing steadily again, back to sleep. She was adjusting easier. Rubbing her pajamas, he tried not to think about how long it would take for her to sleep in her own room. But at least he could sleep last night with her by his side.

“Guess I’m not dead,” he whispered, taking a quick glance at Rey’s face. Her cheeks were fuller. She looked younger now than she’d ever done. When she was an infant, after the moment Snoke had forced her into his arms and threatened to kill them both if she cried too much, Kylo had felt a new, if only, reason to live. He had to keep her alive and get out. There were few kindnesses that Snoke had showed them, yet Rey’s arrival had given him a new purpose as well: he wanted to see if an infant could survive there. Looking at Rey now, with her almost chubby cheeks, he fumbled internally to understand the darker future that he’d stopped. All of the older girls had suffered terribly, but still what he did to the boys…what did he want?
“I, um…” Hux started. “I didn’t get a chance to tell you last night…”

“What?” His head snapped away, broken from the hazy vision of the dark stairs down to the basement.

Hux was still tired, his head lagging to one side. His messy red hair was sticking out over his forehead. He wasn’t looking at him, but his eyes finally lifted when Kylo shifted on the bed.

Hux looked guilty as he spoke. “They got you guys a new dog. It wasn’t for you like, for a present, but they got it like a month before everything happened. I wasn’t supposed to tell you but…but they were supposed to give it to you last night, but there were too many reporters and…”

Narrowing his eyes, Kylo leaned forward. The urge to intimidate Hux was too tempting and he felt a blossom of joy grow in his chest as Hux leaned back, cornered under the intense gaze.

“Rey gets to name it.” The words came easily as he lowered his voice.

He glared for a few unbroken moments until he smirked and Hux lost the fear in his eyes. He broke out into boyish giggles and Kylo actually grinned fully. Rey woke up, rubbing her eyes as she looked at them.

She slowly focused on him and laughed, her smile warming the room with the sun filtering in between the blinds. “You’re happy.”

With a brief smile to Hux, he turned. “Not really. We just made a joke.”

“You’re not happy…at home?” Her face dropped and she looked at him with deep confusion. He wasn’t happy yesterday. He wasn’t overjoyed the entire way home. Despite what he’d promised her, he’d just been a disappointment.

He faltered in his answer, struggling to find what to say to her. He had said so many things over the years that they mingled with the internal promises that he had made to her in his head.

There was a sudden pressure at his feet. Hux sat at the edge of the bed, folding his legs so he could sit between them, but at a distance.

“Rey, I um,” Hux paused to look at his hands then back at her again, “I just know a few kids your age. I’m kinda glad my parents didn’t have more kids because they…yeah…um… I think that Kylo and me, we are best friends. Sometimes, we can joke and stuff. He will laugh, but he won’t be really happy. Like, there were a few times when I was really upset about my parents’ divorce and my other friends would make a joke and I’d laugh, but everything after, everything would just be…sucky.”

Rey turned her head. “Kylo says that. The kids at the hospital say that. I don’t know what it means.”

Kylo frowned, watching how Hux and his angel interacted. She knew that he wouldn’t be going away. It wasn’t like any of the other kids. In the peace of this house, despite the edges haunted by lies, she could have her real life.

Rey then scrunched her face, unable to hold a lie for long. “I say it too. So I think I know what it means.”

Hux just kept his face neutral. “Exactly. Sometimes you just say things until someone tells you it’s wrong. When I was little, like you, I always tried to be like other kids I thought were cool. It’s not
wrong if someone else does it too, right?”

Rey, puzzled, let out a long exhale through her nose and sat up. “Nope. I need to pee.”

She was up and off the bed before Kylo could move to follow her. She stopped at the door and quickly turned to look at him. His heart was already beating faster so he was glad that she could take care of herself. He gave her a quick tilt of his head, telling her just to call for him and he’d be there.

She left the door half open and he heard her soft feet pad down the hall. Her steps were steady, only pausing once before the dull thud of the washroom door shutting let him relax. Hearing none of it, Hux sighed and ran his hand on the blanket.

“How do you guys do that?” He asked, his breaking voice low.

“We had to learn how to talk without words. But I still taught her to talk. She had to talk to the other kids so she’d figure out the outside. I had to get her out,” Kylo said, ending with a shrug. Trusting his friend had come so easily, why stop now?

Hux bit his lip and nodded. “This is still so weird.”

Kylo could only bob his head and wait for Rey to return. The sun was steady through the window and he was breathing. This was life now.

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His pills were laid out for him beside his breakfast plate. He caught Hux’s eyes across the table and he raised his eyebrows, quickly, before looking down at his toast. Rey had already swallowed her medication down, followed by a good clunk of chocolate milk. She was tracing her finger down her slice of Nutella on toast before Leia turned to calmly explain not to play with her food, not because it was wrong, but because it made a mess. Han was reading the newspaper, sipping on a cup of coffee. He had felt a brief pang of relief to see coffee sitting beside his plate before he was reminded of the pills.

He took the first two. One was a vitamin. One was a painkiller. He still needed those.

Those two went down with orange juice.

The last one, the evil one, he put in his mouth and tucked up under his lip. Leia was busy with Rey, Han was muttering about the baseball prospects. Only Hux was watching him.

But he knew his parents were still watching him out of the corner of their eyes.

The pill was in and he drank the juice.

He waited a few minutes, glaring at his breakfast as the pressure under his lip started to build.

“It’s just peanut butter,” Leia finally said, sitting across from him. “Would you like something else?”

Tilting his head, he took a long look at her. Narrowing his eyes, he focused on her hairline; her eyes were too dangerous this early in the day. He finally shook his head no and she sighed, standing to
retrieve more coffee. That’s when he took the chance to spit the pill into a napkin.

If he could do this every morning, he’d finally be able to fix the hollow parts of him, he hoped.

“Hux told us about the dog,” he blurted out, trying to distract everyone from what he’d just done. “When do we get it?”

His friend sputtered into his juice. “You didn’t have to tell them!”

Rey’s ears had perked up. “A dog?”

With a low groan, his father let the paper fall onto the table. With devilish eyebrows, Kylo sipped his coffee and met Han’s eyes.

“You just lost dog-walking privileges for life, Armitage.”

He was sure that Hux was just pretending to be angry when he mouthed asshole in his direction.

Leia had her arms folded and was leaning against the counter. “We haven’t had time to pick him up from the kennel, but Luke will be getting him for us and bringing him by tonight.”

Rey was still digesting what was being discussed around her. He was mainly focused on the fact that his parents had kept another thing from him. Even worse, they had left the dog alone with strangers. Setting aside the bitterness in his mouth, he tried to concentrate on Rey. She looked at Kylo with wild eyes and he quickly grinned at her.

You’ll love having a dog.

Really?

Yeah.

“Start thinking of a name, kids. He’s going to need one,” Han said. “Armitage doesn’t get a vote.”

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Luke showed up that evening, complaining about the drive and the news vans parked outside the house. Hux had reluctantly went home that afternoon, but reminded him of the party at Paige’s before he left.

He was happy to have a distraction by the time that Luke arrived.

His uncle had grown a beard. His hair looked grayer and his eyes seemed tired. He looked at them both with curious eyes before he set the juvenile Irish Setter on the ground.

It wasn’t exactly the puppy that he had in his mind, but it yipped and wagged its tail and ran straight to Rey, who held her ground and grinned when she kneeled down. The dog, still small and filled with energy but not a puppy, licked her face in between happy yips. Then it turned and scratched underneath its chin before turning back to Rey.

She started petting the dog, running her hands through its fur. At first, he’d thought that she’d be afraid. Instead, she happily accepted the new pet into her life. She looked at Kylo with a joy that he’d never expected. A pang of jealously rattled in his chest as she kissed the dog on the side of his muzzle. He licked her again and then trotted over to Han and gave him the same greeting. Leia sat
on the landing of the stairs, talking over the event with Luke. He could still feel his uncle’s eyes on him as the two spoke. The dog walked up to everyone, but him.

“He’s got mumps,” Rey said, running her hand through the dog’s fur. “He’s all mumpy.”


Rey looked up, met his eyes with a slight frown, then nodded and returned to petting the dog.

So they named the dog Lumpy.

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Kylo didn’t want to go to the party, but there wasn’t much keeping him in that house. He was afraid to leave it, but it was that fear and Rey that kept him from exploring more of the world. The new dog hated him and his parents had still lied about the old dog. He wanted to demand more independence for his parents willingly deceiving him, despite how uncomfortable he felt out in the open. Moreover, he was achingly jealous of how the dog loved to follow Rey around and how much she enjoyed hugging him. Now, he had Rey and the dog in his bed. He didn’t exactly mind; Chewie would always sleep at his feet. They would have to sneak the dog for walks, which he only reluctantly went on so Rey could get enjoy the fresh air. Luke would quite often drive them to the dog park to avoid the news crew. They were still there, and he had watched his father give a statement on the front lawn one day. A man in a suit stood at his side; Kylo guessed that he was a lawyer.

His mother and father still had to use the back door to enter the house and he would watch the reporters lurking outside of their home with an sense of satisfaction that made him question himself. Why did he want them to hurt? Why did it feel good to hear his father mumbling about those ‘fucking vultures’ whenever he came home? All he wanted for so long was stability and now the taste of chaos made him crave more. Even when the reporters followed them to the dog park, forcing them to drive to one an hour away, his fear was overridden by the grim dismay of being hounded.

Maybe that’s why he agreed to go with Hux to the party. They had left, after Leia had looked at them with eyes that bore the absent hurt of a dull blade twisting in a wound that was just starting to heal. But Rey had just looked at him with pride and curiosity as he tucked her into bed, his bed, shortly before he dared to leave his house. Lumpy wagged his tail at her side. He reached down to pet the dog for one of the few times since he’d come barrelling into their lives. For once, he wasn’t met with a growl.

There were other changes too. They were only good if they were with Rey. Rey had helped him pick out the clothes he’d wear that night. Between buying things for the dog, they’d been shopping for themselves. The mall was just as aggravating as he remembered it. People were slow and plodding, taking up time and space. The stores were either too bright or too noisy. He hated trying on clothes because everything was either too short or too big. But Rey had frowned every time he’d grumbled. She had told him to go with Hux. She had looked at him with eyes that sang that she wanted to be there with him, but understood why she couldn’t.

It was a big kid thing.
That didn’t change.

Even on the outside, they were still separated by the decade between them. It was only in their world, in that prison, that they were one.

Armitage tapped his arm and he shook himself out of the memory of putting Rey into bed. It was still his room, but the lights were left on. That made it more of her room than the space across the hall. In his daze, he accepted Hux’s touch.

Since they had been back, she had only played in that room, deciding which toys she liked and disliked. Legos were on the pile of like, while dolls were tossed to the side. He had sat with Rey during her ‘experiments’, as they called them in their wordless speech, and watched as she stripped each doll of her clothes and tossed them aside. She looked at the dolls intently, asking him if they were gone. He told her that they’d never been there, so she didn’t have to worry. Still, she would stare at the faces for minutes that felt endless. Finally, she’d put the dolls aside, all of them faced down. The days were like this, shopping, eating, playing with the dog in the backyard, and learning what Rey liked, but the nights were still spent with him. They’d read in his bed and he’d help her change into her pyjamas.

It wouldn’t take long for Han and Leia to do something about it.

He had already heard them talking.

They had already insisted that Rey take baths by herself in the evenings. He could shower in the morning. The least they could do was be open about why any of that made them uncomfortable. He couldn’t understand the problem. He knew that they were hiding their suspicious gazes and kept their conversations behind closed doors. They didn’t understand that he’d learnt how to spy through a pure need to keep breathing. How to hear through walls and understand whispers, dwarfed by distant screams, would help him know who was alive, dead, and what Snoke’s mood was. This wasn’t spying from the banisters and seeing stolen glances and embraces. This was about survival.

He knew what they thought of him and it rang clear why they wanted him out for the evening. Luke had started staying in the basement guest room and had spent the time since he’d arrived in their house. He didn’t want to talk to his uncle, but he couldn’t avoid him during dinner. Even the walks in the dog park gave him moments when he could be alone, but dinner was a trap. The looks between the adults told him how messed up he was.

He would never be normal, no matter what they said and did.

He’d always hear silence in the house at bedtime, knowing that they were all downstairs and listening. They wanted to make sure that he wasn’t hurting Rey behind their backs, in the deep and painful way that was the focus of all therapists. The sexual side of Snoke’s abuse was something that he thought about, but couldn’t figure out how to sort it on the list of agony. The girls always got it worse. That was the thing he kept telling himself.

All the girls, but Rey.

He’d made sure of that.

“Are you okay?” Armie’s voice was still unfamiliar to him but he was getting used to it. They had hung out almost everyday since they came home. Kylo had taken his advice and used it since that first morning at the breakfast table. He wanted to clear the cotton from his mind. He was tired of everything feeling hollow or too much. The words from others still floated to him and he needed to
focus on how to react, but he hoped that in time he’d begin to feel again. He wouldn’t call Agent Jinn a liar, because he wasn’t. The doctors were the liars and they had fooled him too.

Walking under the streetlights, blocks from his house, he thought again about how his friend had changed. He almost wondered how he sounded, but he pushed the feeling away as they trudged under the dim streetlights.

Paige’s house was three blocks away. At first, the thought of going to a party — a real teenage party — had brought him out of the fog that had filled his head since being back in the world. Now, getting closer, he was being pulled back into going anywhere but to that house. The week without being on that evil pill had finally brought back his emotions, but in a better way. His nervousness was now more focused; now, he could finally clearly see what was happening around him. He was afraid for a reason. He questioned how they could still be his friend if they knew what he’d done the last seven years. He had avoided looking up anything about the case, but there must be stories out there about them. The reporters were there for a reason.

There would always be blood on his hands. No party could undo that.

“Yeah, I’m okay,” he mumbled. He finally pulled down his hood, taking in the warm summer air. He ran a quick hand through his hair and wondered if his mother would let him go alone to get it cut. “Just strange to go anywhere.”

Armie smirked. He’d been patient to a near-breaking point the last week. But they had still reconnected and got to know one another. Armie, or Hux or whatever, would come over with a bright smile and kind words to Leia. After she’d disappeared to do whatever she did in her office on the main floor, his mood would sour, instantly ranting about how unfair his father was. He was always angry that his father didn’t want to spend any time with him, even thought they lived in the same town. Kylo could listen, but struggled to understand why he felt nothing about his friend’s rage. When they were alone, the tide would change again. This was the Hux he preferred; he could get along with someone trying to get him interested in some comic or television show that was unfamiliar to him. At least he could probably watch or read it and decide himself if he liked it.

“I know you’ll get used to it. We are just going to hang out. It was Paige’s idea before you get worried that it was you mom.” Hux had his hands in his pockets, his eyes briefly turned away from him.

He managed to huff in response, hoping it sounded positive. “If it’s anything fun, then it wouldn’t be her idea.”

It wasn’t Leia’s idea. She had insisted that he bring his phone. It weighed heavily in his jacket, reminding him that his only rescue would come in the form of people he didn’t trust.

“Exactly!” Armitage grabbed his shoulder and grinned. “It can be like this all summer. When you get a bike we can...”

“I don’t want to go too far,” he said, sharply. When he realized his tone, he frowned. “I don’t...I...”

He let the thought trail off and his friend squeezed his shoulder again,

“That’s cool. We can just play games at your place. So Rey can be there, right?”

“Yeah. She’ll like that.”

Armitage nodded and let his arm fall away when Kylo held his eyes too long on his arm. “Your mom wants me to go to therapy with you.”
His feet felt heavy and he cast a dark gaze as he and stopped walking, exhaling at the thought. He shuffled on the loose gravel on the sidewalk, filling the silence of the suburbs at night. There was nothing but the two of them, a distant garage door opening, and the crickets in the early evening of a dawning summer.

“I said no,” Armitage replied in an instant. “Not unless you want me too.”

Kylo shoved his hands into the pockets of his jacket. The tight fabric still didn’t sit right, but at least it was black. “I need to…” he paused and looked up at the sky again, “…think about it. Therapy sucks. They keep telling me what to do and what to think.”

Armitage tilted his head, frowning. “Then you’re really going to hate school.”

He smirked slightly. “I need school. I don’t need therapists.”

They stood in silence for a few seconds, shoes still grinding into the gravel of a darkened driveway. He really wanted Armitage to understand, but still kept things from him. When he told him about Agent Jinn he realized that he had trusted too much. He would have to keep that part to himself from now on. He still wished that he had the agent’s number. Kylo knew that he would find it one day, once he actually dared to open up the laptop that sat on his desk. Right now, he preferred to live in the idea that Agent Jinn would come by the house and say that there was some mistake. He and Rey could go and live with him. Maybe he liked dogs too…

“Come on, we are going to be late.” Hux’s voice broke his thoughts. That was another thing he should have gotten used to by now. Everyone was always talking, not just begging or screaming. It was strange to crave a silence that was never really peaceful.

He sighed and started following his friend again.

The Tico house was smaller than both his and Hux’s houses, but it wasn’t bad or anything. In his distant memory, he thought it had been bigger. But it had a porch. And Paige was waiting there. Her dark hair was pulled into pigtails and she was wearing jean shorts and a white tank top. She tilted her head as she noticed that they were nearing her home.

“I thought you guys got lost or something,” she said, grinning. “We are in the basement. Mom doesn’t want Rose to wake up. Um, hi Ben. Maybe you don’t remember me but…”

He stopped at the base of the steps, hands still in his jacket pockets. He met her eyes and tried to look pleasant. “I remember you Paige. Your mom made those ginger cookies.”

Paige’s face lit up. “I knew you would remember me! I’m so glad that you’re back, oh my God, you don’t even know…”

He let her fade off into chatter as she smiled. She flipped her hair and he watched her fold her arms across her chest. She still looked like the girl that he knew but she had changed even more than Hux had. It was harder to find the face that he knew in her half-grown body. Her light top hardly covered her stomach. She should be freezing in the early summer air. He could easily follow Hux’s eyes towards her torso; instead of being enticed like he was, Kylo instead thought of the poor girl who he’d seen stripped naked on Snoke’s basement floor. She must have been the same age, echoes of a child in a half-grown body. Instead of Paige’s long, clean locks, this girl had hair matted to her face, caked with blood and snot. She had screamed and pleaded and scratched at Snoke’s face as he bit at her cheek. Detached, he had stood in the corner, trying to think of anything but being there in the low light that only meant oncoming death.
The scent of the room would always change when someone was about to die. The air was sharper somehow, more bitter.

The screams echoed in his ears as the other two stood there, laughing about something.

Hux cleared his throat and he managed to nod his head. They followed Paige around, down towards a back door. Kylo eyed it and felt Paige at his side.

“There’s a private entrance. We used to rent it out. Then, it was for when I got home late from practice. Dad still wants me to be a dancer but it’s not working out. Now it’s just where we hang out. Is that okay?” She sounded too concerned about how he was doing. She was constantly fiddling with her hair as they walked up to the door.

He heard voices and music behind it.

If he could be seven years old again, this would be everything he’d dreamed of when he thought about being a teenager. He had always longed to be older, to be taller and faster, and to be able to do whatever he wanted to. Technically, they had snuck out of his house tonight. It wasn’t from his parents, but from another annoying force that he couldn’t control yet bitterly enjoyed. As he breathed in the fresh night air, he quietly wished again that he hadn’t died with Snoke. He wanted to reach for Ben and not be Kylo, but that boy was dead. Instead, he had to perform in his shell. But the wreckage that he navigated wasn’t as broken as everyone thought. He thought about Rey, tucked safely in a bed back at home, a happy dog at her feet. He’d made that happen. He could get through a couple of awkward hours before fleeing. At least no one would kill him on the way out.

Paige gave him a long look with a pained smile on her face as she opened the door, still talking to Hux about how Holdo hadn’t given her the right grade in homeroom and how she was so glad to be out of her class…

He let it all wash over him as he stepped into the low light of the rear stairwell.

A grouping of faces that he once knew sat along the opposite wall as their feet creaked against every step. Each one seemed to freeze when he walked in, dipping his head as he let his eyes adjust and his anxious heart calm. The rapid hammering of his heart had started the moment the door had opened.

“Holy shit,” a boy with a familiar face said. “You’re really here.”

Hux shot quick eyes to him and then back to the boy. “Yeah, Doph, I’m here. Calm down.”

Pausing at the end of the stairs, Kylo took in the people in the room. He had to know who was there, where the exits were, and where the clear threat was. Snoke had, once, forced him into the basement while blindfolded. He had stamped on the floor and tossed dirt in his face, screaming at him to know where he was and what he was holding without sight. Just having his eyes opened lifted him from that space. Now, in another basement, he just saw a bunch of kids, Doph Mikita among them. Kel and Elia Tehar sat up a little from the tattered sofa to look at him. He recognized the siblings at once. But the final blonde head of Liza Tharen made him still his face, preventing the dawning frown.

Liza, the elementary school classmate who had always followed him around.

Liza, who would steal his pencils.

Liza, whose tank top was even shorter than Paige’s.
He narrowed his eyes at her and then turned back to the others, the dread causing his hands to curl into fists.

“I have a problem with basements,” he managed to say.

Doph nodded. “Yeah, um, I saw that on the news. When you…freaked out…”

Taking a deep breath, he took the final steps in two firm strides. He took off his jacket and tossed it in the corner. He was tired and annoyed, already feeling Liza’s eyes on him. The space was small, but not cramped. Feeling enclosed anyway, he sat on the floor, beside a beanbag chair across from the others. He watched Hux settle into it and held back a smirk. It reminded him of Rey and Lumpy. The brief note of joy was swept away just as quickly as it came when he felt Paige settle beside him.

“So, everyone is here now. And no more talking about our friend here. He’s not a freak, so stop it you guys.” She lifted her head and nodded to herself. “What were you guys talking about before we got here? Was it Holdo’s stupid hair?”

The tension was finally broken by light laughter. Still, he didn’t let himself relax.

His T-shirt itched as he watched the others start talking about the last year at school. The last year had been spent, missing his birthday, Christmas, and everything else, being threatened by death unless he did what he was told. He could hear his heart beat in his head as he looked around the room. But still, no one was asking him anything. No one wanted to know. As the realization took hold, he scratched his eyebrow and then lifted his chin.

“Is this supposed to be fun?”

Paige, still sitting beside him, touched his leg. He tensed and she carefully took her hand aside. “We’re just talking…”

“No, I…” his breath caught in his throat and he sighed. “I don’t think I know how to have fun.”

The admission made his chin drop. Feeling his cheeks warm, he rang his hand around his wrist.

“We can play a game! Oh, mom made snacks. Get a game, guys, I’ll be right back.”

The second Paige had jogged up the other staircase, his other exit point, he watched as the others rolled their eyes. He was doing everything wrong. He couldn’t figure out what to say or what he had to do.

“Her mom will come down,” Kel said, finally breaking the silence. “She’s going to want to hug you. She was down before, already talking about that.”

“I don’t do that,” he answered. He smoothed his hair back and shook his head. “Why does everyone always want to touch me? I don’t get it.”

“We just want to know that you’re here, Ben,” Liza said, sitting up straighter and jutting out her chest.

“Kylo,” Hux added.

“Huh?” Doph asked, after sipping on his pop bottle. Where did he get that? Kylo spotted the table in the corner. If Doph had one, that meant he could get a drink, right? They were in the open and not locked away. He felt a brief spike of panic when several pairs of eyes watched him amble up to
the drinks. He grabbed a bottle of coke and silence followed. The others started chatting about something else and he let out a satisfied breath. Twisting off the top, he took a tentative sip, feeling the bubbles fluttering against his tongue. He’d tuned out the conversation fully and studied the strange landscape painting on the wall behind the table. A lake at night, the moon reflecting on the surface, while a lone man stood at the end of a pier. The only tones were a range of blues.

“Just…call him that, okay?” Hux pressed the issue as he leaned against the table, trying to get closer to see the man’s face.

The inner door opened and in came Mrs Tico, bearing a tray. Turning, he straightened his shoulders as she looked at him with bright eyes. She wanted to touch him. He didn’t want her near him.

“Ben, we prayed for you. Everyday. Now, you’re here! I…I talked to your mother. Everything okay?” She hadn’t aged in the seven years since he’d last seen her. She still looked the same, no lines on her face to distract him. But then he remembered the summer holidays that Paige always complained about when they were younger. Her mother preferred colder vacation spots, without the heat of the sun. There was always water, but no sun.

“Thanks, yeah,” he huffed out, biting back the rest. She set the tray on the table and he backed away from her when she came closer.

She looked him up and down, from his misfitting jeans to his white T-shirt. Her gaze riled up a knot of discomfort in his stomach. The others were still chatting, but he knew that they were still listening. She smiled lightly at him when he awkwardly extended his hand. Grinning, she shook it. When she finally left, he closed his eyes and let his shoulders slouch.

Paige waited until the door to the upstairs snapped shut and then grinned. “So. A game!”

She grabbed some card game from the pile stacked on a bookcase in the corner and he waited until she sat down at her former spot before he placed himself between her and Hux. The others shifted off of the sofa, putting their elbows on the coffee table. Liza’s eyes were still intently focused on him. They passed out the cards and he shook his head, intent on just watching. It seemed like an easy game, but he just wanted to sit and listen, trying to gauge if the game was worth learning. The others seemed to accept his silence as they laughed and joked through the first round. He smiled lightly when Hux won. It might be worth playing, but he still declined as Hux started dealing the next round.

There was instant panic when Paige got up after her turn; but she was back in less than a minute, placing a bowl of chips between them.

As the others were looking at their hands, Kel’s voice cautiously asked, “Was the guy that took you really crazy?”

The game paused in an instant and he heard Hux sigh, setting his cards down firmly on the table. “We’re not going to talk about that.” He felt Hux shifting closer to him as he spoke.

He just stared blankly at Kel. “He was insane.”

“I heard that he killed like fifty kids,” Elia added.

Shrugging, he looked at his hands. “Something like that. I don’t know.”

“People are making videos about you. Like, tons of people online,” Doph said. “If you made a
channel you’d get so many…”

“I haven’t looked up anything about it. I just talk to the FBI and the cops. They tell me some stuff.” He wanted to lift his head, but he was waiting until his hands stopped shaking.

Paige finally knocked on the coffee table. “No more talking about it. We promise, Ben. We’ll listen to whatever you want to talk about but we won’t ask about it.”

Kylo looked up and saw everyone nodding. Managing to quirk his lips in response, he nodded.

So they kept playing and he kept sipping on his coke.

Paige won and she grinned brightly, shifting to sit at the end of the table to deal out the next round. Everyone looked relaxed and comfortable but he could only feel the urge to be alert press on his mind.

There was no one between him and Liza now. She had kept looking at him, not saying anything. She’d laugh with the others and kept picking up and setting down cards, but all he could feel was her pale blue eyes on him. She kept inching closer to him and he kept trying to make more space between them. Stretching out, she rested her hands at her sides, close enough to almost touch him. Her intense eyes and curious hand had made him want to leave long ago.

And no one noticed.

He had learned for so long how to observe everything and everyone around him. The others were either eating, drinking, or chatting, all while playing a game that he thought was easy, yet didn’t want to play.

The only reaction he caught was Hux glancing at him. At least he had one person in the room that would let him react if he needed to.

“Where’s the washroom?” He asked, looking directly at Paige.

“Oh,” she sat up and smirked. “It’s across from the stairs, the next door after the guest bedroom. It smells like feet in there. Dad won’t let mom put anything in there to make it better.”

Kylo let his face settle into what he thought was a neutral expression but he still saw Paige smile brightly at the response. That was usually the reaction he expected from the nurses when he expressed an emotion. He was always trying to put himself in other people’s thoughts, to find their way of thinking. Most people smiled when they were nervous. He was making his friends nervous by not sharing more. But Liza was smiling for another reason.

He easily found the washroom and shut the door. He went there more to escape the itch that Liza’s presence was sending across his body. Sliding down against the wall, he stared at the simple cupboard below the sink in the softly toned room. It was a typical washroom for a basement of a house built in probably the 1970s. He remembered how their basement looked before they renovated it a few years before he was taken. It was small, with a glassed-in shower in the corner. Fake flowers sat in a silver vase on the edge of the sink, beside a bar of pale green soap. The handle on the door to the cupboard was shiny. He reached out and frowned — it wasn’t metal but plastic, but it looked gold. It was still fake and not real. He tapped his nail against the material and his frown deepened.

The lightbulb in the ancient glass light fixture flickered and he jolted.

Darkness had come in a flash, but it still made his body go rigid.
There were voices in the next room but they bled off into silence. A ringing settled into his ears as the nothingness bled off. His chest felt tight and he reached up and locked the door. Colours faded off in the small washroom, replaced by a murky haze. He blinked hard, trying to clear his eyes. The sounds behind the door became clearer. The screams started from a low rumble to a thundering and endless tempo and he cupped his hands over his ears. Pulling his knees closer to his body, he shuddered. He was killing them. They were all suffering the vicious punishment of a man without feeling. The walls blurred again, darkening. He’d helped that man. He’d willingly killed in order to survive. He had to, for Rey. She never got to be innocent in that space.

Frustrated, he pulled his hands away. The floor felt gritty and dirty, rough against his hands. He could feel the pieces of rotten wood mixed with the cold earth.

The room swayed, replaced by the corner of the basement, Snoke’s basement. His eyes couldn’t focus at the sight of the darkened, hateful place.

Gritting his teeth, he let his head sag against the wall. His breathing became ragged, trapped in his chest. He was trapped there. The deep stench of death burned his nose; nothing was clean and everything was tainted. The walls were rotten and water stained. The mould was sour against the wall. The scents filled his nose and the surroundings were blurred yet familiar. The tears in his eyes distorted everything. It was all real. The reality was more vivid, pressing on his mind.

He rolled into a wave of despair, knowing that he hadn’t escaped. He was there. The ground was real. The smells were real. He was still under Snoke’s power. Tears stung his eyes and he dropped his head.

None of it had been real. He had hurt and killed Rey. He’d imagined it all. The cops, the hospital, Agent Jinn, and coming home. He’d dreamt it all, out of some insane part of his mind. Whimpering, he looked out into the darkness as the tears warmed his cheeks as he choked back a tortured sob.

A whisper of a glimmer caught his eye. It was a faint golden tone, shining in the distance of his basement hell.

With an unsteady hand, he reached out.

And he felt the hard, fake plastic of the cupboard fixture.

Blinking hard, he focused on his grip. The visage faded, piece by piece, into the serene lite blue of the Tico’s guest bathroom.

None of it had been real. He angrily stood and turned on the water, viciously splashing his face. He had believed his own twisted mind and had been drawn back into the darkness. He had to be stronger than this. He had to stop being so afraid of everything.

Turning off the water, he met his own eyes in the mirror. His reflection told him he was there, but he didn’t believe it. He turned away instantly, angry at the sadness that shone in his brown eyes.

When he opened the door, his heart dropped again. Liza was leaning against the wall and gave him a small smile when his feet finally agreed with his mind and he stepped out of the room.

“I don’t think it matters what everyone says. You were really brave to save that girl.” Liza smiled lightly at him, her hand twirling a strand of her blonde hair. “Wait, are you okay?”

He felt his cheeks warm, knowing that his eyes still bore the evidence of tears. He shook his head...
and Liza stepped closer. She pulled him into an awkward hug. His body still tense, he couldn’t resist her. When she stepped away he shook his head again.

“Her name is Rey.” His reply was wooden. He could still hear the others laughing and talking around the corner. They were alone there, in the shadowed hallway.

“I, um, really missed you,” Liza said, taking another step closer to him. “I’m glad you came tonight. Maybe we can talk more another time. I’m going away to camp but we have the summer, right?”

He was frozen where he stood, anxiety and terror still lingering in his veins from what he saw in the washroom. He felt Liza touch his hand and he just stared at her.

“We were never really friends.” His voice was flat, just wanting her to move away. “You didn’t invite me to your birthday party.”

Liza frowned and then her mouth shifted to a quick smile. The problem was being worked out in her head. He finally heard her laugh lightly as the memory clicked. “I was six. My parents picked who could come. I wanted you there. Just believe me. I wanted to invite the whole class but mom wouldn’t let me.”

He didn’t trust her. He wanted to move away but she stepped closer.

“You’re my hero, Ben. You were so brave. You’re so famous now and it’s because of something awful, but you’re just…I like you. I wanted to come tonight to talk to you and get to know you.” Her voice had the air of fake kindness that cut into him instantly. This was the tone that nurses, doctors, and therapists took when they were trying to pull him out of a spiral. They were idiots, and so was Liza. They tried to treat him like a child, tricking him into how he should feel. He was in control and needed to be. They couldn’t take that from him.

Liza’s hand felt like the dirt of Snoke’s death chamber and he couldn’t move. She squeezed his hand and his thoughts were empty. Her lips were shiny, covered in a glossy pink shimmer.

She stepped closer and tilted her head. “I’m really sorry about the birthday thing. Maybe I can make it up to you?”

She shifted on her feet, bringing their mouths in line, and kissed him.

The world greyed out; her lips met his in only a whisper, but the pressure was enough to wake him up. He was finally broken from his fear. With two firm arms, he struck out and shoved her away, knocking her hard against the wall. He couldn’t hear anything. He was moving before he could find the trail of a thought in his head. His mind could only latch onto the clearest exit and he took the stairs in three strides, ignoring the blurred faces that he caught in his peripheral vision.

When he’d finally escaped into the night air, Kylo was instantly set on going home. He screamed, letting out every feeling from the violation. He didn’t care about the uncomfortable jacket that he’d left on the floor of Paige’s basement because this was all her fault. He screamed again, letting the betrayal settle into his perception. No one had told him that she would be there. He didn’t want Liza anywhere near him. He didn’t want her to touch him. And now, he was left feeling like he wanted to crawl all the way home to feel something other than the painful itch that she had sent down his body.

Hux was right behind him and he turned to his friend and exhaled angrily. He didn’t know how long he had been standing there.
“You didn’t say anything about that!” He snapped as he took two long strides from the house. Hux followed, stuttering out an apology, while also asking what had happened.

He was halfway down the driveway when he heard two other pairs of feet. He turned with furious eyes to see Paige with Liza not that far behind her.

“Ben, I’m sorry, don’t go, I…” Liza started, but he silenced her with a glare. She slowly turned and went back inside, her feet dragging in the gravel. Paige’s shoulders were low when he looked at her again.

“I…I’m sorry. It’s not your fault,” he managed to say to her. It was a lie, but her face was so sad. But she still didn’t respect him. Her feelings weighed him down and he would have to force them out of his mind on the walk home.

“I don’t know what just happened, but if she was dumb, then it is my fault.” Paige shrugged and looked around. “If you need a ride home…”

“We’re fine.”

She had his jacket in her hand. Hux took it so he didn’t have to go back.

He wanted to get that girl and what she had done to him out of his mind.

Storming to the end of the way, Hux finally slowed and handed him the coat. Kylo had felt cold the second he’d left the house, but now he was almost freezing. He tried to smile at his friend but realized it fell flat by the look he got in return.

“You should go back,” he said. “I’m sorry I…fucked everything up.”

“What happened? All we heard was…”

He levelled a harsh glare at his friend. “She kissed me. She didn’t even ask if it was something that I wanted.”

Hux’s eyes widened and then he tucked his hands in his pockets. “She’s been talking about you a lot.”

“Why didn’t you tell me she’d be here? I never liked her.”

“I thought that…” Hux trailed off. “I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

He started walking and heard Hux struggle to keep up with him.

Hux tilted his head and then frowned when he finally caught up to him. “No. No. If you didn’t want her to kiss you then…yeah…no, we needed to leave. Come on. Let’s go home. Fuck them.”

He took long and angry strides towards his house and only had to stop when he saw the news vans looming in the distance. Groaning, he stomped his foot, grinding against the pebbles that littered the pavement. Hux had stopped a few steps behind him and sucked in a breath through his nose. He gestured towards the alley and Kylo followed.

“It’s not that I didn’t want her to kiss me,” Kylo lied as they walked down the empty, yet well-lit, alleyway. “I just…don’t like…anyone touching me. Unless I want them to.”

“It’s okay,” Hux said, quickly. “Liza was just too much. She’s missed you. We all missed you.”
“I didn’t miss her. She doesn’t know anything about what we went through.” The visions from the washroom still shook in the corners of his mind as he spoke. The floor had felt real, the smells had been real. It grated on his mind, still twisting despite the freshness of the night air. “She doesn’t know anything about pain. She doesn’t know anything about what it’s like to watch your friends die and then have to stuff them into barrels because if you don’t then you might die!” He had started talking and didn’t realize that he was shouting at the end. They were behind Hux’s house and Kylo couldn’t look at him anymore. Turning away, he lifted his head up at the sky. The stars were clear and bright, shining down in the vision of freedom that he’d always pictured but no longer believed could be true.

Hux took two careful steps around him, taking deep breaths. “I’m…I’m sorry. You can talk to me about this. They don’t have to know.”

“You don’t want to know,” he said, then sighed. “This will never get better. I’m…I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Frowning, Hux looked at his feet and then up at the sky. “Could you see the sky in California? The stars? I’ve never been there.”

Lifting his head again, Kylo took in the clear night’s sky. The stars swept out from the horizon, filling a field of black with glittering pinpricks of distant light. Dropping his hands, he bit his lip to hold back his tears. He knew that most of those stars were long dead; they were gone, burnt out long ago. His father would show him the stars when he was much younger, explaining to him plainly how the universe worked. There was no forever. Everything died. There was either an explosion, killing everything in a spectacle or a descent into blackness that enveloped everything into the throws of death, or a dull whimper that still destroyed everything. It all meant death and destruction, without the promise of a forever. Maybe Snoke was right to try to live forever from the blood of young people. Being so close to death would make him unafraid of dying.

Clutching at his wrist, he dug his nails into his skin as the spike of anger arched through him. Liza and her twisting hand and sickly sweet lip gloss was pushed from his mind as he took in the silent alley and the sky above him. He wiped at his mouth again and let his eyes go unfocused on the glitter left on his sleeve.

“No,” he finally said. “We weren’t allowed to go outside.”

Hux, fumbling with his words, opened and closed his mouth quickly. He shut his eyes, pressing them tightly together. Frowning deeply, he shook his head and then stamped his foot in the dirt. The next words sent up a jolt of electricity into the still night air. “I just don’t know what you want! Everyone at school thinks that Liza is hot and you…you just push her away and I…if she did that to me I…what’s wrong with you?!”

The shout went out into the sky. Kylo just blinked in response.

He couldn’t find words. Instead he just scratched at his wrists.

Hux turned away and let out a frustrated exhale, running his hand over his face. Their steps on the gravel, tracing small and separate circles, kept the night from being completely silent. Hux turned to face him and he could see the frustrated tears in his eyes. Kylo drew his feet together and straightened his shoulders, ready for a fight. He’d seen Snoke’s tears before. He knew that they could be a trick or a trap, to try to get him to comply and then stab him in the leg, crippling him for a month.

Instead, Hux just dropped to the ground, his face hitting his jacket as he wrapped his hands around
his knees.

Frozen, Kylo looked first to the stars and then to his friend.

“Do you not want to be my friend anymore?” His voice was small and low, but he forced the question out of his stubborn mouth.

Hux looked up, narrowed his eyes, and then wiped at his face. “No, that’s…that’s not the point. I don’t want to leave you alone. I really don’t. But maybe if I went back then they…”

“Wouldn’t hate me?”

A light smirk crossed Hux’s face. He shook his head and then smoothed his hair. “Yeah, that. And I really like Paige and she doesn’t like me…”

“She will,” he gulped out. He could only picture Hux on Snoke’s basement floor, begging to live, as a knife is held to his throat. His tears wouldn’t be from some teenage angst. They would be from real terror. “She likes you.”

Hux just shrugged. “No one likes me.”

Kylo let his arms drop. He wanted Hux to go back and have fun. He had fallen easily into the game and conversation. And he had ruined it all by reacting like he did. He wanted him to keep going with his life and forget that he was dropped back onto the planet. But he also didn’t want to lose him.

“Go back, they’ll still be there. I’ll…text you when I’m inside and with Rey.” He wanted to reach out to his friend but his hand fell away when he took a step closer. He chewed on the inside of his cheek, needing the intimate distraction of pain.

“You don’t need a fucking babysitter.” Hux forced out a laugh. “Just don’t…I’m scared for you all the time. It’s better than not knowing where you are or what’s happening to you, way better. But now, I feel worried about how you’re doing when we don’t talk. You’re either sad or angry and I want to make you feel better. But I can’t figure out how. I really didn’t mean to yell. It was dumb. I just don’t want you to leave again.”

Kylo quirked his head. He wanted to leave, yes, but he couldn’t. Not for a few, long years. Maybe when he could drive, he’d make a plan. He studied his friend and tried to weed through the words to understand exactly what he meant. Hux had other friends. It didn’t make sense that he’d be so concerned about someone who he hadn’t seen for seven years. Still, like with Rey, he wanted to find words to comfort him. But, unlike Rey, Hux wouldn’t know that he would be lying. “For the first time in a long time, I’m safe and okay. Go and tell…our friends…that it’s fine.”

Pushing himself off the ground, Hux looked up at him. He wiped at his eyes and ran another hand through his hair. He fidgeted in place before finally nodding. “Just text me, okay?”

After jerking his head, Kylo watched his friend dust off his pants and give him one last look before turning and jogging down the alleyway. He heard the brief stop in the tempo before he turned and disappeared, leaving the alleyway.

Finally alone, he looked up at the sky again.

Like a meteor crashing to Earth, he’d pulled everyone into the crater that was him. He dully looked at his house and let out a breath and crept painfully from his throat.
He could run away now. He could save everyone from the continued pain of his existence. In the dark, alone, he could cry. He entered the back gate to his house and waited until it snapped shut before he let out a choked gasp. Crying openly was one thing, but wanting to carve up the backyard with his eyes was another. Stumbling to sit beside the detached garage, he looked at the dimly lit kitchen window.

This place was home.

It was always supposed to be home.

But his heart told him something else.

Hux’s words stung. But they weren’t anything that he hadn’t thought about before. His anger and his fear were warranted. He wanted to let Hux in on his thoughts but a tight, invisible band kept it from spilling out of his chest and through his mouth. He had to protect him too.

If the river were closer, he would have thrown himself into it.

Instead, he walked up to the back door of his house and unlocked it. He slipped inside and quickly relatched the door. His eyes wouldn’t stop leaking so he rubbed at them, hoping whoever he met up the stairs would just think it was allergies.

He had been inside for seven years, after all.

When he finally dared to climb the steps up to the kitchen, his frown deepened when he saw his father there, still reading the same newspaper from that morning.

“You weren’t out as late as I thought,” Han said, setting the paper down. “Have fun?”

He shifted his weight and shrugged. He was hungry and thirsty. His eyes locked on the fridge before he pursed his lips. Stiffly, he sat at the table, toying with the frayed edges of an olive-coloured placemat.

He could feel his father’s eyes on him as he tried to keep his focus on anything but the fridge. Finally, but slowly, Han stood. He took the few short steps to the refrigerator and cleared his throat, getting his attention. He opened up the doors, letting a low light into the darkened kitchen.

“You know I hate how your mom buys too much. There’s juice in here. You want it?”

Kylo kept looking forward, still trying to work through his numbness. He wouldn’t be able to sleep if words and feelings kept haunting him.

His father held up the juice bottle. Glancing up, he absently nodded.

“You can take any of this, son. Here and the pantry. We told Rey that tonight and she looked at us like we were freaks.” Han rounded the expanse of the kitchen and opened the cupboard. He put a glass of apple juice near him and he drank it down quickly, trying to escape the conversation. It didn’t work. Instead, his glass was refilled.

“We had...we never got real food. I had to steal scraps or dig in his trash...” He was still thinking about Armitage’s words in the alley and kept mumbling. “What am I supposed to do?”

He could hear his father breathe as he sat down. The scratching sound of him straightening his shirt made him lift his head. He had stubbornly hoped that if he didn’t look, he wouldn’t have to deal with wherever this conversation was going. Lowly and briefly, he met his father’s eyes before both
looked away.

“We are going to figure it out. Just…remember that none of this is your fault. And I know you hate doctors. I hate them too. Remember when I broke my foot? Yeah. I know that you don’t think that we’re trying, but we are. I lost you for seven years. I can wait until you’re ready to find who you are now. But I’ll still love you, kid. Hell, let me know when you want to take a drive. Your mother would hate it and I’d love it,” his father said, his voice breaking.

He lifted his dark eyes from his focus on the empty glass on the table to the older man. “I…”

Dozens of thoughts pressed on him. He wanted to tell his father about Liza, about Hux, about everything. How he didn’t trust the doctors. How he didn’t believe the medicine was working so that’s why he stopped taking it. And how he really wanted to go for a drive, just the two of them. But his tongue felt heavy, flashing back to the dusty parking lot from seven years ago. The confessions died and he could only end his thought with a nod. Escaping the kitchen, he fled to his room.

Lumpy lifted his head as he shut the door. Frustrated, he opened it just a bit so the dog could leave. Rey stirred and sat up at the noise. A colouring book rested on her lap and a red crayon. She didn’t have that when he left her. He smiled as he looked at her, still drawn into how round and full her face was. She was normal. He had helped her be normal.

Still full of sleep, she handed him the paper. It was filled with a red swirl, harder and harder with every circle.

“What’s this?”

Rey shifted, finding another spot to sleep. “My brain is…that.”

Sucking in his reaction, Kylo put the paper on his desk, shifting his weight as he stood at the edge of the bed. Rey was looking at him with tired eyes; they kept drifting shut as she looked at him, still willing herself to be awake as he looked at her. “We can draw other things tomorrow.”

Rey mumbled something and then fell asleep. He took in the delicate way that she slept and let the evening’s disappointment wash away. He’d always have this to come home to, no matter what happened.

He let the moment pass and took a long look at Rey before pulling off his t-shirt and pants. He wanted to put on pyjamas but his body was empty, both too hot and too cold to even think about putting on extra clothing. He crawled into bed in his boxers and Rey snuggled against him, her breath warm against his chest as she woke up for a brief moment.

The tranquility of her soft body against him was quickly shattered. His phone buzzed, annoying him from the floor, still trapped in his pants. Grunting, he carefully set Rey down on the mattress and shifting to snag the device from his pocket. The screen sprang to life and he narrowed his eyes at the message.

I’m so sorry about tonite. I didn’t mean to make you leave.

He didn’t know the number, but guessed that it was Liza, feebly trying to apologize. Wanting to hate her, he glared at the words. She had no right to say that she cared about him. He ignored it and sent Hux a short text instead, telling him that he was home and fine — and that whomever just texted him should stop.

The short response that followed was positive, assuring him that it wouldn’t happen again.
Sitting on the bed, his phone in his hand, he sighed. Every day was exhausting. He couldn’t even close his eyes without being drawn into darkness. Turning to set his phone on the nightstand, he saw the notebook he’d received from Agent Jinn. Reminded of Rey’s drawing, he shrugged to himself. If he could sketch something more positive, he could show her in the morning how to get her thoughts out. That was more important than the constant turmoil that pressed on his mind.

Opening the book, he frowned when a business card tumbled out. The heaviness of the entire week was lifted when he spotted the name as he studied the small white square. Flipping the card, he felt his hand shake. In a few neat strokes, Agent Jinn had written his number and a short note to him.

*Whatever you need, I’ll always answer /QGJ.*

This would have to be enough. He had to show Rey how to grow up, but he’d need help from someone who understood.

He had to get better for her. He had to stop the intrusive memories and even more oppressive friends. That was what mattered most.

She was going to be normal. No matter how he felt, she was the future that he had to leave behind.

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for delaying this update - I know that it’s long and I thought about splitting this into two chapters BUT as the end of this ‘act’, I thought that it was okay to make it a little bit longer and introduce some new characters. The next chapter will be after a time jump of two years (about). The semester will be starting soon but my goal is to update all of my WIPs before hell begins but that is a lofty goal with so much teaching ahead of me (as well as how generally crappy I feel nowadays - seriously, compared to last summer I have no energy. Don't get old, kids.) I always love feedback and it really keeps me writing so feel free to leave a comment! And if you're about to start another semester at uni, just know that there are instructors out there slowly pushing out fanfic too.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

A middle act of thoughts and feelings from the first year and a half of being in the world.

Chapter Notes

I have the next act (hopefully not more than five chapters, but we'll see) planned out and mostly written. But the semester is starting next week so posting will be gradual. The next 'act' will also include Rey's perspective, but will still mostly focus on Kylo since this really is his story. Thanks so much for all of the kudos and comments! I'm worried about a crucial aspect of the next act - I guess you'll see when I update the tags... Peace and love!

Time was sometimes that Kylo felt in hours or days. But it could also pull him along through weeks or months. He would spend an afternoon helping Rey learn to read and time would finally stop when she would put the right sounds and syllables together. There could be slowness in those moments of shared smiles and the hint of change towards something brighter.

He was being dragged along by time but Rey lived in every moment, even the ones that were spent in tears after a nightmare or in frustration and not knowing a word or idea. But her friends, Paige’s sister among them, didn’t care and taught her made-up words. His jaw ached from how hard he had held his mouth shut to give her those silly little moments. It was that and the stupid dentist, trying to clean up his messed up mouth. He should wear a mouth guard at night; they wanted to pull some of his teeth so they weren’t so crowded. He didn’t want that. But they fixed the holes. It all felt pointless.

Hours, days, weeks.

The first summer crawled by, peppered with different forms of touches and space: his father, resting his hand on his shoulder when they’d practice driving; his mother, wiping something off of his cheek without seeing the alarm in his eyes. When the calendar told them it was time to make the journey to meet with Maz, he refused to go. It took three days of talking to Agent Jinn to convince him that it was the right thing to do, for Rey. She could never feel afraid of talking to anyone. And she missed Maz. He could see the confusion turning into clumsy resolve as his stubbornness starting sowing seeds, which he couldn’t let sprout.

It would have to be enough.

Time both moved faster and slower with everything finally being married to that fucking calendar.

But there were a few things he could do to stop being carried along the stream. He wouldn’t back
down from being in the correct grade for his age. Snoke wouldn’t take that from him. Studying meant pushing down his impulsiveness and rediscovering the patience that Snoke’s hell had taught him. He would lock himself in his closet, daring his body to feel panic. It was easy to slip into the state that made him focus on details and remembering. How to learn patterns and how they fit in places. Hux’s notes were useless and he had almost said that to him out of anger at how his friend couldn’t see that himself.

Punishing himself, he was good at that too.

So he studied. He hated using the computer at first, but made himself to get used to the white screen and fragile keyboard. His hands worked best filling up notebooks with a real pen. He’d sketch or write with Rey and then scribble black ink onto pure pages until his looping handwriting sealed his ideas into permanence.

He’d write letters to Agent Jinn, telling him what he was learning and asking him what he should focus on for the future. Texting and calling were almost too temporary. Sending and receiving letters sent pieces of himself across the country. It was strange that he had a new address but still lived in the same house. Mail didn’t come to the door anymore. Why wouldn’t strangers leave them alone?

And then school started.

The reporters were gone and he could leave the front door of his house.

And then it was Halloween, then Thanksgiving and Christmas.

And he got to celebrate all of them, despite having been in constant fights and arguments at school. But he kept studying and trying to ignore anyone who called him a murderer.

They weren’t lying.

He’d float in a bubble as time blew him along, sending him drifting at times into nothing.

Their birthdays were in the spring. He knew that his parents had Rey’s real information somewhere in the house, but they thought it was best if they celebrated on the same day.

They were so lazy.

Rey’s preschool friends filled the house. He and Hux snuck a beer in the backyard and both decided that they didn’t like it. Kylo had let his friend do something he thought was rebellious, even though his parents knew what they were doing. Any punishments were cautious and explained to them with words rather than actions. He had smiled at Hux and accepted a gift of a new wallet as the children screamed and played in the background. His head had been on the other side of those sounds when they walked to Paige’s. He’d sat with the others until he couldn’t see the reality of the basement anymore.

Liza gave him a notebook and he threw it away when he got home.

Memories were both solid in their tastes, smells and touches, but also empty of real feelings.

The teasing had faded away into background noise. His body didn’t ache anymore and he would have to find other ways to feel pain.

He missed it.
On the first anniversary of their escape, he spent three hours on the phone with Agent Jinn, a rope around his neck in the woods, far away from his family and Rey. He wept and wanted to chase the darkness and let it carry him instead of time.

If he hadn’t cared so much about Rey and her future, he would already been bones. No one believed him when he told everyone that he was already dead, but just hadn’t died yet.

He didn’t say anything about it when he came home.

And then everything started again.

Hours, days, and weeks.

In late July, he had to tell Rey why she should be sad when his grandfather died. Bail’s cancer had come hard and fast, or at least that’s what his mother had said. It was the first time that they saw a dead body in a casket. Rey’s eyes were wide and only cried when Leia did. She didn’t know how to be sad about this, even though they were the two people in the church that knew what sadness really was. It wasn’t a sudden or temporary feeling. It was a lingering fog that was always there, but only appeared to others when the warmth descended into cold. They only saw it when it was tangible to them, when they decided to feel it.

But they knew it was always there, waiting for them.

The book about them, by some useless journalist, came out the week after.

And the week before school started, after a month of unanswered texts and cancelled or abrupt and awkward encounters, Hux said he didn’t want to be his friend anymore and went to live with his dad.

Time punished him more than Snoke ever could.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

About to turn sixteen, Kylo finds solutions to his high school suffering. See the tags for warnings.

Chapter Notes

spoiler: i know nothing about american high school wrestling.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The thrill of winning a match made Kylo’s blood hum as the referee raised his hand. It wasn’t exactly getting the deciding point that made satisfaction spread across his chest. It meant that someone other than him had lost. He’d feel dejected and angry with himself for losing so easily. The smell of sweat and the wrestling mat blossomed from his skin as the sound from the gym finally returned to his ears. The other boy looked down at the mat and bit his lip before finally looking at him again. He wanted sympathy. Kylo knew that he looked irritated because the other boy just winced and looked away. To him, his look was empty. The victory was over and he just wanted to disappear from the ring.

Rey hated when he did things like this, how he looked at that boy. She had tagged along to one meet with his parents and wouldn’t let him escape or give excuses. She was almost six and her world wasn’t just him anymore. One of the few times he actually opened his mind more than a crack to Maz was when he realized that Rey had more friends than he did. Her days were for school and friends, but the evenings were for their time together to find any tendrils of Snoke and try to quiet them.

Well, he’d help her.

He had other ways to focus his pain. Wrestling was one of them. Another was knowing that someone else, someone who had failed, had to feel the coldness of his eyes.

He’d be feeling bad the rest of the night. Right now, it was that boy’s turn.

It was the third meet of the spring season. February was cold and dark, but next month meant his birthday and finally being able to drive on his own. Han would let him drive to practice, but would always be in the car with him. Road trips meant being away from Rey, but also time to be alone.

The team hated him. And Coach Canady had stopped trying to prevent most of the cruelty. The pranks that didn’t cause real harm were the ones that actually hurt the most. That he would talk to Rey or Paige about. When he was really low, he’d talk to Liza. She’d change the subject after only a few words, telling him that she’d talk to them for him, and he’d go back to ignoring her.
Kylo had decided that there was nothing but pain in the world and not enough people knew how to deal with it. After his grandfather died and Hux decided to turn his back on him, he saw sadness on one side and hate on the other. His mother would have tears in her eyes because of a song or a picture, while Hux’s mother would sit on her porch with her arms folded. Pain could sometimes be useful and they didn’t realize it. He’d tell Rey that he didn’t like hurting others, but he knew he did. It was a real feeling that he tried to resist. Still, it was there, tempting him. Snoke’s words wouldn’t fully escape him. Hurting others meant that they actually felt something and they were real. It was like the pain felt by the mothers in his life.

His teammates still teased him, but only to a point now. If it weren’t for their pride, he probably wouldn’t even be on the team any longer. If living with a murderer for seven years had taught him anything, it was how to hurt without leaving a mark when he wanted to.

The cheer from his side was more for someone from their school moving forward in the tournament rather than anything he had done personally.

“Good work,” Canady said as Kylo moved to sit with the others. Everyone else but him was showered and had lost long ago. Good, he smirked to himself, spitting his mouth guard into his hand.

He’d wanted to text Agent Jinn. He wanted to tell someone that he was in the quarterfinals tomorrow for his weight class. A brief spike of embarrassment reminded him that he had barely made weight. The smell of the cafeteria turned his stomach everyday. He’d sit with Paige and Liza after they got their food, chewing on a sandwich only because he had to.

He also ate it because Rey made it.

She loved food and the kitchen. He’d force himself to stand there and help her, hiding his rigid movements with clumsiness. Every Sunday was spent making muffins or brownies, or figuring out what they wanted for dinner that week. They’d watch videos on his phone and he’d do the hard things. He ate because he was hungry and it was easier to deal with that sensation when it was Rey doing all of the steps.

He still tossed his pill every morning, until it just wasn’t there anymore.

He couldn’t hide anything.

And his parents wanted someone else to deal with it at the next therapy session.

Watching the next weight class, he swept his hair back and followed the hands and quick movements. The jerking turns and agile hands made teenage boys look less awkward, not like the group that sat next to him. Next year, if he could finally eat normally, he’d be in that group. He was tall enough. Just not bulky enough.

“Oh, he’s good. Look at that. Kylo, how do you do that? That one move, you know, that one?” Poe Dameron slid in next to him and started nattering. Kylo just shut his eyes and ignored him.

Other than helping Rey through the world, wrestling had become his sole passion for the past year other than hating himself. Soccer hadn’t worked out for him. The lingering pain from his broken ankle started to show after half a season. He could run and jump, but being out on the field for so long had always left him limping and swirling with panic that he would always be broken. He had been too slow and had easily been frustrated by not winning and not being where he needed to be. Hux had been disappointed, but they’d signed up for wrestling in the spring. It had been fun—actual fun, not just something that he lied about—and he had quickly and easily put on muscle
through training. He loved feeling stronger, filling out his lanky body.

But then everything went to hell when summer ended.

Now, in the afterglow of Christmas break, he was good at two things: wrestling and not having friends.

Most of it was Liza’s fault.

If it weren’t for her, he’d still have Hux.

Despite the shaky start, he’d settled in easily to the routines of listening, learning, and following whatever their teachers said. When he was finally left mostly alone, after the fourth or fifth fight, he was allowed to fade into the background to the other students. He had to graduate. He had to get away. He had managed to pour much of his sadness into studying, then the rest of it went to wrestling. Happiness was meant for Rey. He’d go with his parents and drop off Rey, pretending to be happy with the day, and then let his mood sour on the drive over to the other school. His mother had reluctantly accepted his grim face because he was fifteen and had no control. His father knew just as well what he wanted. They weren’t bad parents. They really weren’t. But he’d tell everyone but Rey that they were. The aftermath of the book about him had pushed him even further into a corner. It wasn’t because he didn’t want to be there; it was more like he wanted to be somewhere else that didn’t exist.

Next month, though, he could do all of these things himself. He’d get his license and could take Rey to school. He could take her to the park. They would be able to go anywhere. At school, he would park in the far corner so he’d know exactly who had fucked with his car.

He couldn’t get into any more fights.

Well, at least not at school.

Straightening, he left the bench for the locker room. He snatched up his bag from the pile of their stuff by the door. There were always piles of things and it still made him suck in a breath. There was too much stuff everywhere. No one knew how to live with nothing. He wanted to be alone, but that wasn’t possible. Another aggravation. He gripped the sweatband on his wrist and decided that he would just change and shower at the hotel. He’d let the sweat burrow under his skin, finding every scar and cut. Then he’d scrub himself until the itch was gone. The rest of team gawked at him as he disappeared. At least they had a reason, thanks to him, to be there the next day. That should mean something. But he was used to it by now.

Since Hux quit, everyone had hated him.

And he deserved it.

Apparently, he was a girlfriend stealer. None of it was true, but he just let the rumours take over. It was almost better than the evil whispers that had swirled before about being a murderer. He’d take a lie over the truth because it changed the tone of the taunts.

Liza wanted to be his girlfriend, but he said no. So, she settled for being his friend. But friend was a loose term that he never used for her around others. She’d lurk by his locker and twirl her hair, or ask to work with him on a project. Hux’s eyes would burn into them across the classroom. Paige had followed, and so did the others when they felt like it. Doph picked his lunch table based on the colour of his shirt. He’d sit with Hux when he was wearing red. If it was blue, he’d be with the girls and Kylo, pretending that nothing had happened.
Hux, who had always felt alone, lashed out at him in silence. His face was set in a permanent frown whenever they passed by one another in the hallway.

Everything seemed to happen in slow blows and hidden whispers.

The locker room was half empty. Boys from other teams were laughing about something in the far corner, half naked and red faced from the shower. He had counted how long it would take him to change and moved to the furthest corner from the others. Every article of clothing would be switched with another and he’d put on decent smelling cologne. The other boys wore things that made him gag. It was more about covering up the smell of not showering for him.

When the distant laughter started again, he changed with practiced efficiency.

He could only look with lingering animosity at the showers as he towelled off his hair. He smelled. He was dirty.

But they couldn’t see him.

Letting the towel rest over his head, he heard the locker room door open and close. Even in an unfamiliar school, he still knew that sound. It never changed. Every door needed to be fixed in some way that adults could never put in proper order. They missed details because they were always tired. He had argued with his teachers about how it really felt to be tired — to be too afraid to eat or sleep for days on end — and they would have to hold back what they really wanted to say. He could win those fights with words.

“You’re the murder kid, aren’t you?” A strange voice asked. Black sneakers and red socks owned the voice and he really didn’t want to learn the face.

He left the towel on his head, glaring into the shadow cast onto his legs.

“Hey, fuck off leave him alone. Wait, didn’t he beat you earlier? Go fuck off.”

Dameron. His voice was grating and made him drop his head. He couldn’t even hear the other boys leave the room.

He’d only been at their school for a full month and Kylo had already decided that he had no other purpose on the planet other than to annoy him.

“Hey, what’s up?”

“Nothing.” His reply was short and finally made him move, standing to toss his things together. “Are we going now?”

“Yeah in like...yeah soon.” Dameron was looking at him with a half grin.

He narrowed his eyes, waiting for the other boy to back away and leave. But he didn’t. “Do you want something?”

“I told coach I could room with you. He didn’t say no.”

Dameron was a year below him, still only fourteen. Or at least he thought that's how old he was. But they had one class together — physics. Kylo still couldn’t wrap his mind around how someone so stupid could be taking such a high-level course. He wouldn’t stop talking, but would still do well on exams and tests. He’d always sit with girls and they seemed to like the constant garbage that came out of his mouth. “Why did you do that.”
“Last time, no one roomed with you. I took one for the team. Hey, you’re our only hope tomorrow. Better than staying with coach.” Poe was studying his shoes, kicking at a ball of tape that was affixed to the floor. It was nearly pressed flat and no one had bothered to pick it up.

They had got there late. Normally things like this would have been solved hours ago and he wouldn’t have been trapped in this conversation. The roads had been bad. They hadn’t been able to stop at the hotel before going straight to the tournament. The change in that routine had put him in the right space to vent his aggression. But this change couldn’t end with him striking a teammate, especially the youngest one.

Finally putting his bag on his shoulder, he shook his head. “What are you doing? No one wants to room with me.”

“Maybe I do.” Dameron shrugged, cockiness in his grin. “See you outside.”

Kylo had to fake his confidence. Around most people, he knew that he fooled them. But this boy, this idiot, he carried himself like he didn’t realize how hard it was for others to be in the world. Rubbing his eyes, Kylo grunted to himself before punching his bag.

He should be happier about winning.

And now it had been turned to dust by a smirking asshole.

-=-

It kept snowing after dinner.

He adjusted his headphones and let the blur of snow match the pace of the music. Each swipe of the wipers hit a beat and he smiled to himself.

Rey had loved the snow. The first time that it snowed, the three of them and the dog had run outside and he had laughed until his stomach hurt. Hux had flakes in his hair, making his skin look even paler. Lumpy chased Rey, barking into the chill of the air.

The memory made his stomach hurt and he turned up his music.

Hux hated him. When he moved in with his dad, he set their friendship into ashes. He could see dark flakes mix with the white as they drove, knowing that no one saw them but him.

He didn’t even fucking like Liza.

Pulling up to the hotel, he took one last look at Poe in the van before they all piled out, a group of anxious teenage boys. He felt like the only one in control, even though he was still working through the puzzle of why Poe would want to room with him.

Normally, he was alone.

None of this made sense.

The younger boy dogged after him as the keys were dispersed and, of course, they were in the room farthest from the others, closest to coach.

“That’s good, right? It means he likes us.” Poe’s overly positive voice made him grip the keycard tighter.
“Not really,” he mumbled, watching the others easily run from them. They were alone in the lobby and his shoulders sagged for a brief second.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just tired. From the drive. Being roomed next to coach means that we’re losers. Or that the others will probably come and fuck with us. That’s what that means,” Kylo said, finally righting himself. “Why did you want to room with me? You knew this.”

Poe seemed to shrug it off. The curls on his dark head framed his face in a way that his hair never did. “Of course I know that the guys talk shit, but it’s not your fault. And just so you know, I always told them not to do the shit that they did last road trip. That was awful. I still feel bad.”

He looked at the shorter boy blankly. “Just make sure that the door is locked.”

They trailed after the others and caught the look from coach as they entered their room. Kylo just wanted to go to sleep, after he called Rey. She had wanted to be there for this tournament, so close to qualifying for state, but her extra tutoring had kept her from him. She was good in almost everything in school, except for working with others consistently. Teachers always tossed around that word; they bashed it into the ground until he didn’t even think about it anymore. She hated group projects and would either be silent or take over from the others. She’d work too quickly and wanted extra things to do. The last meeting at her school was raging in the back of his mind as he opened the door. He tossed his bag on the first bed and frowned when Poe instantly bounced onto the same bed, jostling his things.

“That’s mine.” His voice was deep and annoyed, too tired to deal with his over-energetic roommate.

“What? You’re going to shower. I just want to test them both.”

He gritted his teeth. “They’re the same.”

The beds looked identical. There was nothing to compare or argue.

“Nah. They’re not.” Poe stretched out his hands, pressing the mattress until it squeaked under his weight. He still didn’t move, but he nodded. “Okay, this one’s yours.”

Normally, he liked showering. It was a place where he could be numb and do what he wanted. But now, he wasn’t alone or with coach, who would just go sit in the bar and give him space. Poe looked like he would be awake for a while, longer than he wanted to be conscious. Reaching for his bag, he snapped his head towards the other boy as he sat up to move closer.

He stepped back, snatching up a smaller bag that was buried in his mess of black clothes. He exhaled at the near contact from the other boy. “Don’t touch my stuff.”

They never really trained that much together. Kylo thrived on the control that practice and tournaments gave him. His body accepted touches there but here, alone, he needed to make himself calm down.

Poe was oblivious.

“Cool. Wouldn’t think about it.” He locked eyes with him and then finally nodded and pushed himself off towards the other bed.

There was always a new problem whenever he left the house.
Poe was trying to turn on the television when Kylo could finally escape to the washroom. The door locking made him finally feel safe and his heart settled. The joy of having his bag and its contents in his hand, the weight same as always, made him find his centre. He wasn’t torn about whether or not he enjoyed hurting others; his mind wasn’t wrapped up about glares from Hux. He wasn’t dwelling on why Rey would sometimes stop talking for a week. There was just the rush of oncoming numbness.

He took off his wristband and he studied his skin. His left wrist was neatly ordered, the thin cuts only something that he could see. Each line was his release. Every small slice meant another day of surviving. During his monthly meetings with Maz, he’d wear his jacket the entire time. His body would be covered and he felt both more adult and secretly revelled in fooling her.

The meetings were becoming easier now that he had his small moments of relief.

He tossed his dirty clothes into a corner and turned on the shower. When it was finally warm enough, he took out his razor and grabbed his soap and shampoo and turned to his routine.

The older cuts were the easiest to widen. Cutting a new and still-forming scar would be painful, but not rewarding. The true goal to pain was waiting until a scar was healed, thick and fat with old tissue.

Snoke had taught him that.

Setting the bottles on the tiled floor, he closed the shower door and sat down. The water was warm and the steam made breathing easier. He traced the scars, counting them. Each one of them meant that this was his own body. Snoke’s scars were embarrassing. These were just secrets.

Finding the right spot, the razor split open the old diagonal cut, setting white skin apart and opening his blood to the air. It had to be a deep cut this time to get to what he wanted. Pressing harder, his hand quivered and he sucked in his breath and drank down the sharp sting when the warm water finally mixed with the beads of blood. With another slice, he turned the beads into the shape that he wanted. This was his reward for winning. His muscles ached and his mind would keep him from sleeping, but he could have this.

Lifting the blade, he cocked his head at the drop of blood that lingered on the edge.

He could never let Rey see the cuts. He’d never do it at home. She couldn’t copy him with this.

He poked at the cut, sad that the brief spike of pain had come and gone so quickly.

The steps for showering kept him from fully mourning the end. He’d catch a hint of blood on the tiles. The stream was a fine shade of pink against his skin. Washing it all away, he settled into the awkward aftermath of cleaning it all up. It never bled for that long, toilet paper sopping up the pathetic scratch until it was more or less dry. It wasn’t a real wound compared to what he’d endured. Flushing the toilet paper he reached for something that wasn’t there.

He realized that he’d forgotten his pyjamas in his bag.

He should have been used to doing everything wrong. Hux hated him because he kept missing things. Liza refused to hate him or leave him alone. Paige would listen, but could only hear so much. He had stopped telling her about why he didn’t want to stay later, after the girls had gone to bed. He would give Rey one last hug, when she was safely tucked into Rose’s bed, and go home alone.

Realizing how long he’d been gone, he met his eyes in the mirror. He wasn’t a coward. He couldn’t
delay any longer. He needed to call her so she could go to sleep. She needed him. And he wanted to hear her voice. It would make the embarrassment of leaving the washroom with only the towel around his waist bearable.

Reaching for the door, he caught himself making another mistake. At least his leather bracelet was in this bag. Tightening the clasp, he nodded to himself.

Poe was sitting on the other bed, flipping through channels rapidly. Satisfied that his unwanted roommate was distracted, he dug through his bag and found the pair of black sweat pants that he wore for pyjamas. Dameron had changed too, he saw with a quick glance to make sure he wasn’t looking. But the other boy was only pretending not to look at him when he slid the pants on under the towel.

“There’s this. We can watch this,” Poe said, gesturing at the television. It was some talk show. Kylo didn’t care.

“I need to make a call,” Kylo said, prepared to argue for Poe to leave the room. He was still holding the damp towel and felt a slight jolt when he spotted blood against the bleached white. Turning the cloth in his hands he tossed the thing onto the floor in the corner, determined to forget about it for a while. He’d take care of it later.

Instead, the other boy just nodded. The television was silenced in one click. He grabbed his headphones and phone, gave him a light smirk, and left.

The room was quiet. His breathing was the only sound as it overtook the rhythmic hum of the heater by the window.

Frowning at his phone, he could only shake his head. He rubbed his wrist and felt a headache start to spread across his temples. He’d be sixteen soon. And in two years, eighteen. He would finally be a real adult soon. The fights and sneers of school would be over and him and Rey could have their own place.

Dialling home, he started pacing the room.

His mother answered and he sighed.

“Put Rey on the phone.”

“You could at least say hello.” She almost sounded like she enjoyed annoying him. At least his father had taught him how to drive. His mother just worried about whether his jacket was warm enough or his bed was comfortable. She never saw the real things.

He stopped in the middle of the room, looking out the window. He spotted Poe out in the snow. The flakes had turned from storm to bits of fluff, swirling in the light of the parking lot. And he was out there without a jacket.

Fucking moron.

“Hello. Now put Rey on the phone.”

“How did you do? At least tell me that.” He could hear his mother sitting down. He pressed on his wrist, still feeling the dull sting of the razor’s ghost against his skin.

“Better than everyone else.”
His mother chuckled. “All I needed to know. Here’s our girl.”

“When will you be home?” Rey must have been tired. The tone of her voice was never this whiny unless she was exhausted.

“Tomorrow evening. It’s not that much longer.” He played with the fringe on the edge of the blanket on his bed, wondering when the last time it had been properly cleaned. There was a deep must that clung to the grey threads. “We got here late. And I have a roommate. He won’t shut up.”

“He’s probably just nervous. Make him smile at least once. That’ll make me happy, Kylo. Rose was sick today so I couldn’t do anything.” Rey sighed. “And it’s not the same on the phone. Come home.”

“Tomorrow,” he repeated. “Remember to finish your drawing, okay? I really like this one. And I think I found a new recipe for us to try. I didn’t have much to do in the car but think about you. I’m tired too. And yeah, the phone sucks. But I love you.”

“Love you too.” Rey yawned. He knew that she wanted to say more. The picture was of what she wanted to be when she grew up and she’d just managed to draw him. She hadn’t figured out what she could be to him when she was an adult. “Bye.”

“Bye.”

He hung up and sat on the bed.

He’d have to have a long conversation with her when he got back. They were never anything annoying or too difficult. There was something easy about knowing what she shouldn’t do as she got older, since he was mired in making those mistakes.

He was writing her a letter when Poe came back, grinning and covered in snow.

“It’s actually really nice out there if you want to take a walk or something.” He kicked off his shoes and shook off the snow. Kylo watched him cross the room to rest them by the heater. He put his soaking socks next to them. His sharp eyes caught the holes on the heels.

“No.” He kept writing, focusing on putting words for Rey into form rather than just imbalanced feelings.

“What are you doing?”

His eyes narrowed into the harshest glare that he could manage when he snapped his head up at the other boy.

But instead of intimidation shining back in Poe’s eyes, the other boy just smirked at him.

“You’ll have to do better than that to make me flinch,” he said. “Goodnight, I guess.”

His headphones back on his head, the other boy crawled into bed, leaving him to turn off the main light. Annoyed, he stalked across the room to slam his hand against the light switch.

Returning to his bed, in the darkened room, his writing was forgotten for a moment.

No one new had bothered to try to get close to him. Even the kids who were obsessed with gore or heavy metal music had lost interest in him after a few weeks. Some of them would still say hi to him, especially if they had gone to elementary school together. Everyone knew who he was and
thought that they knew what he’d been through.

The damned book had meant that reporters had called and dropped by again. Slamming doors and calling lawyers were about all his parents could do. Agent Jinn had even sounded furious when the book claimed to use FBI sources. Maybe whomever he fired would leave a spot for him to get a job there one day.

But the book described how the other children died, and even though it missed most of the real story and aching details, he was still pushed to the centre with blood on his hands.

The other boys thought that he’d strangle them in their sleep. That’s what they said right to his face.

When he turned on his bedside lamp, he put his notebook aside and took one last look at Poe. He didn’t want to sleep, dreading that some cruel prank would inevitably come. Rolling his eyes at himself, he took quick strides to reach the door again.

It was locked.

He actually had listened to him and put the security lock on without him hearing it.

Tilting his head at the gesture, he felt his lip quiver. If he woke up the next morning and all of his things were still there, he’d decide whether or not to be hopeful about the situation.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone, thanks for reading! The comments on the last chapter kept me going through a rough night. One of my cats is at the animal hospital right now. It's his kidneys (he's only six) so they don't know what exactly is wrong and won't know until tomorrow.

To say the least, I'm so afraid we're going to have to put him down. Plus, with my workload for the rest of this week and next week, I'm just going to go 'fuck it' and pull the tigger on the start of the next act even though I haven't really combed out some of the mistakes for this one. A chapter from Rey's POV will be coming when things are less...messed up. Hug your kitties for me because I can't hug mine.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Rey tries to figure out how Kylo can have a new friend, and still not forget her.

Chapter Notes

Everyone! Thanks for the concern about my poor furbaby. He's still not home. He'll hopefully be home tomorrow. There might be an infection and they're still giving him fluids. We know that it's his kidneys and we'll only have him for a few more years. He's only six so it feels very unfair that he won't get a longer life, especially since he's a rescue cat. Kinda wish that healthcare was free for animals in Sweden too...but INSURE YOUR PETS!

Anyway, here's a chapter from Rey's perspective. Love your comments and kudos.
*hugs*

Rey had been waiting all afternoon for Kylo to get back. She had started waiting in the morning, after waiting all day yesterday. Waiting, waiting, waiting. Staring up at the ceiling of Kylo’s room, she let her eyes blur until she could see spots, and then blinked them away. Lifting her head to check the clock, she frowned. Only five minutes had gone by. At least at night she could sleep. The daytime just meant more time waiting. She’d already taken a nap and that had just made her head thick and confused. Why was time so slow when Kylo was away?

Lying on Kylo’s bed, she returned to what she had been doing before. She lifted her arms above her head and pushed to rotate her shoulders. She tried again to roll her shoulders while holding her arms still. She’d shoved Kylo’s pillows off the bed and had to remind herself to pick them up off the floor before Leia did it for her. She was good at doing chores and cleaning up her messes, Kylo's too. No one had to do it for her. But she could do it for him.

Her shoulder started to hurt and she smirked to herself and pressed a little harder.

Someone softly knocked from the doorway. She sat up to look at Han, his arms folded. “What are you doing, kiddo?”

“I’m doing a thing,” she answered. “It’s something to do.”

“But what is it?”

Han took two steps into the room and stopped. She could see him better, but Han seemed to think that she’d tell Kylo he’d been in his room. Of course she wouldn’t say anything, even though it was Kylo’s room. She wasn’t quite big enough to make the bed herself so she had to ask for Leia’s help. Even then, Leia only did it after Rey told her Kylo wouldn’t be mad about other people being
in his space.

It was her space too, so she could have mom and dad there.

But now, dad was looking at her with raised eyebrows. His eyes were always kind and she liked his hugs in the morning. He’d also give her an extra pop-tart, even when she didn’t ask for one. And it would be strawberry. Dad meant jokes and treats and driving too fast until she squealed with laughter. Other kids would have been afraid, but she knew he’d never let anything hurt her. She still had a hard time when she thought about how he let Kylo get taken. He wasn’t mean. He was nice.

He loved them. How could he let that happen? The thought still bothered her, even after so much time had passed since they got home.

“Okay, I’ll show you,” she flopped back down on the mattress and extended her arms. “I’m trying to do a thing, a thing that Snoke did to Anja. He took her arms and pulled them really hard and they popped out of her body.”

She wasn’t looking up, and she couldn’t hear Han sigh, so his reaction remained a mystery to her. There was just silence. “Can I ask why you’re doing that?”

“I need to see how it hurt,” she replied, rolling her shoulders again, looking for the ache from before. “Because if I know how much it hurt, then I’ll make sure someone remembers Anja. How she felt will happen again. She was nice to me. I was really small, but she tried to help Kylo take care of me.”

It was something that she and Kylo had discussed for a while. It wasn’t her idea, but it was her brain’s idea. It had put a dream in her head that she’d one day forget all of the others, that the other kids would be really gone forever. She woke up and started looking for her notebook and pens, telling Kylo that she had to draw them all, to make sure that they wouldn’t disappear from her head. And she had to know how they felt before they died. Kylo looked more sad than usual when he left the bed to get his computer. His head was down and his hands were slow to open the laptop. When he finally looked at her clearly, she knew that he shared the same fear. He had too many new people to remember too. They sat there until morning and he let her look through the pictures and stories about the other children. He showed her the memorial story, where all of the families posted about the children who were no longer there, but were still remembered. It made her feel better. Then he showed her another story. He tried to make the computer go faster, but she still saw her own face; it was blurry and taken from a distance. But it was there. And then she saw what he wanted her to see.

There were still four without names and real pictures. The others had drawings done by the police. Anja was one of them. Her in real life wasn’t there.

Han slowly sat on the bed. She lifted her head and realized that she probably shouldn’t have been that honest. But she wanted to be. She saw how Kylo walked around without someone to talk to because he didn’t want to explain what he was thinking or why it was in his head. Most Sundays, he’d just sleep until the late afternoon. Every day of Christmas break, he just wanted to stay in bed. She wouldn’t have to pout or do anything to get him up, despite how much she wanted him to be around. He needed to sleep if he was tired but it was so lonely without him. But he’d always get out of bed when she finally asked.

“You know I’m not mad, Rey. You can always tell me these things. And, if you trust me, I think I can tell you why I understand,” he said. “You trust me?”
“‘Course.” She smiled. “You’re Kylo’s dad.”

“Technically,” he said, leaning forward to rest his elbow on the bed. “I’m your dad too. I’ve just got a piece of paper that says that though.”

She knew other people, normal people living normal lives in the real world, could get sad and feel pain. She mostly knew because Kylo told her that they did up until she started going to school and she could see it for herself in the other faces that filled her class. It still wasn’t real school yet. The first one was pre-school. The other children were crying and asking for their moms and dads. She walked up to her teacher and asked her whom she should miss if she didn’t have a mom and dad. She just had a Kylo, a Han, and a Leia. And a dog.

Another teacher came and they went and sat in another room. Rey had been thankful for that. They’d been to the school several times before the first day. At first, there had been three other kids there. One was named Rose. She knew Rose because she was Paige’s sister. She waved at her and they sat at a table and coloured for a while and played a game that was too easy for her. Kylo had been allowed to watch but she couldn’t talk to him, although they still talked. He mostly just texted Hux or read a book, but he was always there. She felt safe. Then, the next time, there were ten children. Rose was still there, but Kylo wasn’t allowed to be there. She had heard him yelling at her teacher outside of the room and his face was hard when he came to say goodbye. She hated when he wore his mask. He told her that he wasn’t mad; he was just worried about her.

This was before they spent so much time apart.

Kylo would have to go to school. He couldn’t spend all of his time with her.

The third time was when they met all of the other children and their parents the night before school would start. It would only be two days a week, but Kylo would have to go to school everyday.

Rey knew that Kylo hated it more than she did.

And that’s what she told this other teacher on the first day. The woman wasn’t that old. She wasn’t old enough to be a mom. But she didn’t look confused and said to her that she had a mom, a dad, and a brother. Rey remembered frowning and shaking her head. The people at the hospital called Kylo her brother too. But he wasn’t. Not really. Paige was Rose’s sister because they had the same mom and dad. Her mom and dad were dead.

The teacher still didn’t get mad at her when she explained those things. Instead, she nodded.

She said that some families were different. But if Han and Leia loved her, took care of her, and made her feel like their house was her house, she could call them mom and dad. She didn’t have to forget her real parents, because they’d always live in her heart, but she had a new mom and dad who she could love and miss, just like the other kids.

And then Rey went back to the other children and tried to explain to Rose what the teacher had told her. Rose looked at her and tilted her head. So, why not?

That night, when she told Kylo about her day, he looked at her with a growing frown. His face would start off neutral and then would fall. The teacher is right. But it’s your decision. You know why I don’t want to call them mom and dad, but I don’t want that to stop you. You need to love more people, Rey. You can love them if they give you the right reasons to do it. You can’t care about everyone, but some people need to be cared about more than they think they deserve. Kylo, when he was talking to himself more than to her, would sometimes speak more like an adult than how the others treated her. When he was tired or sad, he’d sometimes treat her like a little kid.
Those were only rare flashes on bad days.

If she could be big tomorrow, she would be. It sucked when everyone felt like they had to tell her how things worked and how to feel.

She realized she had been quiet too long when Han reached out to tap her foot. Smiling, she shook her head at the playful touch.

“I know, dad.” She looked at his face and saw the pieces that Kylo got from him. It made her miss him more. “But it’s not just the piece of paper. You’re my dad because I love you.”

She liked saying those words. She liked seeing how happy it made Han. She said it to Leia one time when they were alone, walking Lumpy in the park. Leia had pointed at a place where she used to take Kylo to play. The smile on her face had slowly turned to sorrow until Rey reached for her hand and told her that she loved her.

“And I love you too. So that’s why I understand why you need to do your…remembering. We’ve talked about this, about other things. We want you to be a normal kid, but you’ve got a bunch of horrible stuff in your head that we can’t pull out and erase. I’d do it in a second if I could, but I’m not a miracle worker.” Han reached for her foot again, pinching her big toe so she giggled. “And I’d do it in a fraction of a second for Ben. But that doesn’t mean I love him more.”

“I know. He’s got…he’s got everything. I just have a piece.” Her grin faded. “I wish I had more for him.”

“You’ve said that before. And I still believe you. Even though I’ve told you that it doesn’t work that way. But you know, just keep getting him to talk more. And keep getting him to bring his friends around.” Han said, gently. “You want to take the dog for a walk? Maybe he’ll get here quicker if we do something else than lay around.”

Rey nodded and hopped off the bed. She picked up the pillows and put them back before turning to Han. He was looking around the room and shaking his head. To distract him, she took the few steps towards him to wrap her arms around his legs. His hand rested on her head and she sighed. There were always more conversations when she spent so much time waiting.

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Kylo finally got home after dinner. He was mumbling to himself when she ran to the back entrance to peer down at him. He’d always be taller, but she could sometimes look higher than he could. A real smile crossed his face when he looked up at her. He was shaking the snow from his boots. He’d left his jacket on the floor and she smirked at him. Taking the few steps down to the entrance, she picked up the soft black coat. She hugged it a little, making sure it felt better; the jacket was probably sad that it had been tossed down without care. Kylo’s smile faltered and then he nodded and properly hung up the coat beside hers.

“It was snowing. That’s why I’m late,” he said. His cheeks were flushed though. He’d been outside. He probably was pacing outside of Hux’s old house, looking into the window and imagining that he was there. Rey knew because she did it too.

“It’s okay. I helped make dinner. And we took Lumpy to the far away park. He chased a squirrel
and I saw the squirrel go up the tree to his house. I don’t think that the squirrel was really scared. There were a lot of other dogs in the park.” She always talked too much after dinner. Mom and dad would let her talk and ask her real questions. They really cared about her story about the squirrel’s house and his family. She could see it all and tried to describe it as well as she could.

Kylo smirked again and hugged her. “I missed you too.”

His plate was on the counter and she stamped her foot a little when he didn’t bother to warm it up or take it to the table. He started eating standing over the counter. There was a hint of annoyance when he looked at her, so it was clear he was tired. She’d helped make the rice and Leia had let her turn over the pieces of chicken in the pan. Plus, she got to choose which vegetable to make.

Waiting for the microwave to beep, Kylo studied his socks. Rey climbed onto her chair and kicked her legs, waiting for him to say what he was thinking about. He’d always focus on something when he was waiting to find certain words.

“I think I made a new friend,” he said. “But I haven’t decided if I want to be his friend.”

“Why wouldn’t you want to be his friend?” Her heart lifted instantly at the word. Kylo didn’t admit he was lonely after Hux moved away. He’d tell her that she was enough. But she still couldn’t talk about things like they could. “Are you being…in your head?”

The microwave beeped. The plate slid out of the microwave with heavy scraping. Kylo sat down and started to move the food around his plate. He only started eating when she started telling him about the steps she took to help make it. She wanted to be good at cooking so when they moved away and left, she’d be a good cook and could take care of him. Maybe if she made the food taste better, he’d want to eat more.

Although wrestling took him away from her, she noticed that he started eating more before going away. He’d eat and check the scale. He’d even have snacks with her. She didn’t think that he liked ice cream until he told her how good mint chocolate chip tasted. She thought it tasted funny, like her mouth was tingling too much, but she decided that it was her favourite too.

“He’s annoying.” Kylo finally spoke after he was done eating. She looked at the plate and decided that it was enough. “He talks too much. It’s hard to think when he’s talking so much. And he wanted to room with me. There’s something wrong with him.”

She was thinking about her answer when Kylo stood. He filled two glasses of water and gave her one. He leaned against the counter again, sipping at his glass.

“Maybe he just wants to be your friend. Like when I met Finn. He was shy and I started talking to him so he wouldn’t be afraid of being new,” she replied, remembering the first day Finn was in class in November. He seemed so worried that no one would like him because he’d just moved there. Rey liked that he was new; he wouldn’t know anything about her and she’d be able to have a new start.

Kylo sighed and nodded. “Poe’s new too. I didn’t really talk with him until yesterday. That was probably mean. But he already has other friends.”

“Maybe he wants more?”

“He would,” Kylo scoffed. He set his glass in the sink and stretched his arms, groaning as he moved. “Where are Han and Leia?”

Rey lifted her shoulders. “Upstairs. They wanted us to talk before you told them about the thing.”
Nodding, Kylo rubbed his eyes. They’d given them space. It seemed like Kylo didn’t like it when his parents showed him kindness or understanding. He turned to her and extended his arm, telling her that it was time for them to go upstairs.

Han and Leia were watching television and reading. She liked their room. It was big and tidy, but had so many things to look at and study. There was love there, for both of them. There were so many bookshelves and pictures. Her favourite was a picture taken on her first Christmas. Kylo looked like he was almost smiling, kneeling beside her by the tree. Her cheeks reddened at the memory of not understanding what was happening and why there were so many people around. Why there was so much food. Why there were presents under a tree for no reason other than it was someone else’s birthday.

Then she ruined it all by telling everyone in school after the break that there was no Santa Claus.

She didn’t like the idea of an outsider, who knew who she was and what she wanted, coming into the house and leaving strange packages for her.

Santa Claus was scary, not friendly. The other kids cried and she had to sit with the other teacher and tell her why she felt that way. It wasn’t like talking to Maz. She knew why Kylo was angry at adults, but it was good to look into the eyes of an adult trying to make her feel a certain way and understand why he walked around in constant suspicion of everyone around them.

But soon he’d be like them. What would happen then? She was still listening to everyone talk, but her brain was giving her the strange thoughts again.

Kylo was standing by the doorway with his arms folded, telling them about how he’d finished third, but at the next meet, he would probably win. He knew what he did wrong and how to fix it in practice in the next weeks. She watched his eyes as he retold the match. They would dart from side to side, remembering what had happened. She liked it when he had those kind of memories, the better ones. He had done the best out of everyone at his school, on his team. He should feel good. But instead, he was just in his head, replaying the events so he would do better the next time.

And Rey knew that he probably wouldn’t—her stomach starting to hurt at the thought—and then he’d be even angrier with himself. Leia asked if he got a ribbon or a medal and he said he threw it away. He wanted to be better than third and might not get there.

The thought wouldn’t leave her head as they got ready for bed, mixing in with her worries about what was going to happen. Kylo was going to get his license. They had gone to look at cars a few weeks ago and he’d grabbed her hand tightly when he saw one that he liked. This was part of it. This was just going to get bigger. She watched as Kylo tossed his clothes towards the basket and she didn’t want to pick them up. His pyjamas were just black shorts; she had the ones that she’d picked out for him, but he wouldn’t wear the lighter colours. She thought he’d look good in purple. He didn’t, apparently. She still thought about it, even though she promised him that she wouldn’t. He did so much for her; they could disagree.

She brushed her teeth and Kylo sat on the edge of the bathtub, telling her about his biology lesson from last week. He’d figured out the problem and no one else got it. It was something about cells and how they divided, and then what happened. It was something with a word that she didn’t know, but he felt certain about. It sounded important and she tried to listen. But she was more interested in how he moved. He would tell her that he wasn’t bragging, but he was. Rey watched as he made small motions with his hands when he spoke about the rest of his class. He’d flick his fingers when it came to Liza. Then, when he’d talk about Paige, he’d rest his hand on his cheek and lean into his hand.
“What about your new friend?” She asked, spitting into the sink and then lifting her head from the sink to look in the mirror. Perched on the small footstool, she looked over at him.

His hand was still, resting on his bare knees. “What do you mean?”

“What he there?”

He shook his head. “He’s a grade below me. I only have one class with him.”

She was watching his hands and they slowly clenched together.

“What’s his name?” Rey asked, still trying to work through what Kylo meant with his actions. They were in between a Liza and a Paige story. It was something closer to a Hux reaction. He wanted to be his friend and didn’t know how.

“Poe.” Kylo answered, then stood and folded his arms. “And I know how to be friends with him.”

He left before she could answer, stalking off with his eyes held forward. She had to watch his stiff shoulders exit the small washroom and leave for his room. Her own breathing made her nervous when the room was suddenly quiet. She must have been blinking her thoughts. Her own heartbeat thundered to life in her ears and she bit her lip to remember that she was really there, in the house. She so rarely made him so mad that he would show it. Hopping down from the stool she took the few paces towards his room and stopped.

If Kylo got a new friend, he’d be gone more often.

He’d want to spend time with him and do boy things. It wouldn’t be like with Paige and Rose. They’d play loud video games until they made her head hurt. Television was okay. Computers and the phone she could watch. But only for so long. There were too many pictures and stories to make sense of. It was supposed to be real, but it wasn’t. Kylo had told her about it before, how people liked to watch things that were fake in order to feel emotions that could be real. They knew that everything was written down and filmed or created by someone else to make them have those sensations in their hearts because they still liked feeling a certain way. He made it make sense.

But now, he was making her feel alone. Now, he was pushing her into the dark place.

The dark place was where Snoke could hurt her. There, she was trapped and Kylo couldn’t get to her. The door was locked and she could hear him tapping to her outside of the door. He couldn’t scream and demand to get her out. He could only tell her it would be okay. But now it wasn’t.

Standing in the hallway, she dropped her head, whimpering. She hated crying. It only meant that her feelings were real, but also in another place that was outside of her body. Her feet were touching the cool wood floor. Her eyes could see the white paint on the walls. But her head was stuck with Snoke. And she couldn’t get away.

Kylo’s strong arms came around her, pulling her towards him. “I didn’t mean to leave, love. I’m sorry. I was… I was there too. In my head. I don’t… I’m sorry.”

She hugged him back and nodded.

He picked her up and hugged her closer, holding her until she felt the other real again, not the fake real. She was there, with him. Snoke wasn’t there. He was dead. Mom and dad were still watching television down the hallway. She could hear it. But they weren’t her real mom and dad. She felt Kylo carry her to bed and she didn’t want to let go when he put her down. Maybe if she held on harder, pulled him close enough, then they could fix it. If she thought hard enough about it, she’d
have her real mom and dad. If they lived in her heart, she could make them real.

“I want to make them real too,” Kylo said, pulling her into his arms on the bed. “But if we did, they’d take you away from me. And I wouldn’t be okay without you.”

“But you’re not okay.” Her mouth was stringy with spit and she cried. “You’re not supposed to get mad at me. I was just asking a question.”

“I know, I know.” He cradled her closer and she felt her own tears on his skin. “I wasn’t mad at you. I’m never mad at you. Even if I act like it, I’m not.”

Rey nodded and she breathed in against his chest. He smelt like trees. It was a nice smell, but it still wasn’t his normal scent. How Kylo smelled was softer, like being outside after being stuck in school all day. He didn’t need to cover it up. She didn’t want him to. But he wanted to. So she needed to let him.

“I’m sorry I was away for so long,” he finally said.

“I’m sorry I cried.”

She felt his shoulders lift. “You can always cry, Rey. Especially if I made a mistake.”

Rey turned her head, looking up at him. He was looking more like an adult everyday, more like dad. His face was still soft, but his cheekbones were sharper. When he leaned back, she could see the lines of his jaw, cast in shadow. She knew that he hated his nose, but she liked it. Even though the break was caused by Snoke, it still looked perfect on his face. The rest of his body was changing too. She was just getting taller and better at doing everything that made her stronger. Climbing during recess was fun; she was faster than everyone else. The tallest swing set didn’t scare her and she found the right spots to make her way to the top. While her legs were dangling over the edge, she grinned down at her panicked teachers. But Kylo was stronger, bigger and had more muscles. Before, he was just thin. Now, everything she saw had come through training. And eating, when she made him.

She ran her hand down his stomach. It was firm, with delicate ridges. “You’re still my hero.”

“And you’re still the light that came to save me,” he smiled as he spoke. “Rey, can I have a new friend? I won’t if it will make you worried that I’ll be away.”

He shouldn’t have to ask her that. She never asked when she made a new friend. Her conversation with Han echoed in her mind and she forced herself to nod. “Yeah. I’ll be okay. I have Rose and Finn and mom and dad. And Lumpy. We can’t...be together forever.”

Shaking his head, he kissed her forehead gently. “I’m not leaving for college tomorrow. And you’ll come with me when I do.”

“What about my friends?” She asked. And the realization finally clicked in her head.

For a long time, since they were in the real world, they hadn’t had just each other. This wasn’t forever. No matter what he said, the world would keep growing. She cared about other people and he needed to care about more people too.

“We’ll figure it out,” he said. “It’ll be okay.”

She leaned into him and closed her eyes. She wanted to sleep and her head felt heavy instantly. It would always be nice to sleep without worrying that someone would be gone in the morning.
She felt Kylo move off the bed and turn off the ceiling lamp. The light was washed away until he clicked on the lamp on his side and the panic died in her chest.

He lifted her up and she let him put her under the covers, swimming in the fall of sleep. Cuddling next to him, her head on his shoulder, she yawned.

“Goodnight,” he said, pressing his lips against her forehead again.

She nodded, not having the energy to speak.

But she decided that, for a while, she’d only talk to Kylo.

Maybe she could stop having friends and it would just be them if she were silent.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

wish me luck teaching tomorrow, fam. i need to get from the neolithic revolution to the middle ages in 90 minutes and i want to die. thanks again for reading. i spent a half an hour lurking in a burger king to try to understand teenage boys. i still don't understand anything.

Dance class was mostly hearing the same things said repeatedly. And the only one that would listen was Rey. He’d watch her put her feet together and frown when the others wouldn’t do the same. It was just a bunch of loud kids screaming and not keeping in formation. There was no order. Kylo exhaled through his nose and leaned back, resting against the mat on the floor. He heard Paige sigh beside him and met her eyes when her dark head lay down beside him. Their backpacks were sitting at their feet as they waited.

“Rey’s still not talking.” She was telling him something that he already knew. But she was overreacting. Everyone was. It had only been a few days. She had been quiet before. It would be fine soon. He didn’t spend hours thinking about her silence because it was something that she wanted to do. Why would he stop it?

He wanted to reach out for Paige’s hand when it brushed his, but he stopped himself. She was slim, her taut stomach peaking out from the edges of her shirt. The shape of her lips set off the rest of her angled face. That was what told him how fragile she was; it reminded him of Rey, how her soft spots were also the most attractive parts. She had started dancing again and her body was so thin. He couldn’t touch her without hurting her.

“I know. She told me…” he paused and glanced up. Rey was still smiling and was the best dancer of the group. She would lift her head to the instructor, then hold her pose, and not get distracted by someone else giggling or falling on their ass. “It’s not a big deal.”

Paige swatted at his stomach. “It’s such a big deal if she’s only talking to you. It's your birthdays soon. How am I supposed to plan something if she won’t tell me what she wants.”

He shrugged. “She’ll tell me and then I’ll tell you. It’s not that hard.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, then tell me what you want. You hate little kids parties. You hate being here. So tell me, what’s the plan?”

Sitting up on his elbows, he looked at her with sharp eyes, questioning why she had thought so much about it. “Rey just wants her, Rose and Finn, and some other kids. The blonde girl there, I think. She wants pizza and to watch a movie. I don’t really care about anything else but getting my license.”

“But it’s your sixteenth birthday, Kylo. God, how are you being selfish without actually being selfish?” Paige sounded more annoyed than she needed to be. He checked his watch to make sure that they really needed to be there another hour. It was for Rey so his glance was quick, making
sure she didn’t see him getting bored.

“I’m not…” he started, then let out a long sigh, clenching and unclenching his hand. “Do you know Poe Dameron?”

“Poe? Yeah, he’s a total suck up to all the teachers. And he really wants to eat lunch with us. He keeps moving closer, sitting with people he doesn’t know. Don’t you talk to him at practice?” Paige flipped her hair, sitting up to wave at her sister.

Kylo fell easily into his own head. At practice that week, only a few days after rooming together, Poe had asked to pair with him. It didn’t make sense at first—he was smaller and weaker and didn’t have most of the basic stuff down. That’s why he lost so easily. When Kylo realized why he wanted to room with him, and it was all about getting better at the sport, he started to back down on his idea of him actually wanting to be his friend. He was out for himself, like everyone else.

“I don’t really talk at practice. But he does.” He sighed and shut his eyes. “All the time.”

Paige touched his arm, making him look at her. “Then let him come and sit with us at lunch. He’s probably asked you. Don’t be a dummy. Kylo, you see so many things that we all miss. You’re trying to make me decide for you. And I don’t like it. I never like it.”

Poe had. He had been packing up his bag after practice, looking forward to showering at home when Poe had walked up to him, just a towel around his waist and asked him after a long explanation about how he wanted to room with him again on the next trip. It had sent his mind down the usual road of doubt. It was frustrating when someone would tell him what they wanted, but he didn’t understand what they were really out after.

The image of a fading bruise along Poe’s ribs made him also wonder if he’d done that when he’d thrown him hard against the mat. But the bruise wasn’t new. It wouldn’t have been so black if it had been him.

“Sorry. I’m…I keep thinking about Hux.” His words were true, but he said what he didn’t mean. “Maybe we can just hang out at my house. I’ll ask Poe to come. The kids can play games and draw and Rey will be happy. And we can just…”

“What? Watch them? Kylo, you’re bored right now. She won’t be happy if you’re bored at your own birthday.” Paige’s face was getting red with frustration. “We should celebrate. You’ll get your license and we should do something special. Rey is happy when you’re happy.”

He looked up at her and frowned slightly. It only made Paige roll her eyes.

“Okay, so I’ll tell you what to do. Your birthday is on a Friday. I know that you’ll take your driver’s after school. So we do something then. Something that’s just for you. We can hang out at my place and play games. And then on the Saturday, we make it all about Rey and the kids. Maybe have a sleepover at your place after or something. It’s not for like two weeks so you can freak out about it now and get used to the idea by then.” She was doing what she said, telling him exactly what he wanted. He’d made that happen. “God, Kylo, sometimes you’re so frustrating.”

He knew he was. But it didn’t stop him amongst his peers. Paige’s hair fell around her eyes and she actually smirked at him when she turned to look at him again, the anger fading from her face.

“But that’s what you want, right?”

“Yes,” he answered.
The instructor started calling for the girls in the background. And Paige nodded, saying that she’d fix it for him.

The only thing he forgot was that he didn’t want Liza to be there.

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He threw himself into his father’s arms without restraint when the test giver, a heavy and ancient woman, told him that he’d passed. Kylo felt his father’s embrace encircle him, hugging him tighter, and wanted to ruin the moment. He wanted to tell him that this just meant that he was getting away. He was one step closer to leaving.

But he held his tongue and parted, seeing the shining look of pride in Han’s eyes.

He couldn’t hurt him just then.

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“…and then we packed up and left Florida. It was like, bam, goodbye sunshine and the beach, hello stupid Connecticut. Mom had a job. Dad wanted to get away from the people he’d loaned money from. He’s such a fucking asshole. Then they made me change schools last year. Because he’s such a fucking asshole.” Poe’s story had gone on for too long, but he’d actually been listening, not imagining some dark scenario out of nothing.

Kylo sat beside him on the couch, accepting the intrusion of having feet on his lap as Poe stretched out to look at the girls. The card game had ended long ago in favour of talking and listening to music that he hated. Kylo didn’t want to say anything, but it was good to let the others talk.

They had drifted from school to movies, then to music. Then, finally, Paige lifted her shoulders and asked why Poe had moved there. It broke the question that they had all been thinking about. It took him several detours to get to the answer, but when he heard it, he started to feel a bit more at ease. The clearer people were to him, the easier it would be to build on the friendship, or whatever it was.

Liza pursed her lips and let her chin fall forward. She was wearing a new bra and he could see it peaking out from under her tank top. It was a shade of pink, almost salmon. Paige, at least, could put on a bra without wanting to show it off to everyone. “You could have said you just didn’t want to. I say that to my dad all the time.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t do that. Maybe you’re a daddy’s girl. Ever think about that?” Poe sat up a little and levelled a look at her. Kylo caught the tone of his voice and agreed with his defensive reaction.

Liza firmed her mouth. “I’m totally not.”

“You are,” Kylo added. He thought about Liza’s room, the few times he’d stepped foot into it before leaving for the openness of the living room. She had too many things: posters, electronics, childish stuffed animals. She clung to her childhood and he wanted to rip it all up so she’d be on
“Oh, shut up. You get whatever you ask for too. So just...shut up.” She flipped her hair and stood. Kylo didn’t watch her leave for the washroom, but knew that the other two did.

“Wow, she’s such a bitch,” Poe said, openly. He reached for the soda that Paige’s mom had bought them. She had offered them something stronger earlier, but all of them had exchanged looks of pure embarrassment at the offer. Kylo had just stared blankly before realizing that the other three were too afraid to say what they really wanted. There had been sparkling wine at his house when everyone had arrived, shared by everyone except Rey, even though he knew it had hardly anything in there to get them drunk. He’d checked the bottle. Paige had looked at her glass like she was sad to be told to grow up and only sipped at it in slow gestures. He did the same, but more so because he hated the smell.

But it had been what he wanted.

They were in the backyard of his home on a cool March evening and they raised their glasses to what he did and had done on his own. It wasn’t about fighting demons or killing murderers; it had been about studying and practicing. He did what sixteen year olds should do. Rey had hugged him and told him she was so happy for him without saying anything. It had been around the others so he understood her silence.

And Poe had smiled at him, breaking the awkwardness that he’d felt since he arrived.

It was harder than he thought to get his phone number. He’d always duck away after practice, saying something smart and then leaving before Kylo could ask. On the last road trip, he finally found the words and asked him if he wanted to come the following week. Poe had only smirked at him, making him regret his decision.

Then he said that he had already bought him a present.

He didn’t want anything. At least Liza knew that now. There was no awkwardly wrapped gift waiting for him there of some motion of love and longing. Instead, he had the small gift from Poe, tucked away into his pocket. He’d given it to him privately, a wry smile on his face in a moment alone before leaving for Paige’s.

The only present he wanted would come from Rey the next day, at her party. Or maybe at breakfast. She wouldn’t be able to wait that long. The joys of birthdays were slowly becoming some of her favourite emotions to explore.

“Shut up, she’s my best friend,” Paige said, reaching for her own drink. But her hand paused and she pursed her lips. “But she can get a little bitchy.”

He tilted his head at Paige at the words. He was used to catching these types of things when it was about him, but not other people. As the thought took over he recalled how Paige and Liza would talk around him. Since Hux left the group, who did Paige have? As much as it pained him, who did Liza have? The twisted dynamics only smacked him in the face when Poe jerked his foot away and he realized that he’d been drawing small circles against the skin of his ankle.

His cheeks burned and he dropped his head. Paige said that she needed to check on Liza and left the room. That’s when Poe kicked him lightly.

“It’s okay. You were just thinking.” Poe’s eyes were telling the truth. He could feel it, or at least he hoped that his mind wasn’t fooling him into seeing what he wanted. “I don’t mind.”
Then he stretched his feet out onto his lap again and smiled at him, sending his mind onto the brink of touching his deeper thoughts. He was invading his space and he should have pushed him away, yet his anxiety about his group of friends and where he was prevented him from bringing up a reaction. Being steps underground made him still feel like he couldn’t breathe most of the time. There was too much darkness below ground. Paige’s basement was filled with life but he could still see the way things could go if people made different choices. Things could always be connected; no one walked through life untouched by others.

Paige danced back into the room, looking more apprehensive than she usually did. She finished her awkward spin and her shoulders slumped. “So, um, Liza wants to go. But she’s staying here. So I don’t want to kick you out but…Kylo, she’s being weird. Like, weirder than usual. And I can’t deal with so much weirdness. Maybe she’ll be okay in a bit.”

Poe gave him a look. It was like the ones that he would get from Rey.

And he realized that it was time to go.

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He was starting to feel less awkward around Poe. They had really only been alone in the hotel room, but that wasn’t anywhere familiar to begin with; it had the illusion of being a place he’d been before but that was part of the illusion. Their teammates and coach were there. It wasn’t taking the path to his house that he’d followed so many times before, but with other people.

“Hey, are you worried about her?” Poe asked, in between kicking at stones on their path. The grass had a faint tinge of white; it hadn’t snowed but it was colder than it had been that afternoon.

It was always easy to fall into old memories. He saw an echo of Hux’s shadow on the ground before he lifted his head to look at Poe, reminding him that he was there now. Not in the before.

“Paige will be fine. I’ll talk to her tomorrow. Or maybe tonight.”

Poe paused and then kept walking. “I meant Liza.”

“I don’t care about her,” he said, knowing that his voice was sharp. “And don’t look at me like that.”

Poe nudged him. “Like what?”

“You know what I mean.” He wanted him to stop. He wanted to be alone in that moment. There were too many things to sort out and piece together. That’s why he hated being around too many people. Even with just three others, he’d have to always put together what he did wrong and what he’d probably do wrong again.

It was easier with just him and Rey.

Just thinking about her made his head drop again. He stopped walking and looked up at the night’s sky. For once, Poe was silent. He tried to find the right star patterns, but his head was too twisted. Nothing settled. There were too many things swirling.

Poe’s arms hung loosely at his slide. “Hey, I can just go home. You want to be alone and I’m
coming back tomorrow. I probably upset them. I was talking shit about my dad and it pissed me off.”

Kylo lifted his hand and shook his head. “You can’t walk home. And it’s too late to ask for a ride. Just shut up.”

Poe bit his lip and dipped his head. “You’re thinking?”

“I’m always thinking.” It was a half lie. Most of the time, he was just drifting in and out of where he was, where he wanted to be, and back to a place he never wanted to return to but still did time and time again.

The remark made Poe smile and start walking again. He’d guessed right with that remark when it came to what he was expected to say.

They neared the corner to his house and his mouth felt loose. “The first time I was at Paige’s house, Hux and I walked back this way. And there were these reporters outside. We had to sneak around back.”

He looked at the street. It looked so similar, like it was in his mind. He could see the ghosts of the news vans in the haunted corners. But he kept talking, comforted by the strange presence of his new friend. “We got into a fight in the alley. He yelled at me. I…I asked him if he still wanted to be my friend and he said he did. He was a fucking liar.”

The last part he yelled. He didn’t hear it until he saw Poe’s eyes.

“I don’t really know the guy but…yeah. He…if he lied, then fuck him.” Poe seemed to recover quickly, looking back up the street as he shuffled his shoes in the lingering crystals on the pavement. “I don’t want to wake up Rey. But you really need to talk and you never want to talk. So I don’t know what to do right now. You keep so much in your head. Paige told me. Liza even told me. We’re friends now so I can say this shit. I guess.”

“You guess?” He tried to seem taller, to glare down at the boy who hadn’t even turned fifteen yet.

Still, there was a daring smirk on that face. “Yeah, and I think I’ve guessed right.”

He looked down at his feet, daring to open his thoughts to Poe. “Liza kissed me that night.”

“Wait, what?” Poe’s mouth quirked into a smile and then it quickly faded. “It doesn’t look like you’re too happy about it.”

Folding his arms, Kylo was torn between wanting to shut up and to keep talking, to run or stay where he was. He’d let Poe invade his personal space so it felt right to let him into his thoughts. He could see his house, but he didn’t want to be there either. Still, Rey was there. Frustrated, he sat down on one of his neighbour’s lawns. Mrs Sebulba wouldn’t mind. She would walk around in the middle of winter in just a housecoat and call him by his father’s name. He’d just blame it on him if she woke up.

The grass was cold and stiff when he rubbed his eyes. He saw Poe shifting his weight from side to side. Then, he nodded and sat down next to him, resting a hand on his shoulder. He almost looked at him with surprise when a flinch did not follow.

“When was this? Like right after you got home?” The hand was then quickly withdrawn when he eyed it before nodding. That was close enough. “That’s…pretty fucked.”
“Yeah. Pretty fucked.” He closed his eyes and exhaled, his breath warming his hands. “That was when everyone was obsessed with me. Now, I’m sort of glad that they’ve kind of forgot about it. I mean, I haven’t. Rey hasn’t. My parents haven’t. But…yeah.”

Poe was looking up at the streetlight, before turning back to him. “So, I have this cousin. And I promise that this is leading to something, so don’t tell me to shut up. He’s like five years older than me or something. It’s dad’s side of the family so… I don’t want to call them trash, but they are. But I liked him when I was a kid. He’d play baseball with me and let me use his computer. Anyway, right before we moved, he killed three people in a drive-by. One was just a little kid, someone’s baby. It felt like…knowing that someone could just kill other people because he wanted to, and how easy it is, it was hard to feel safe again. That guy that took you, that motherfucker, had parents. He was somehow born and decided to destroy other people’s lives. All I’m saying is that, I probably don’t understand a tenth of what happened to you. But I get how it feels to always think that you’re not safe and anyone can turn into what we’re afraid of. And that it’s possible those things could be inside you too.”

There was something real in those words, despite how he wanted to argue that he didn’t understand what he was experiencing at all. That’s how he felt at the beginning of the story, but at the end, Poe had done what he’d promised. He had a point. And he got there the long way. He’d only heard second-hand information. He wasn’t Hux, who’d heard too much. He wasn’t Paige, who he was afraid of hurting. He just wanted to be his friend.

The sincerity in his eyes cracked something inside of him.

“I killed him. Someone must have told you that. I strangled him and it felt…good. He had made me hurt other kids and was going to kill Rey. The FBI had started to figure out where he was. I don’t think he was going to kill me until I told him to kill me instead of Rey. Even though I tricked him, beat him, and killed him, I feel like I’m dead all of the time. I think sometimes that he thought that he had me under control somehow. And that’s how I got him. That’s not in that stupid book, but the part about me killing him is there.” Tired, Kylo flopped down onto the grass and tried to focus on the stars in order to keep talking. Poe’s head rested beside his, following his eyes upwards. “Maybe everyone is right. Maybe I will kill someone else some day.”

“But only if they deserve it?”

He glanced over, meeting the other boy’s eyes under the streetlamp. “That’s…exactly. But isn’t that wrong too? The doctors try to get me to talk about this shit and then they won’t get it.”

“Nah, they’re making it more complicated. It’s like in class. You get a problem, there’s a formula, and you solve it. Easy, right? But if you sit and think about it too much, you think it might be another formula and you get the wrong answer. That’s what they’re doing. And they’re giving you the wrong answers.” Kylo didn’t actually agree but nodded lightly when Poe finished his stretched metaphor.

He heard a car approaching and it forced him to sit up. The car slowed, then kept driving. He brushed the cold out of his jeans and looked over at Poe. “I don’t really talk about this.”

“Yeah, makes sense why you don’t. Everyone’s obsessed with themselves and hearing that someone else has had it worse pisses everyone off. Suddenly your own shitty life isn’t the shittiest.” Poe sat up too and stood, reaching down to him.

He eyed the hand and thought about the gesture rather than the words. It was easier to zone out into that abyss than admit that Poe was right.
Gripping the offered hand, he got to his feet. Looking down at Poe, he lifted his lips into a light smile. “I used to hate you.”

“Yeah, I know.” Poe grinned. “But I got under your skin. Because I don’t give up.”

They walked in silence back to his house.

And he had to hold his tongue to prevent himself from saying that he probably should.
Rey blinked awake when two sets of feet enter Kylo’s room. It was late, but not that late. Still, it was late enough to make her stomach hurt and her eyes feel sandy. She sat up and scratched away the unpleasant sensation, trying to force herself to be awake.

She remembered Poe. He was the boy that Kylo had been so worried about. When she’d met him that day, she couldn’t really understand the problem. He had softly curled hair and expressive brown eyes. She guessed he was cute. His eyebrows could shift in a second, catching her in a look that made her feel safe. She liked him the moment that she saw him.

And he was the first person she talked to other than Kylo.

Poe had come into the kitchen when she was looking for scissors to cut the wrapping paper for Kylo’s gift. Leia had given her twenty dollars to buy a frame for the picture she’d drawn at the mall that day. She’d gotten help putting the work in the frame, but then the phone rang and everything started to get rushed. If she didn’t get it done now, it would never be finished. It was a really good picture too. There were no gaps in the colours. She could hear everyone else outside, but she needed to do it in that moment when Kylo was distracted.

*Hey, sweet pea. What’s going on?* Poe had asked, opening the fridge. She had quirked her head and looked up from the drawer where the scissors usually were. He took out a milk carton and poured himself a glass. He didn’t even ask.

She bit her lip, determined not to talk to anyone. She didn’t talk to her teachers or mom and dad. Just Kylo. Then she saw how the milk beaded on Poe’s mouth and giggled.

*I need help with Kylo’s present,* she said. *Can you help me? I’m not good at wrapping things. I never got to do it before that many times."

Poe grinned and nodded, leaving his glass beside the sink. *Yeah, sure. Let’s do it."

Upstairs, in her room and not Kylo’s, Poe showed her how to rip paper without scissors. He folded the sheet and winked at her before tearing it along the edge of her desk. He made it look easy. He had a real smile, one that she wanted to see more of. When he handed her the paper and she got to try, she felt like the next day would be even better with him there. He looked at the picture with a bright look on his face. He told her it was something he thought Kylo would like. And when the picture was wrapped, it looked perfect.

And now he was lurking awkwardly in the same doorway with Kylo, looking like they both had secrets. Poe was gripping his backpack, shifting from side to side.

“It’s really late,” she mumbled, looking at the two of them with a frown. She always tried to hold back when she felt like this. Just the sound of her own voice when she was this exhausted made her feel small and not six years old ye. She was just a baby, a small kid who couldn’t go anywhere. This was why she hated talking most of the time; other times, it came from selfish reasons that she could never keep.

Her friends had only come around her more, wanting to help her in school. Rose would still sit with her and try to guess what she wanted. Finn would run and get any toy or activity that she looked at. There was a pile of paint kits on their table by the end of the first morning. She’d been mad at first, but couldn’t stay that way. Tomorrow, she’d talk. Tomorrow would be her party and she didn’t
want to hate anything on her birthday.

The idea of being born was still something that she couldn’t quite understand. She knew she’d been smaller and had gotten bigger. Kylo was growing all of the time and she couldn’t stop it. She knew she’d been born to save Kylo, but there were other reasons she was alive now. Her friends needed her and so did mom and dad. But the world was too big and she was too small. At school sometimes she could turn invisible and float outside of her body. It was a good power to have when started to see Snoke lurking in doorways or in the back of her classroom. He wasn’t really there, but she still didn’t want him to see her.

“Shit, Kylo, I have to get up really early tomorrow I should just go…” Poe started to say.

Her mind drifted but she was sure that she heard Kylo say it was okay to sleep in their bed. She weakly lifted her head and nodded. Both boys broke from their annoying conversation and silently stared back at her.

It was 10 p.m. and her birthday party was tomorrow. She had been happy that Kylo got his license and wanted to spend time with his friends, but it had meant too much time alone to think. She had checked the tape on the package several times during the day, making sure it was like it was the previous time that she looked at it. She wanted to feel good the next day. There were few times that she could not deal with Kylo being nervous. It would be better if they both slept right now and he stopped thinking about it.

“You can sleep here. There’s a sleeping bag,” she said to Poe, her mind cloudy. “Everybody just needs to sleep.”

Poe looked at her and his smile made her grin again. “Sure thing, sweet pea. Be right there.”

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Kylo was focused on brushing his teeth with Poe standing beside him. Looking at him in the mirror, watching him mush his toothbrush with a heavy hand against his teeth, he’d rather have been in the hotel room.

Poe leaned forward and rinsed his mouth. “Everything okay?”

Kylo just shook his head. “She talked to you.”

“Yeah. I was there.”

“But she…”

Poe stared back at him in the mirror. “Don’t be a dick right now. You said that she wasn’t talking. Now she’s talking. That’s good right? She talked to me earlier today too. So is there something wrong about that?” Poe asked. He looked sincere with the question, not like he was about to mock him.

“No, but she won’t talk to her teachers. But she’s talking to you. She just hates her voice right now,” he said, stepping back, suddenly realizing how bare he was. It had been too quick to change in his room. He had put on his normal sleep clothes: just his shorts. But Poe was mostly fully clothed, probably having forgot his pyjamas. “It’s been going on for a couple of weeks. She can
only talk to me. Everyone is freaking out, but she’ll be okay. She has friends and likes school. She just doesn’t want to talk right now.”

“That’s a little…strange. But I guess if she’ll be fine, then who cares what everyone thinks. She can do what she wants.” Poe wasn’t looking at him. He was looking at the holes in his socks again.

He realized he felt mostly strange because this wasn’t a hotel room. This was his home.

And Poe wasn’t Hux.

Rey was curled up into one corner of the bed and they had another shared look.

“I can totally sleep downstairs,” Poe said in a whisper, leaning closer.

“No,” he answered. He wasn’t sure why he wanted to test Poe but he was tired of his boasts and bravado during the day and the odd softness and openness he’d shown that night. He opened his closet and retrieved the old sleeping bag from the top shelf. There wasn’t any dust, but he expected there to be. Handing it to Poe, he shrugged and sat on the bed, touching Rey’s leg through the blanket. She mumbled turned away, shifting to the other edge of the bed, away from him.

Poe still stood near the doorway and turned off the light, letting him turn on his lamp.

“She doesn’t like the lights off?” He asked, his voice dropping to a whisper. “Um, do you want to talk for a bit?”

He shifted under the sheets and tossed a pillow down on the floor. “Yeah, if you want.”

Biting his lip, Poe stripped down to his boxers and spread out the sleeping bag. There was always a thrill to make someone else uncomfortable. Part of him still wanted Poe to back off and not want to be his friend. He was daring him to turn around and leave, to not want to deal with his shit anymore. Hux left. Poe could leave too.

Instead he just sat up and shrugged at him, motioning around the room. “I…like your house. Your parents must be loaded.

Lying down, he shut his eyes at the comment. Rey was facing away from them, but he still dropped his voice. “I don’t know. They’re buying me the car that I want. But I don’t really want anything that they can buy. They know that too.”

The thought continued to pound in the back of his mind: this wasn’t talking in the hotel room. This wasn’t training in the gym with the others. They were having a conversation in his bedroom.

“Guess that’s why you didn’t bother to ask them if I could stay over.” Poe’s smirk was enough to make him smile too.

“The girls were supposed to come over tomorrow evening. It was something Paige planned, but probably won’t happen now.” He rested against his pillow, looking directly into Poe’s eyes. “I’m sorry that I didn’t open your present yet. You shouldn’t have got me anything.”

“Want to know what it is?” Poe had trouble keeping secrets. Kylo knew that he should be more guarded. But he couldn’t. “Okay, I’ll tell you. You always wear that armband, the bracelet. I got my grandma to send me one. It’s really nice and handmade. I think she made it herself. I saw somewhere that it was your birthday and I thought I’d give it to you on the next road trip or something. So I guess I got lucky and I get to hang out with you here rather than sleeping on the couch at home.”
Kylo narrowed his eyes. “I don’t like gifts. But thanks.”

“Yeah, don’t mention it. And don’t feel like you have to get me anything. My birthday is next month. Maybe we can just go to a movie or something.” Poe’s eyes looked serious for a moment and the tension only passed when Kylo nodded. “Good. Goodness. Maybe we’ll take Rey too. I don’t really care which movie we watch. Kid shit still makes me laugh.”

“She’d like that. She’s getting better with movies,” he said. “If she’s talking to you, I think that she’d really like that.”

Poe nodded and closed his eyes for a second before opening them again. “I’m sorry for that story before. No matter how shitty I feel and how fucked up my life is, I don’t have a drop in the bucket compared to you and Rey. It’s all…I think I talk so much just to…”

“Not hear yourself think,” Kylo said quickly, to finish the sentence. “I do that with my parents. And sometimes with Rey. She knows I’m doing it to distract myself. She’s six and I feel like I’m too much for her.”

“Hey, but now you have me, right?” Poe looked at him with desperation that he tried to hide behind a joking grin. He had the same loneliness that he saw from Hux. It drew him in, downwards, into wanting to accept him. He’d already started and he rarely gave up finishing something that was in motion, despite knowing the outcome.

“Yeah. Goodnight.” He closed his eyes and rolled over.

He heard Poe sigh and then the sound of the sleeping bag rustle. “Yeah, night.”

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A nightmare woke her. It was about being sucked down into blood until she started choking. Bubbles popped against her face. The smell was real. The slickness of the liquid pulled her down deeper until she couldn’t breathe. It had been happening more and more. Rey could wake herself without screaming, but it was still heavy to force herself to move and not rouse Kylo. He hadn’t been sleeping well lately. He’d been worried about his driver’s exam, even though he’d say that he knew he would pass. Sighing, she didn’t bother to open her eyes. She turned over, rolling around until she found arms and cuddled into them.

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Poe woke him up at five thirty. He stood there, arms folded across his chest and eyes shifting. Kylo wanted to ask if he’d had another nightmare, but he was sure he hadn’t this time. But that wasn’t it: he needed to get to work. Shaking off the sleep, he gently slid Rey off of his chest and got up, despite how his body resisted it.

“What?” He asked, mouth and head still struggling with being awake.

Poe was already dressed, and nodded in quick jerks. His eyes dropped a little and he scratched at
his eyebrow. “Yeah, I um. Yeah. And I have to get there before six. And I didn’t want to wake you up until now…can you ask your dad or something?”

He didn’t need to ask his dad; the warm thought blossomed and pulled him fully out of sleep. Shaking his head, he smirked a little. Poe’s mouth quirked with confusion as he shoved by him to pull on his jeans. No, he didn’t need his dad, because he knew where the keys were. He grabbed his t-shirt and motioned for Poe to head downstairs. No one else was up yet, but he saw the bags of groceries waiting for the day on the counter.

They had slipped their shoes back on and he had the keys to his father’s car in his hands when the backdoor opened. Han stood there, squinting at them, Lumpy’s leash in his hand. The dog barked, his tail wagging, as he spotted them.

“Where’re you two off to so early?” Han blocked the door and Kylo straightened his shoulders.

“Poe has to go to work. I’m taking the car.” He felt Poe tense behind him but ignored it for now.

Han slowly stepped back, letting them leave. He was waiting for him to remind him that there were still rules that he had to follow for the next few months. It had been in the study guide and they both knew them.

Still, he let them go.

“Hey, look I appreciate it but…” Poe started as he opened the door to the garage.

Kylo just shrugged him off. His father’s car was between them as the gears and winches to the garage door grinded to life. The dim light of the spring morning spilled in and he opened the driver’s door. After tapping the roof of the car, Poe got in. They backed out and he was finally driving for the first time without his parents. He could go anywhere, but he would come back.

“You could probably get away with anything with your parents, but the police might stop us.” Poe’s seatbelt clicked and he quickly mirrored the action. “That might help, but they still might.”

“They won’t.” He faked confidence, but let a real grin spread across his face. “It’s too early.”

It was a longer drive than he thought, but the streets were empty. Poe was clutching his backpack the entire time but in a quick glance, he saw the grip start to loosen as they neared a grocery store on the other side of town. When he had parked, he looked over and frowned.

“You didn’t have to be nervous,” he said, confused by how quiet his friend had been.

“Nah, I didn’t. But I do need you to not tell anyone about this.” Poe was looking at the dashboard, his face in a deep frown. He looked up and his eyes firmed. “I’m serious, Kylo.”

“It’s…” He trailed off and shook his head. “It’s fine. Don’t worry.”

Finally, the apprehension faded from his face. “Great. I’ll see you tonight then.”

The door slammed shut and Kylo kept his eyes forward, stopping himself from watching the other boy run inside. He was staring at nothing, eyes unfocused. While he normally sought out a feeling of numbness, the one that washed over him now wasn’t as pleasant.

Another car pulling up beside him forced him into action and he started the car again. At least now he was annoyed at an intrusion and not just the wasteland of his uncertain mind.
He drove home with less caution now, speeding a little on empty stretches, trying to untangle what had happened. The look on Poe’s face told him he was embarrassed to show him that part of his life. He was a freshman; he could get a job if he wanted one. Rolling his eyes at himself, he sighed at how slow he had been to put the pieces together. He didn’t want to have a job; he had to get one. He clenched the steering wheel at the thought as he pulled into the back alley.

No wonder Poe thought he could get anything that he wanted. It was true for things that could be bought, like shoes, a car, a phone, but what he really wanted would always be out of his reach. His parents couldn’t buy back seven years of his life, lost to torture and confinement. He sat in the car, neatly parked in the garage, and let the frustrating idea take hold. He couldn’t shake the growing bitterness at how he was still encountering unfairness in the world and discrepancies between how he knew the world worked and how he thought it should. It was slowly being forced down his throat and he didn’t want to accept it. Maz would always push him into thinking about empathy and how he dealt with others. He already had enough inside of him, he thought. Rey had to feel for others but he just had to survive and try to predict how they wanted him to react.

His father was waiting for him on the back porch with two mugs of coffee.

“IT didn’t have time to get cold,” Han said as Kylo’s boots made the back steps creak. “How’d it go?”

Shrugging, he accepted the cup, too wound up in his mind to argue. “Fine. I know I shouldn’t have done that, but…I didn’t think you’d be awake. And it really didn’t take long.”

Han’s mouth was set in a soft line. “No. No it didn’t. But even when you have your own car, it’s not really legal to drive around with your friends. And I hate saying this to you, because you know it’s a law.”

“It’s a stupid one.” He sipped at his coffee and then frowned. “And I won’t.”

He was lying, but his father still clapped his shoulder. Clearing his throat, Han took a heavy step away to lean against the railing. “I had to get a job at his age too. I get why you were helping him out.”

He stood in the silence, watching the steam rise from his mug. An ache that he was well accustomed to by now spread in his stomach: someone was being wronged and he couldn’t do anything about it. Maz was wrong; he felt too much and that’s why he desperately wanted to push those thoughts away. It was a feeling that was easy to hide when he was at school, surrounded by people who either ignored him or hated him. He didn’t care what most of them thought about him on good days. Right now, he was too disoriented to dredge up how he felt on bad days.

But the feeling still cracked through, mingling with his residual confusion and anger at the gray areas of the world. He clenched his teeth. Fighting down rage wasn’t something he could do today. It would be a day filled with too many people and too many situations he could be trapped in. The thought made it even hard to press down the feelings. His hand gripped his cup and if he’d been alone, he’d have thrown it across the yard.

“I need to shower before breakfast,” he finally said, shaking hands resting the mug and the keys on the railing.

His father gave him a soft look, one that he hadn’t seen in too many years.

They parted with a nod and Kylo cursed his resolve to never cut himself at home.
Can’t come. I’m beyond sorry. I’ll tell you on Monday. 

Why not?

I can’t really text more or call you. But I WILL tell you on Monday.

Kylo didn’t reply.
Chapter 15

Rey was watching herself from outside of her body. She was floating above everyone, feeling happy that her friends were there. She was almost too afraid to come down and ruin it by telling them she had been watching from above. Kaydel had showed up a half an hour late, pouting. She whined to her when her mother left that her socks didn’t match. Rose told her that she thought her socks still matched, even though they weren’t the same pattern. Finn didn’t get why it was a problem. Rey had just smiled and said that she was glad they were all there.

No one reacted, except for everyone who was older than five or six. She hadn’t talked during breakfast. She had hummed a little as she put syrup on her pancakes and sung random sounds during her bath, but everything else had been about meeting eyes and making motions.

Paige had came by with Rose for lunch, before everyone else came. Paige smiled at Kylo, but then said that Liza wasn’t coming; that made Rey glad. She didn’t have a problem with Liza, but she knew that Kylo didn’t always want to deal with her. He was waiting for Poe and so was she. She was glad that Kylo had a new friend, almost a best friend again. She guessed that Rose was her best friend, mostly because Finn didn’t know who he wanted to be better friends with. It was so annoying that he couldn’t make up his mind about such a simple thing: it didn’t matter. Most people didn’t have a favourite person. She did, but Rey knew that everything about her was drastically different than her friends. It wasn’t a bad thing, but was made up of tiny wrongs that piled up over time. The first time that she went swimming, she realized how apparent her scars were. It had been a warm day, the first summer of their freedom. Kylo hadn’t wanted to take his t-shirt off. He had ducked his head and held her hand as they walked to the edge of the pool. She was used to Kylo being brave, but faced with a pool of screaming children and teenagers, he shied away. It was like back at the hospital, when she started seeing the seams in his armour. He had been afraid before, but this fear wasn’t from terror. Then she looked down at her own legs and saw the lines and marks and stepped back. He noticed her movements and quickly took off his shirt and took her hand.

_We are how we are. Don’t ever feel bad because I do._

Kylo really did understand when he’d made a mistake and was worried that it would make her feel different than others.

But he didn’t believe it himself. He just stopped caring. Or at least he said he did.

Rey knew what he cared about. And also knew when he was lying.

The entire morning, leading up to the arrival of her friends and Paige, had been spread out with small lies or at least smaller lies. They were the lies that she could tell when she had to sit at a dinner with food that she’d never had before. She wanted to try it, but when she did, she had to look at the people around her and pretended that she liked it. It took a few tries to learn that if she said that she liked something, then it would be served again. People, especially adults, only tried to make others happy. It wasn’t their fault that she didn’t understand what they meant.

Those thoughts were rolling over her as she watched herself play with her friends. Paige was sitting on the big couch, telling them what to do with their felt figures. Rey knew that Paige wanted to be a teacher and that it would be great if Paige could teach her class when she got older. Paige had smiled, but shook her head; there was no way she would be teaching junior high or high school. They were supposed to cut out forms and make them into people. Somehow, everyone had a problem with that. Most of the problems had started when Rey took all of the black and had to start
cutting off pieces of the others.

She watched herself happily helping the others until Kylo threw his phone across the room. It hit the kitchen island with a violent crack and she was pulled back down into her body.

He didn’t look at anyone before he left, escaping into the cold of the back porch.

Paige’s expressive face followed her eyes. “I guess we should ignore him? That’s what I do.”

Rey shrugged and put her felt figure to the side. “He will want to apologize. I can’t let him wait that long.”

Paige’s cheeks were red when she met Rey’s eyes again. “Maybe I sometimes make him wait too long.”

“It’s okay.” Lifting her shoulders, Rey couldn’t see anything wrong with that. “He’s not a kid. I’ll be right back.”

Rey ignored her friends and picked up Kylo’s phone from the floor. The screen still looked okay. She hit the button and made sure that it wasn’t cracked. The last year he’d broken three phones by being careless or openly violent. He really did care, but sometimes he needed to explode. Rey would rather it be with a phone than with someone else.

The phone in her small hand, she opened the door to the porch. Kylo was sitting on the small bench, his arms folded.

“It’s not broken this time,” she said, handing it towards him with firm hands.

He looked at it and let it fall to the ground. “I don’t want it right now.”

She looked down at the phone then back at him. She quirked her head and her frown deepened.

“I’m not trying to ruin your birthday. I’ll be…better in a few minutes.” He rubbed his eyes and ran his hand through his hair. It was thick and black and Rey loved touching it at night. But right now, it looked like it caused Kylo pain. She hated it when he was only in his head. It was one of the few places that she could not draw him out from. He stopped making sense. The more that he grew up, the more that Kylo saw of the world, the more the gap widened. He had a hard time explaining it to her when it came to things like school and friends.

“Poe’s not coming?” The thought struck her and she blurted out the words before she could take them back.

Kylo’s look was narrowed and dark when he looked at her. “I told him things about what happened to us. And now he’s not coming. That probably means he hates us and will be like Hux on Monday. I can’t…Maybe I should stop looking for best friends. You’re probably right. Boys are dumb.”

Just hearing him saying those words made Rey laugh. “Boys are dumb. But you’re not supposed to say that. He’s not mean, Kylo. And he’s not lying. I like him.”

He pursed his lips. “I like him too. That’s what makes this hard.”

Rey felt warmth blossom in her chest. Kylo wanted to be friends with Poe. He actually wanted something. She had wanted to see Kylo smile, his real smile, when she gave him his present later on that day. But right now, she just wanted him to calm down and be back with the others. He
hated people, but he didn’t hate kids.

“What did he say?” She asked, shifting her weight from side to side.

Kylo looked at her and then frowned at the garage. “That we’d talk on Monday.”

“Then don’t think the worst,” she grinned, hugging him on the bench. “Come inside, please.”

His arm fell around her and she sighed into his half hug. “I’ll be in soon.”

Pulling away, she picked up his phone again and put it in his hands. He didn’t drop it this time.

She sat back down and looked at her cut out, thinking about how much easier things would be for everyone if she could fix things for Kylo. She thought again about how she wanted to make things better in the past for all of them. Her birthday party would have been bigger, with so many children that would never have been made gone or end up forgotten. It would have made Kylo a different person if Snoke had never hurt him and made him do bad things. He’d be softer with everyone, not just with her.

-=-

Leia leaned over and looked at him. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, stop asking,” he said through gritted teeth. He kept his eye forward, staring off through the windshield. “When can I get my car?”

His mother gave him a neutral look. He couldn’t break through what her eyes meant and it frustrated him more. It happened only occasionally as he watched her get better hiding being hurt or insulted by him. She would close off those parts, trying to love what he was now rather than what he should be. She was wrong to do that. “Well, we’ll see.”

“That’s not an answer.” He almost wanted to pout as he rested his head on the window.

Their car was parked far from the entrance of the school. Leia slowly turned to look at him as she put the car in gear, getting closer to the main door. Of course, she’d do that. Of course she’d pressure him into acting out. He hadn’t ruined Rey’s birthday. He had come inside again and tried to listen to what Paige was telling him but his thoughts really were elsewhere. Even at night, when Rey was telling him which parts of the day were her favourite, he could only manage short nods before he forced himself to listen to her and actively show her that she was loved.

That’s when she gave him the present she’d made for him and told him that Poe helped her wrap it.

“Fine. I don’t care,” he spat out and left the car.

Hardly anyone was there that early. He was glad to be in the space before the school was filled with distracted and vapid people. He’d already swore to put Poe out of his mind as he climbed the front steps and made his way to their wing of the school. The corridors were broad but would feel smaller in only a half an hour. He preferred to not feel trapped. He could make it through the entire day not feeling like he was drowning if he could just forget Poe Dameron and whatever lie he was
going to tell him now.

And of course he was there.

Poe lifted his head as he heard him take even steps down the corridor. He paused, exhaled, and kept walking. Ignoring him now would be the best idea right then.

“Hey,” he said, standing. “I told you I’d be here.”

“Yeah, you did.” He didn’t want to look at him. It was all a game. It was all to get him into some sort of prank or something that would end in hurt. “What are you doing here?”

Poe scoffed and took a step back. That’s when Kylo finally looked at him. Poe’s tongue nervously ran up and down a split lip that was still bright red and fresh. A dull mark shone out to him from under his left eye. Kylo was shaken into curiosity, finally stopping to really study him and the injuries.

“Yeah, I couldn’t be there and I feel like shit. I got…it was like this, some idiot left a freezer door open when I was trying to restock some stuff. I walked into it. I had to go to the hospital and my parents were pissed. I wanted to come. I really wanted to. How was it?” Poe was trying to distract him and he couldn’t buy into it.

“It was okay. Paige made a game. I hated it.” He held back: I don’t believe you.

He watched as Poe looked down and then back up at him again. “Yeah, you would. But really, I hope you’re not mad.”

He was. He was furious. But his eyes could only focus on the wound on Poe’s face. Letting his eye close in on him, he finally nodded. Rey might have been right. She was usually right.

“I’ll see you in class,” he mumbled as he grabbed his first-period books.

“Okay,” Poe said, still looking at him. “See you later.”

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He just wanted to go home. There was nothing left for him there today. There would have to be a tomorrow but it would still be horrible. Music helped. People weren’t helping right now. The last week had been too many words and feelings and he wanted nothing but emptiness.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught heads turning and mouths opening to yell. Over the shrill tones of his music, he slowly turned his head. It only took the brief glance to make his shoulders straighten; he was snapped out of his numbness. Bryce had Poe pinned up against a locker, spitting words at him that he couldn’t hear. Poe was nattering back, just as quickly, pushing at the other boy’s hands to let him go. It had only been a week since his birthday, but it had been hard for him to forgive Poe instantly. He was working on it, mostly filling up pages in one of his journals.

It was easy to forgive someone when they were being threatened.

With quick hands, he yanked down his headphones. “Hey!”

Bryce’s blond head snapped towards him. “Fuck off, faggot.”
His shoulders firmed and he narrowed his eyes. He was moving without thinking and pushed the senior off of his friend. It was a flurry of hands and clumsiness, mostly on the other boy’s part. Poe was talking, but he only heard dull noises around him. He knew that the others were yelling, but they blurred out.

He only saw the fight that he was in.

It had been too long.

He breathed it in and locked eyes with the dumber, but bigger, boy. He still felt like a kid, but Bryce was graduating that spring; he was an adult. He shouldn’t be going after his friend. It made his hands twitch and his blood start to run hot. Everything started to blur out and the space turned dark. Red tinged on the corner of his eyes and he almost grinned. He saw fear in Bryce’s eyes and he had his moment to strike.

Gripping Bryce’s shirt, he shoved him hard against the locker. Bryce was taller and bigger, but he didn’t see any of that as he glared at him. Bryce pushed back, trying to punch him.

Kylo just smirked to himself and stepped out of his reach. Bryce’s face was red as his hands tried to grab at him, to push him down, to get him on the ground. He’d seen how the other boy fought. He knew he’d stumble and wasn’t certain of his own body.

It only took two steps to grab him and smash his face against the locker.

Kylo only had to use one hand, but he could hear the other boy cry out as his nose met hard metal with a wet crunch. He grabbed him again and saw blood and heard screams. Once more he brought flesh against the unforgiving surface.

A firm hand gripped his arm and he stepped away, leaving Bryce to fall to the ground, grabbing at his nose.

Holdo stood there. He’d heard her voice earlier, but it hadn’t mattered.

She was talking but he didn’t hear her.

As the world faded back into focus, he saw the panic on Poe’s face. He caught a look from Paige over his shoulder, her hands covering her mouth. Liza was holding her books against her chest, her mouth agape. The rest of the students were just blurred faces in a crowd around them.

“Ben, stop.” The principal's voice was firm. “What happened?”

He dropped his head and didn’t have an answer.

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Poe wouldn’t stop taking his fries. He’d finally been able to go off of school grounds for lunch after the two weeks of ‘detention’, and that bastard kept taking his food.

“No, you’re wrong. How are you guys ahead of me? It’s like this, symbolism is everything in English,” Poe started to lecture Liza and Paige, across them in the booth. His plate was still half full, most of his fries drowned in ketchup. But he wouldn’t stop taking his fries from Kylo’s plate.
Annoyed, Kylo shoved a handful of what was left into his mouth. He still wasn’t listening to a lecture from a freshman, but he had been forced to eat the rest of his lunch. Poe caught his annoyed glare and smirked, leaning in closer to try to grab another one. He felt his leg press against his as he tried to reach passed him to get at his food.

The girls giggled.

The soft music in the diner filtered through his ears. The leather of the booth squeaked as Poe shifted his weight, intending to strike again at the remains of his lunch. Kylo sat back, letting Poe take a fry. He folded his arms behind his head, grinning at his stolen victory. His lip had healed long ago, but when he smiled, Kylo could still catch the hint of it.

Even when things were normal, he’d always be reminded of the darkness that most people hid. He wrapped himself in his, bearing its heavy weight in everything that he did.

But for a few minutes, he felt it lift. He was in high school, with friends. He was finally allowed to go out to eat wherever he wanted.

Things were almost how they were supposed to be.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

i’m almost caught up on work, guys. i still have so much proofreading and research and teaching ahead of me but...here we are. thanks sooo much for the comments and kudos - you guys don't know how much they mean to me. we're back on board the pain train for this chapter and then the next. we're finally catching up to nearly 50+ pages that i have written for this. it's all downhill from here, fam. Please excuse the typos, I'm really tired but I'll go back and fix them at some point I promise!

If Rey weren’t Rey, she would have almost forgotten what it was like when Kylo had a bad day. Rose didn’t understand when Paige had a bad day; she’d just whine that her sister didn’t want to play with her. But to Rey, she called them bad days, but the word didn’t really match some of the times that she’d seen or felt the last almost two years. Colours were deeper than words; they filled her head the moment she stepped back into the house and the world swirled with tones of red and black.

She had spent the weekend at grandma’s. She’d been sick for their birthday and Leia had promised her a sleepover when they had a free day from school. A long weekend usually meant being bored, wanting to do more homework or play more games or do anything. But a weekend with grandma would mean different and new things. It would mean being away from Kylo, but he had been having a good week so she thought he could have some time to himself too to spend alone with his friends. That was a good enough present for Rey, to give him the space that he wanted.

When she was about to leave with Han on Friday afternoon, Kylo had been smirking on his phone. He was sitting on the couch rather than hiding in his room. His feet were on the coffee table and he was stretched out, letting himself almost hang off the sofa. He wasn’t wearing black for once; he was wearing a blue shirt; it rid up his back, showing off his sides as he rolled over. He shifted easily over to the couch as Rey watched him from the doorway. Han just let her watch him. He was watching him too.

It had been a week filled with Kylo smiling and hope fluttered in shimmering butterflies across her eyes before she left.

Sometimes time felt jumbled to Rey. Things smashed into other things. Sometimes she’d be at school and then she’d be at home with Kylo. Sometimes she’d be with Rose and Finn on the playground, and then back at Snoke’s. Driving with Han the few hours it took to grandma’s, she let the feelings overlap until the days were all the same. It was like going outside of her body; she could go outside of time too. Maz told her not to do that, but sometimes it was too tempting to escape.

Rey knew he’d been in a fight in school a couple of weeks ago and it had made her upset. She had cried and pouted at him, having trouble understanding why he always went back to old habits, no matter how much they hurt her. She never wanted to be disappointed in him, but she hated seeing Han and Leia have to deal with punishing him. They didn’t like it because they didn’t want to lose him; they would go over the countless books and papers, trying to come up with the right way for
Kylo to deal with what had happened, but also still feel safe and trust them. Rey didn’t always agree with them. She thought the rules were a little silly because Kylo knew right from wrong. But her faith in him had been shaken by how he’d started lying about how he felt on her birthday, keeping things from her. He’d made it up to her and told her everything that night, and it was clear he felt bad about hiding himself from her on such a special day.

She still didn’t understand why birthdays were special, but guessed that she’d start believing it the next year and it would be the new truth.

He had promised her with sincerity that he wasn’t just acting out at school to hurt someone just to feel something. He was defending his friend. It was the right thing to do, even though it was wrong. She had seen panic in his eyes as he told her that and he quickly added that he probably should have tried to talk the other boy out of the fight. That part made Rey smile and told him that she never wanted to hurt anyone either, but if someone was hurting her friends, she would have to really think about it.

But he took his two-week punishment—no car until detention was over—and didn’t complain. He’d mope, sure, lying on her bed as she did her homework on the floor, and stare at her out of boredom. He just wanted to spend time with her, he said. And she believed him.

And then he just seemed to turn it around, to force himself to not stand so straight and gaze off into nothing.

They drove in his car; it wasn’t a new car, but it was just used and he liked it. He didn’t want anything new. Or at least he didn’t need anything new. And even though Han was there, she was so happy to be the first person that Kylo drove with on his own. She wanted to reach for his hand but remembered to sit back and hold her seatbelt. They didn’t have to go anywhere, they just had to drive.

It was like the stories he’d tell when she was even smaller. How good freedom would feel when they could decide for themselves. On some of his darker days, he’d hold her and talk about how good it would be just to leave and forget everyone there. After grandpa died and Hux left, that’s when those conversations were the worst.

Now he had access to that freedom. And he could go anywhere and leave her behind forever.

Was there really a forever? When the thought struck her in Kylo’s car, Han was pointing out something in the distance and Kylo was following his hand to squint through the spring sunlight.

With his features washed out, he was back to looking softer and younger. It was suddenly the same face that would lull her to sleep with fantastic stories of hope or just simple touches that told her that he cared. Even when he was hurt and broken, bleeding and holding back tears to not draw attention to them, he would put his heart out to her to keep her safe. The times that he was truly blinded by agony were the times that she’d been hurt. When Snoke would lock him in the closet and force him to hear her scream.

He’d do that to force Kylo to do the really bad things. The things that made him cry and scream now when he thought she couldn’t hear him.

There were ways that Kylo had been hurt that she thought she understood because she felt them too. She’d been there, in the same place. The memories were getting distant but the pain still cut through her when she dreamed and when she was tired and couldn’t keep the darkness away. Still, she’d never be able to really forget them or let them go. Dead hearts followed her everywhere, memories of faces no one would ever see again. But now that he was thinking differently, being
more adult, she wasn’t sure that they felt the same way anymore.

Then he had a good week. He wanted to drive to school, but still rode with her in mom’s car: that made her stomach buzz with happiness. He’d smile at her and was happy again when she got home from school. He was texting more, actually using his phone rather than letting it sit forgotten on his bed as it buzzed for hours. He’d go out, spend time with his friends. He’d go to practice and come home and show her some move he’d perfected. The final tournament before state was coming and he really felt ready. Poe hung out at their place, doing homework and playing video games after practice and after Kylo showered. When they were alone, just her and Poe, he’d ask her what she liked and what she liked the most about school. He’d give her a big hug every time that she saw him, lifting her up into his arms. He was smaller than Kylo but his energy would make up for the height.

She felt like she could leave him. She wanted to be a little selfish, and also spend time with grandma. Grandma meant flowers and pictures of kittens. Grandma meant a new sweater and watching the fish in the aquarium. They lived their whole lives not knowing there was someone taking care of them. She’d watch the smaller, bright blue ones follow her fingers as she made them dance from outside the tank. They were hungry but only knew that she was a blur that meant food.

She left on Friday and was back late on Sunday.

And Kylo was having a bad day that sucked the happy stories she had brought with her. It had taken only a weekend and he had just vanished into himself. Had there been another fight at practice? No, he wasn’t in trouble. Did he lose a friend? No, Leia said. Poe had spent the night on Saturday and it had been a nice and normal evening.

But Sunday morning, after he’d left, Kylo just decided that nothing was right anymore.

He’d screamed at his mother, not holding anything back. Leia just stared at the kitchen island, telling her the truth because that’s what she asked for. She needed to figure it out, to unravel what happened. The world was unfair and he was never going to be happy and normal. Nothing was ever going to be right. Then he locked himself in his room and wouldn’t answer to anyone.

Not even Rey when she got home and carefully knocked on the door, tapping out her usual pattern of love and hope.

He didn’t answer.

“Kylo? Are you okay?” She asked, her voice as tiny as she could make it so it would slip under the door.

Finally, after too many minutes, she heard him settle on the other side of the door. He tapped his response. Died a long time ago.

“But that wasn’t this you. That was the other you.” She could hear Han and Leia standing at the bottom of the stairs, still talking and filled with worry. “I saved you, ‘member.”

Can’t I just have a bad day?

The taps were slow, like his hands were having a hard time keeping still enough to make sense.

“Everyone can have a bad day. Even you,” she tried to sound more adult, more like a teenager or something. It didn’t fit right in her mouth. She was still just a kid, too small in the big world to lift him up anymore. “Can I come in? I’m really tired.”
She heard him stand up and open the door. His eyes were red and his face was pale. He looked
down at where she was crouched and then slowly turned away to move towards the bed.

*What happened?* She blinked as she closed the door.

He blinked rapidly in return. *Nothing happened. I got too happy and I think I broke.*

*Broke?* He wasn’t broken. Nothing could break Kylo.

He pulled the sleeves on his sweater down rolling the cuffs over his hands. *Just broke.*

Rey rubbed at her eyes and stepped towards the bed. He didn’t pull away, but he didn’t reach for
her either. He crossed his arms and leaned forward, dropping his head against his folded arms.

His phone buzzed and he ignored it. She frowned at him and reached for it, small thumbs typing in
his code.

*R U ok?*

“Don’t tell him I’m upset,” Kylo mumbled. “I just haven’t answered him.”

Rey quickly scrolled through the other messages. Other than the thirty unanswered texts,
everything before that looked normal. Stupid messages from Poe, serious answers from Kylo.
Talking about rooming together one last time and how next season would be better.

Frowning, Rey typed a response. *Rey is home. Was asleep. I am sad.*

The reply came instantly. *K. Don’t be too hard on yourself. Give her a hug from me. Seeya
tomorrow. Feel better.*

“Did something happen?” she asked, setting the phone back down on the nightstand. “Are you mad
at him?”

“Nothing happened.” He sat up and looked at her. “We hung out. He complained about having to
have a job because his dad is a piece of shit. He doesn’t even have a bed at home, Rey. It’s so
unfair that we have so much and he’s…working while we just…get to be kids again.”

She quirked her head. Even though she understood, she needed him to answer. No more lies. “That
made you mad?”

“Of course it made me mad! A guy jumped him at school for no reason. Rey, what if I didn’t want
to be his friend? Who would have stood up for him?” Kylo was keeping his voice low but in her
head, she heard him yelling, screaming it into the void.

She escaped into it, tuning out the room and putting them there, in that space. It wasn’t Snoke’s
basement; it was a place in between escape and reality. It made her feel safe and she could only see
him.

“Someone would have,” she said, stepping closer. “Kids aren’t always mean.”

He shook his head. “High school is mean, Rey. It will be different for you because you’re nice and
by then, you’ll be even nicer. And you’ll be pretty. That will help.”

“Kylo, do you think I’m pretty now?”

Even as the reds and blacks swirled around him, he smirked at her. His face softened and he finally
stopped to look at her with real eyes, not the fake ones that he sometimes wore. “You’re beautiful. Rey, I want you to grow up and not have to deal with all this. I’m ruining it.”

She forced herself out of her head, to be back with him in the room. “I love you. No matter what.”

He closed his eyes and sighed. “Love you too. I should… go downstairs and apologize, right?”

“Only if you mean it,” Rey’s voice was firm. “Please, Kylo. Say the real words.”

“Yeah.” He shook his head, still playing with the sleeves of his sweater. “I get mad and just… forget that I’m allowed to be happy.”

Kylo reached out and took her hand and she squeezed it, smiling.

He dropped his head and left his room. She waited until she heard the voices fading into the kitchen to grab his phone.

“Hey, Ky, what’s up?” Poe’s voice was sleepy, but he answered after three rings.

“It’s Rey,” she said, keeping her voice quiet.

“Hey sweet pea, how was your grandma’s?”

“It was good. Is Kylo mad at you?” She felt dumb asking it, but Kylo’s lies from before wouldn’t leave her.

“Don’t think he is. I was bugging him about Paige and how she likes him but won’t say it. How Liza is a total bitch for not leaving him alone. He got quiet so I stopped. Nothing big. No fights. He seemed, like, happy when I left. It’s nice to see him like that, you know?” Poe was sitting up and seemed to have left the room to go outside. She could hear the sound of wind chimes and tried to put herself there. It was easier to talk on the phone if she knew where a person was. “Do you think he’s worried that I won’t be his friend anymore after the next road trip? Is that why he’s… whatever… sad?”

Boys didn’t like talking about feelings. But Kylo and Poe were all about feelings.

“What do you mean?” If there hadn’t been an argument, then Kylo had gone into fantasy, building up something that wasn’t really there. It was like Snoke’s shadow in the hallways at school; no one else could see it, but it was still real to her. Kylo’s fantasies were true to him too.

“He’s probably worried that we won’t be friends anymore after the next road trip. He should go to state and probably will but there’s no way I’m getting to state.” Poe said, and she could hear the grin in his voice.

“Why not?” She was smiling at the phone, comfortable in Kylo’s with nothing but the contact and the conversation. “You’re good too, right?”

He laughed. “Nope. I’m fucking awful.”

“I think he… made up something bad in his head. It made him sad.” She knew that Kylo wouldn’t talk forever downstairs. She had to be quicker.

“Okay, yeah. I’ll… look I’ve got work all this week to even have enough money to go on this trip. Make sure he knows I’m not ditching him on purpose or anything.” She thought Poe could hear the panic in her voice, despite how she tried to hold it back. “Tell him goodnight for me, okay?”
“Okay. Bye.”

She hung up and put the phone back where it was.

She heard the shower running shortly after.

So she quickly went downstairs to see how mom and dad were doing.

She already knew they’d let her miss school the next day.

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Poe was supposed to come over for dinner the night before leaving for the tournament.

He was late.

The hours dragged on and on and Rey was tired of everyone else waiting like he wasn’t coming.

Kylo had been pacing around, glaring at the walls, until he finally met her eyes and he nodded and knew that he should put his energy into something else.

She knew he’d be there. When she heard his shoes on the porch, she ran to meet him at the back door. Kylo was already up in his room, writing in his journal instead of impatiently scowling at everything. He was more or less back to normal now, the maelstrom of Sunday forgotten. Monday had been a quiet day spent on the couch, eating snacks and not doing anything. Mom and dad took the day off work, but stayed away unless they needed something. There was no feelings chart. There were no long conversations. They were just a family.

“This is the good door,” she smiled. “This door is for our real friends.”

He dipped his head and stepped inside. “Yeah, Ky told me. Hey, I forgot my backpack. We’ll need to get it tomorrow morning. I’ve got all my stuff there…and I forgot it. Like a fucking dumbass.”

Rey was used to hearing Kylo sound sad and angry at himself, but most other people kept their pain from her. Not Poe, though. Normally, he would drown it out by talking too much. He gave so much away in his silences. He was sitting in their back entrance; he’d flopped down and closed the door behind him with his foot. Lumpy came down to investigate, and was looking down at them from the kitchen. Poe was touching his arms, looking like it had been too cold to be without a jacket. With a firm frown, Rey shook her head. They weren’t her real mom and dad, but mom and dad still made sure that she went anywhere with what she needed. She grabbed one of Han’s old fleeces from the hook and handed it to him. It wasn’t the one he used to walk the dog on cold mornings, but the one that he’d promised to give away to charity but never did.

“We have too much,” she said. “It’s okay.”

“No, I…” Poe started and then stopped. He looked smaller, more like another kid, as they sat in the back entrance. He still pulled on the oversized sweater and then frowned. “Is he mad?”

Rey matched his look. “Why would he be mad?” They’d talked about this. Kylo was looking forward to going away.

She reached for Poe’s hand, forcing him from the floor and into the light of the kitchen. He gave
Lumpy a nice and thorough pet and greeting. That’s when Rey noticed the bruise under Poe’s eye. It was small and would fade quickly, but it was still there; it looked like everything that she’d seen before on her own body. The tiny marks that other people thought they could hide on others. The echoes of death drew her down as she watched him move, suddenly worried about what he could and couldn’t do. It was making her body hurt with thoughts. He was taller and she couldn’t take care of him.

Rey opened the fridge to distract herself. “Your plate is here, we saved it for you.”

“Thanks, sweet pea, I’m….” he trailed off. He looked around the empty kitchen and bit his lip. “Hey, why are you guys so nice to me?”

She smirked and shrugged. “Kylo is your best friend. I want to help him stay that way.”

Poe had to help her put the plate in the microwave and waited patiently as her hands, which were still too tiny and weak, to grate more cheese on top once it was warm.

He was Kylo’s best friend. She had to take care of him, no matter how small she was.

He ate with only a fork, which was weird to Rey since he always ate normally at dinners before, as a slow stream of adults filled their space: which was even weirder, since there were only two of them. They were pretending not to listen, but they were. Han came down first, mumbling something about resetting the Wi-Fi because nothing was working like it should. He only looked at Poe and nodded before fiddling with the small white box at the top of the pantry. Leia trailed after him when he started swearing at the modem. Poe could only look at her and grin as he ate the last of his lasagne.

Leaning her head against her hand, she smiled. He looked so happy to be there, despite her fake-but-still-real parents bickering in the background, down the steps towards the basement where the other box was. She knew how to fix it but didn’t say anything. Kylo had already said that it shouldn’t be there.

“I helped make it.” Rey felt like she was boasting, but she wasn’t. “I cut the onions and fried them. And then I did the hamburger meat and put in the spices. We followed all the steps. It goes sauce, cheese, then the noodles, then the meat. I might have messed up some of the layers, but everybody said it was good. Even Kylo.”

“It’s good. Do you like cooking?” He looked tired and the usual smile in his voice was hidden behind a wall that she’d only rarely felt from him before.

When he’d finished, he reached out to her and she took his hand maybe too quickly. He hadn’t even asked for something to drink. And they had milk.

“He’s writing something,” Rey said, trying to make it not sound like an excuse. “He’s been…he was waiting for you but couldn’t wait anymore.”

Poe looked from his empty plate back to her. “I get it, yeah. He’s probably worried about tomorrow too. He’ll do good. I’m going to fucking suck, like always.”

His head snapped up as Leia climbed the stairs from the basement. “You can swear, sweetheart. And you’re probably not as awful as you think.”

“No, I’m really bad. I’d quit if I could, but then Ky would think it’s something personal and not talk to me for a month.” Poe was smiling but Rey knew that it wasn’t a real joke.
Leia shook her head and took his plate. Rey jolted, realizing that it was something she should have done. But Leia just shook her head and put the empty dish and fork in the dishwasher. “He lets you call him that?”

Poe shrugged. “He doesn’t argue about it. I guess.”

Finally, she heard Kylo’s feet on the stairs. He looked at them both and his reaction was clear to her but probably hidden for everyone else. He was both pleased that his friend was there, but also satisfied that he had been able to wait without bothering anyone. Not saying anything, he sat down beside her and nodded, mostly to himself.

“You didn’t have to walk here,” he said at last.

Poe tried to shrug off the comment, especially with Leia standing there. “Nah, I took the bus most of the way. It’s really fine, Mrs Solo. You feed me and let me hang out here. He’s worried about nothing.”

Rey knew why it bothered Kylo so much. Going anywhere, meeting strangers along the way, was something he didn’t want anyone to do alone. He thought he was fine on his own and he could defend himself now. Others who were smaller or weaker, however, he’d focus on how many things could go wrong. The first time that she took Lumpy for a walk on her own, he looked at her with quiet betrayal that she put herself in any sort of danger. It was just to the corner and back. And she knew that mom was watching her the entire time. It was like Kylo didn’t trust anyone but himself, still.

And it was frustrating.

But she could deal with it. For him.
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Author's note: READ THE CHAPTER NOTES FOR WARNINGS.

Chapter Notes

Thanks everyone for the comments and kudos so far. This chapter has given me anxiety about posting it. Again, check the End Notes for the warnings (since they're a bit spoilery, I put them at the end).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kylo wasn’t mad about losing. He could deal with that. It was the bitter atmosphere in the van that made him seethe. He’d pushed those negative emotions out of his head in between this trip and the last; there had been so much that had happened in between and now it meant nothing. He’d lost and everyone was disappointed in him. The season was over and he’d been dominated, getting bad draw after bad draw, hardly scoring points and getting pinned because he wasn’t focused. Getting to the hotel, he didn’t even wait for the others. Storming off, he kicked hard at a crushed coke can across the parking lot. He was lucky even to be allowed on the trip after what happened at school, but he might as well hadn’t gone at all.

Taking angry and deep breaths, he looked up at the sky and swore to himself. The others were watching him but he did not care. They were the problem for never listening to him.

He heard shuffling feet and turned to see Poe, holding both of their bags. He could go from looking cocky to pouting in an instant. During the last few weeks, his first impressions had been inverted, but they still remained in the back of his mind like a reminder of how people treated him in the beginning. He probably cared too much. In his heated anger, he thought that he should just stop caring about him once and for all. To stop coming by his house and being around him, since he was such a loser who couldn’t do anything that made him into a real person. He caught a glimpse of the rest of the team glaring at him in the distance and snorted.

“You can go for a walk. Coach says it’s okay.” His expression showed concern and he knew that his friend was worried about him. Still, he wouldn’t say it when others—especially the team—could hear it. “We’re in room 204. In case you forgot or something from yesterday.”

Poe looked at him for long enough to make him take a warning step forward. Finally turning towards the hotel, Kylo waited until he was inside before sitting down on the low concrete traffic barrier. The chill of the late April evening started to settle against his bare arms and he shuddered. Normally, being alone was enough to calm him down. He would be able to think clearly, going over why everyone was wrong. Most often, he’d call Rey. He checked his phone and his annoyance spiked at the time. Leia wouldn’t let her talk this late. There was always someone in his way. Even if she didn’t have school the next day, there would be some dumb thing they were
forcing her to do. They were still trying to get her to decide whether she liked gymnastics or
dancing. She liked both and didn’t see why she couldn’t do both. His parents didn’t understand that
Rey wanted to do everything.

He heard the gravel rustle and quickly looked up. It was just a man standing outside the hotel,
smoking.

Poe had worn him down. He actually missed him and his never-ending chatter. Poe, being over
excited over an easy win. Poe, trying to cheer him up when he wanted to feel empty. Poe, who
wouldn’t bug him to eat, but would instead steal his food until he was forced to do something about
it.

Stamping his foot in the dirt, he forced himself to stand.

God damn him.

He had to knock on the door and was forced to wait five minutes before Poe answered. He had a
towel on his head.

“I’m sorry, I was in the shower. Do you have my room service?”

“Shut the fuck up,” he countered, pushing by him. He sat down heavily on his bed, taking off his
shoes and tossing them into the corner. Poe was busy rehanging the towel, still chuckling to himself
about his joke.

“It wasn’t your fault, you know. You got a bad draw, a couple of them,” Poe said, scratching his
head. “And it's also not your fault that our school sucks so hard.”

“I don’t hate school. I hate the people there.” He settled against the headboard of the hard hotel
bed. It wasn’t anything that he hadn’t heard before. Poe sat next to him and pursed his lips and
then nodded a little. The television looked dusty, showing their distorted reflection back at him.

He was starting to regret coming back at all if Poe was just going to try to cheer him up the entire
time. Instead, his companion fell quiet. It was easier to accept how close he was sitting if he was
silent. There was no quick quip or annoying response. He let him have his silence.

And he wasn’t alone in it.

They’d had these moments before. He shouldn’t be surprised by them anymore, but his mind was
too full to find familiarity in its clear form. But this was the last road trip of the season with state
now out of sight. They were friends now, but Kylo was expecting the trust that he’d put in him to
evaporate with the season over. Promises could be broken and they probably would.

Rey was right. This had why he had been thrown into rage. This was probably going to end tonight
and it had been building in his mind since then.

Exhaling, Poe pulled his legs up and settled his chin on his knees. He was shorter and always tried
to make up for it by taking on larger kids. That explained the fight with Bryce. Kylo was
embracing being taller than most of the other boys at school, even the seniors. It was just
aggravating not being stronger than most of them.

“I wish we were in more of the same classes. But hey, things got better after you beat the shit out of
that guy.” He grinned and then it faded away. “It still sucks that you got detention and he got
nothing.”
“He got a broken nose,” he said. “And I’ll break it again.”

Thinking again about taking on the older boy, Kylo felt a spike of dark pride. He was careful to pick his battles and that had been one that he had taken on fully, accepting the consequences. The truth was still making his neck itch. After the constant fights and scuffles when he started school again almost two years ago, most of them caused by his misunderstanding something or the need to quell his constant craving for aggression, the school finally comprehended that he didn’t react to having privileges taken away. Holdo instead had made him write out and describe the events, rewriting them until he could fully explain the emotions behind them. He’d sit in her office, going over the texts until he felt calm. Since then, instead of starting a fight, he mostly stuck to writing out elaborate scenarios from both his perspective, and whoever had angered him. The wrestling team helped even more.

He only made a few exceptions. That asshole had been one of them. Poe had gotten himself into that mess but there was no way, as long as he was breathing, that one of his friends was going to be hurt. Rey understood that and her caring had made it easier to wait to get his car and freedom again. And then he screwed it all up by not being able to deal with his apprehensive fear. Taking a quick glance, he caught Poe’s eyes. There had been so much writing and it was only when he stopped that the thoughts got stuck in his head.

He didn’t tell Poe that he had also started a new notebook. About him.

“Everyone says that you’re hard to talk to, but they’re totally wrong. I mean, at first, I didn’t think I’d get you to talk to me, but now I’m glad I did. You talk when you need to. You don’t just talk to hear yourself speak.” Poe was looking at him intently, like he was disclosing something that he didn’t already know.

“You mean I’m not like you,” he answered flatly, before smirking.

“You’re an asshole, fuck you.” Poe shoved him, grinning wildly. “Are you...are you going to go to that spring dance thing? We can hang out instead if you’re not going.”

He rolled his eyes. Poe was just like him, asking questions that he already knew the answers to. Still, he gave into it. “Liza keeps asking me. I told her that I’d go only if I could go with Paige and she went with someone else. You take Liza if you want. Hux would hate it.”

Just saying his former friend’s name made him shudder as he tried to block the pang of emotion from fully coming through.

“But you wouldn’t care?” Poe answered. “I mean, she’s cute. Not my type, but cute. Still a total bitch to you and me, so she’ll just say no and do that nose thing she does. The pig nose.”

He almost laughed at the impression. But he kept his face neutral, only briefly closing his eyes.

“You’re around her enough. She keeps trying to touch me even though she knows I hate it.” He lifted his shoulders. “She wants to be my girlfriend. She doesn’t ask about it anymore, but she talks to Paige about it. Paige feels bad and tells me. I try not to think about it.”

“You don’t like her?”

They’d had this conversation before. The one that made him shut down. He wanted to keep talking this time, to not hold back. The last week had been climbing over humps in his head, to understand when he should and shouldn’t give into other people’s concerns. Rey was right.

“She’s an okay friend, I guess. A half friend. She...sometimes she talks too much but when she
actually listens, it’s something I like. She’s always happy in the morning, happy to see me. Since Hux ditched me, she’s usually the first person to meet me at school. Well, before I started hanging out with you. But I know what she’s doing. So it’s easier to keep saying I don’t want a girlfriend. I’d rather be alone, but my parents and Rey would be worried. Rey is friends with Paige’s sister. We hang out more with them and Liza is just…there. It’s gotten easier to avoid her since we became friends.”

Poe put his head down for a moment, then stretched out his legs. There was another hole in one of his socks. Poe caught him looking and quickly pulled off the offending articles of clothing and tossed them aside. He wiggled his toes for a moment, taunting him. His smile slowly faded, however, and he looked at him quickly before turning away.

“Why would you stay friends with her if she kissed you without asking? Without giving you the chance to say no, back off. This has been bothering me for a while,” Poe’s voice turned bitter, his eyes fixed on the opposite wall. “I would have ditched her after that. So hard. I might have even spread nasty rumours about her too and then felt bad about doing it. She stole something from you and wanted to get into your pants and wouldn’t even let you say no.”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head. “It was just something that happened. I’m not as mad anymore.”

“But you’re still mad?”

He let his head drop. “You saw me tonight. You know what happened last week. I’m mad about everything.”

“You’re not…I mean, yeah I guess you are. But it’s not your fault. I don’t want to repeat myself, but I’m so right about this. What happened to you was fucked up, especially if you can’t really talk to anyone about it. And Hux’s dad is wrong. It was that crazy fucker who was a psycho. You’re just…I don’t know. It’s like you were spit out of a volcano and are still cooling off.” Poe’s eyes were darting around as he spoke, but finally fixed on his bare feet. “My dad just thinks you’re weird.”

“My dad…I finally made him happy when he taught me how to drive. Getting my license was the first real thing we could do together. I could have got a better car, if I had wanted one.” He sighed, remembering the look on Han’s face every time they were out in the car. He wasn’t really teaching him. He was just desperate to spend time with him. “Driving with him was…nice. And I didn’t even thank him.”

“Maybe your dad can teach me. My old man isn’t doing shit to help me.” Poe was still staring at his feet, his head lowered. “My mom keeps threatening to divorce him, every time he unloads on her or me. She packs a bag and leaves for a week, but always comes back. And I have to go to school with a busted lip and act like it never happened. No matter what I do, I’m a fuck up in his eyes.”

Wincing, Kylo nodded. “Is that why he made you change schools?”

Poe shrugged, but then finally shook his head in agreement. He leaned closer, brushing his shoulder, then pulled away. He was acting normal tonight, but for Poe normal meant weird. “He didn’t like the people I was hanging out with. That and rent was ‘too fucking expensive’ at our old place. Now we just live in a cheaper, shittier dump. He never throws anything out. I think we have like fourteen broken vacuum cleaners in the garage. Why did he fucking bring those? I had to throw out a bunch of my shit and he brought the fucking vacuum cleaners.”
Poe was trying to make a joke, but he couldn’t let the moment escape him. His eyes had been too quick in the shower earlier and he couldn’t forget the pain that was clearly inflicted on his friend from someone older and stronger. Vengeance was all that Kylo wanted. He could never have it fully, but for someone else then maybe he could find an end.

“I’ve seen the bruises,” Kylo said, killing the long pause that had filled the room. The lights were buzzing, but Kylo could only hear how they were breathing. The lingering mark under Poe’s eye had made him nervous the entire time they’d been together. He finally sucked in another breath to speak, even though he was unsure of what to say. “Was that him?”

A rising anger had taken hold of him then, remembering how Poe had moved gingerly and at half-speed during practice weeks ago, then stepped off the mat entirely. He claimed he hurt his ankle. But he’d been hurt again. Taking the bus to his house and forgetting his things just made the thoughts lock into place.

“He got pissed when your mom called a while ago and he realized that he’d have to stop wailing on my face. Still doesn’t stop him, and he forgets when he’s drunk. When he’s not, well…Stupid fucker doesn’t think that anyone will see me without my shirt on.” Poe suddenly laughed, then let his head sag back against the headboard. “Did you…see anything else?”

He raised an eyebrow in response. But his eyes had caught it, even if his mind hadn’t.

Slowly, the other boy lifted his shirt. The newer bruises had faded to a sickly green, but they were still there. Kylo had to lean forward to see what Poe was pointing at, but then he saw them. Fine and neat white lines traced along the side of his chest, along his ribs.

With a grim look on his face, Poe dropped his shirt. “I thought no one would notice them if I did it there. It sucks at the beach, but I just tell anyone that asks that it was a cat. I don’t even have a cat. Yeah, um…” There was a long pause as Poe fiddled with the hem of his shirt. There was a pain there that Kylo had only caught glimpses of before. If he hadn’t been so focused on his own docked agony, he might have been more aware. “Things got…bad for a while.”

Tracing the leather bracelet on his left hand, Kylo nodded. It was the one he’d received for his birthday, the one from Poe. Silently, he undid the clasp. His hands were trembling as he lifted his wrist. The newest cut was still scabbing over, but it matched the other dozen scars that stained his skin. This one had been deeper though, less diagonal and more…proper.

He’d promised himself never to do it at home, and he’d breached that perimeter with too much ease. It was something he could do again. Something that he wanted to do again, desperately. Now, stuck in this room, he wanted to flee into his misery, pressed on by revealing something he didn’t want to tell anyone, but still did.

He let his hand drop and moved to return his wrist to the comfort of the band. Poe’s hand stopped him.

“I want…I mean…maybe we can be the type of friends that talk about this stuff more often. We already do, but maybe more? I never told you before but I…I’m afraid too, about how I think.” His hand was warm, even though it was only a light touch.

Managing a nod, Kylo bit his lip. He could talk to Rey, she understood. But he was realizing that everything that was happening in his head was too much for her. He never wanted her to stop talking to him. He didn’t want to scare her either. He would always tell Hux the essence of his feelings and memories; but towards the end of their friendship, he pulled back even more. His other friends liked to pretend that nothing happened so they wouldn’t have to deal with it. Paige tried her
best, but her strategy was to try to tell him what normal thoughts should be and how to get there. The therapists would try to get him to open up, but he was exhausted from the constant tricks.

There was space for him here.

“I think I’d like that.” He wasn’t sure he said the words, but they came out anyway.

“Really?” Poe quirked his mouth into a grin. “That’s greatness.”

“Not really. Not for you.” He managed to half smile in return, stealing some of Poe’s energy for his own. “You’ve heard my nightmares.”

“Yeah, I think you kicked me once,” Poe teased.

Kylo looked at him flatly. “You were on the other bed. I can’t kick that far.”

“You have really long legs! I swear. Or maybe I was walking by the bed. When I go for my night walks. The ones where I walk around the room and watch you sleeping.” Poe was smiling at him, the pain pushed away for now.

Shoving his friend, Kylo finally laughed. “If you were watching me sleep, you deserved to get kicked.”

Poe sat up on his knees to face him and pushed him back. “I have to watch you sleep so I can avoid getting kicked.”

Despite how annoying the joke was, Kylo returned Poe’s grin with one of his own. He would have been totally exhausted if the quiet moments of the evening hadn’t snuck up on them. There would always be the fear of rejection and hurt keeping him from fully giving away his soul, but he could start here now, truly. The silence stretched on and he closed his eyes, finally glad that the screams now only haunted his dreams.

He felt Poe rest his hand on his shoulder and he opened his eyes, giving him a look of irritation. Poe licked his lips and flicked his eyes from his hand to his lips, then finally his eyes. He slowly pulled his hand away and sat up, but was still inching closer.

There was a nervous energy in his gaze that made him uneasy, but still curious. His friend’s brown eyes were warm but were also searching for a reaction. He leaned forward, putting a warm hand on his leg. Kylo couldn’t feel his own heartbeat; the steady thudding in his chest came directly from the palm resting on his thigh. The encounter with Liza flashed in his mind, keeping him locked in place as Poe gradually leaned forward. With his face only a breath away, he paused, waiting for him to pull away or hit him.

He didn’t.

“Can I….okay.” Poe whispered, then closed the gap between them to press their lips together.

It was a light kiss and he hardly felt the pressure. There was just the delicate and warm sensation of lips and the lingering scent of Poe’s cologne. His lips were still soft and a curl of hair brushed his forehead. Kylo felt Poe’s hand tighten against his leg, making him sit up and inhale through his nose. The noise made Poe lean back, instantly taking on a mask of anxiety.

“Was that…weird?”

It was a stupid question. But instead of saying anything, he reached out and pulled Poe back
towards him, kissing him again. Kylo pressed hard, mashing their mouths together and yanking Poe closer to grip his back. But the warmth of the awkward kisses cracked memories that he had wanted to keep locked away. The physical contact made him actually react. He’d never thought that much about sex for a reason that he wanted to keep from his waking mind; it was an annoying background noise that the other boys were obsessed with. Them and Liza. But now, kissing Poe, his body was lifted into something akin to joy. He felt the other boy’s mouth open and he dipped his tongue inside. The sensation hit him instantly and he groaned, letting a need that he’d never felt before grip him.

Poe jerked back. “Is this…okay?”

The feeling was fleeting, broken by the question.

“Shut up,” he snapped, before shoving the other boy away. He put his head in his hands and pressed on his eyes, trying to will the warmth spreading up his body to stop. Poe scrambled away to the other side of the room. When Kylo looked up, he saw tears shining in the other boy’s expressive eyes.

“I didn’t mean…shit…I thought…” he rambled, glancing quickly at the door, knowing that he needed to run. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

Kylo moved off the bed and Poe tensed, backing into a corner. His hands were up defensively as Kylo moved closer.

He knew he looked angry because the feeling was the easiest thing to latch on to. Anger and fear. Anything that felt that good could never end the way that he wanted. He’d miss something or misunderstand something. He should hit Poe. He should scream at him never to come close to him again. To fuck off and die. He wanted to admonish him for opening the locked box of feelings he’d kept hidden away in the back of his mind. Sex was only punishment and it shouldn’t bring out any positive reactions. This was just the way that it had to be.

But the dejected look that rolled over Poe’s face made him lower his raised fist.

Maybe there was another way.

“Can I…” The question trailed off from Kylo’s weak mouth and he bit his lip, hard. As gently as he could, he reached out to brush his hand against Poe’s.

“What? Beat the shit out of me for being a queer?” Poe was frozen, turning to words to try to defend himself. He looked down at Kylo’s hand and then met his eyes again, bewilderment overtaking dread.

“No.” This time he took Poe’s hand and squeezed it lightly. It was a different feeling than training. There was a softness there now, one that took away his focus. He leaned closer, breathing in to try to get back to his thoughts.

“What’s…what are you doing?” Poe’s voice was confused and there were still edges of hurt and fear there.

He had only rotten instinct at that point. He so rarely trusted his body in situations that he didn’t control. His arms he could trust, his legs he could depend on; but the rest was a space in between. His body was the thing that could be broken, but would heal in all the wrong places. Snoke had taught him that. His mind was the thing that could never be beaten, but it couldn’t be trusted either. But the ultimate betrayer right now was his body.
Taking Poe’s hand, he set it on his hip. He kept his unsteady hand there and with both terror and want, he stepped closer.

Poe lifted his other hand. It was also shaking, but firmed as he rested it on his cheek. Kylo leaned into the touch, too afraid to turn away but also not knowing what to do next.

“I don’t know what’s happening,” he finally said. He was looking into Poe’s eyes and saw the same hint of hazel that swept through Rey’s.

He didn’t know which was more wrong, but he leaned down to press his lips against his friend’s and pulled him closer, suddenly aching for the contact that part of him also wanted to flee. He tried to deepen the kiss again, searching for the same sensation as before. It didn’t take him long to find it, elevated by the connection. Poe ran his hands through his hair. His short nails grazed against his scalp. He’d never realized that touches could mean more than just care or hate. The third emotion was making him hard, a feeling that normally caused him dread, but Poe’s tongue was in his mouth and he felt a hand caress the front of his jeans.

That made him pull back, sucking in a dull gasp.

“Shit, sorry,” Poe’s shaky hand again settled on his waist. “Tell me what to do. Just…tell me. Tell me what I did wrong so I can make it better.”

Kylo could only shake his head and motion towards the bed.

Licking his lips, his friend nodded, his eyes darting back and forth. “Yeah, yeah, okay.”

Poe guided him towards the bed, even though his legs felt too stubborn to move. He let himself be dumbly dragged to his bed. He sat on the edge and Poe, also not wanting to give up the contact, clasped his hand.

“Look, Ky, I really like you. I should have told you that before I did anything. I’m sorry, I fucked that up. I know you and I know…just shit. I’m so sorry. You don’t know how much I like you. I don’t have words for it. They just come out all jumbled. And I just kissed you and…” Poe took a deep breath when Kylo squeezed his hand, trying to tell him to calm down. “Do you like me back?”

He didn’t want the pause to drag on too long, but his thoughts weren’t coming into place. The room was louder now and he could hear Poe’s breathing over his own. The light was buzzing. Someone opened a door in the hallway and then slammed it shut. He couldn’t think over the noise. Still, in his confusion, his body was still humming. Torn between his two halves, he just put his head on Poe’s shoulder.

“Sorry, I was selfish. Are you okay?” Poe said as he rested his head against his in return. He dropped his voice into a whisper. They were alone, but the gentle tone of the other voice made him relax. It was only a fraction of his anxiety, but it was enough to get words out of his mouth.

“Why would you like me?” He sounded pathetic. He sounded needy, like Rey when she was tired and upset with him. Poe had delicate curls and a sweet smile. Meanwhile, he had awkward ears and a mop of hair, moles and scars. He was pale to the other boy’s natural toned skin. Poe was handsome. He was just tall and awkward, but most of all damaged. There was nothing perfect about him. But holding Poe’s hand and the feeling of his leg against his made him feel an inch above nothing. Poe wasn’t fragile like Rey. He didn’t have to worry about hurting him. He tried to tell himself that as the other boy started to speak.
“It’s actually easy. You’re smart, you’re funny. When you smile, I mean, I can count how many times you’ve really smiled the last month on two hands, but when you do…I can’t stop thinking about you. The rest of the day, I’m lost. Cold-shower lost.” Poe paused, prying their hands apart, only to reach around to drape his arm around his back. He pulled him closer before pressing a light kiss on his forehead. This must be how Rey felt every night. There was someone who cared for him, holding and caring for him.

He pushed down his rising anger at himself and shook his head. “How can you feel that way? About me?”

“I just do, Ky.” Poe hugged him closer. “I just do.”

Poe had to know. The locked box had been opened and he couldn’t close it again without releasing some of the toxic memories inside.

“You can’t like me,” he finally said, pulling away, refusing to let the words spill out. He wanted to stand from the bed but Poe held firm, forcing him to sit down. Glaring at him, Kylo only saw acceptance when he sat back down. “You don’t know what happened to me. Most of those things in the book and the documentaries were wrong because they didn’t go far enough. I’m too fucked up. You need to stop liking me. I’m telling you, right now, just stop it.”

“Tell me.” Poe looked at him defiantly. “I’m here. And I want to know. Ky, I won’t judge you. I just want to know what happened. You can’t just keep all of this in your head forever and come out the other side being normal.”

The word made him drop his head. That was all he wanted at this point. But it was something that he could never be.

Carefully, Poe leaned forward to kiss him again. Like the first time, it was warm and enticing. But, most of all, gentle.

Pulling away, Poe gestured towards the bed. Kylo hesitated before crawling up beside him. Resting his head against the younger boy’s chest, Kylo just shook his head. Their legs were mismatched in length when Kylo sought out somewhere else to look. He should have also said how awkward he was and how they didn’t match physically. But then he realized he was just trying to distract himself. There was someone here who wanted to listen, who might be able to understand—someone who wasn’t six years old who he didn’t want to destroy with the darkness inside him.

“I don’t want anyone to know.”

Poe hugged him. It was a gesture that he had avoided for so long, but now accepted. “Well, I’m not just anyone.”

Sucking in a dry breath, Kylo set his head down and started talking in a low voice. “I was seven when he took me. I didn’t know what was happening. It was exciting at first, like running away. It was something I always thought about. You know, just leaving everything that’s annoying you and everyone who’s ignoring you? Then he killed someone right in front of me. I knew what death was, but I didn’t think that it was real. This wasn’t like a movie. The boy who died, he was bleeding and crying and he did it to save me. I didn’t want to be there anymore, locked in that weird house. But I couldn’t get away. I never thought that a room could make you afraid before. I was just a kid and I knew he wanted to kill me. But he wanted something else too.” He was determined to say everything without stopping, and he had to fight through the cracks in his voice. He couldn’t cry. Poe couldn’t see him cry. “There was still a dying body on the floor. It smelled like…like dry leaves. I could feel the other kids watching me. They weren’t crying. I couldn’t figure out why
they weren’t afraid too. He had made me stab him. He put the knife in my hand and he was still warm. It was so...soft. Smooth. He was so...warm. His eyes were open. He was watching me stab him.

“Then I remember footsteps. And he closed the door to the upstairs. There were so many doors and all of them were awful, but just not broken enough. The other kids had run away. Snoke…I wasn’t afraid of him until I really looked at him. The other kids hadn’t been crying so I thought still, like a moron, that all of it could have been something fake and not real. But then I looked at him and realized I would never get out of there alive. His teeth were rotten. It was like he didn’t have lips and his skin was melted. I can still see every wrinkle, every line, when I close my eyes. When he looked at me, I couldn’t move. I had the knife and I didn’t do anything. I hate myself for not stabbing him. I hate myself for what I let him do to me. I was still wearing my baseball uniform. I remember the way his hands felt when he touched my arm…”

His own words faded away into the darkness that he had tried to keep buried. Snoke had stroked his arm and he felt the tattered scratch of a hangnail trail down his skin again. The touch quickly turned to a harsh hand, gripping his arm. Under the bruising pressure, he couldn’t pull away. His lungs weren’t working and his legs were frozen. His hand was stiff and the knife clattered to the floor when Snoke tossed him onto the rotten sofa against the wall. The springs squeaked and poked at his body, jabbing him in the back. There was dust hanging in the air, only visible between the gaps in the slats that blocked the windows. He was on the sofa and Snoke pressed his knee down on his chest. You’re a stupid boy. And now you will learn how stupid you really are. The words couldn’t even make him scream. The pressure on his chest stopped him from breathing. Snoke’s hands ripped open his shirt and he could gulp down air when the old man finally stepped off him. He remembered gasping no when he reached for his pants.

He was in the wasteland of his mind when the now, the reality, shook him. Poe was holding him. Poe had kissed him. And now he was resting his face against his friend’s soaking wet t-shirt.

“You can keep going.” Poe’s voice echoed through his memory, lifting him out of the nightmare of Snoke’s hands on his body. “You can also stop. It’s up to you. But I want you to keep going. I care about you so much. I’m listening, really. I’m here.”

He blinked hard, willing the hotel room to come into his vision. He never wanted to return to that couch. But Poe had taken him there and then brought him back.

“He raped me. He wanted me to scream and cry, to hold me down as he shoved his fingers inside me. I was bleeding, I felt it. There was blood all over my legs and he didn’t stop. Every time he moved, he’d hiss and drool, dragging his hands all over my body. Every finger felt different and I could count every new scratch. I didn’t even fight him. I let it happen. I could have bit him. I could have kicked him. But I didn’t do anything. He made me look at him. My blood was on his hands and shoved his fingers in my mouth until I gagged and fucking looked at him. He was hard and I had no idea what that even looked like then. It looked like a monster coming out of his body. And he…held me down. And raped me and I never thought it would stop. The way it kept going made it slow down time and I was trapped there, only living in that place forever. There was nothing that happened before and nothing would ever happen but that. He was holding my throat and was inside me. Nothing ever hurt like that before. It burnt. My legs wouldn’t work. It felt like my guts were falling out as he was fucking me. I could smell his breath and his…come…when he bit my mouth. I was just seven. That’s not supposed to happen.” He sobbed, his stubbornness finally broken from only shedding silent tears. “And when I looked away, I could only see a boy who had died for me.”

He was waiting for Poe to push him away, to scream at him for being dirty and weak, but instead he pulled him closer. The tears came warm and heavy then and he wept, feeling Poe’s sobs join his
“That’s why you can’t like me,” he mumbled. “I’m useless and disgusting. There’s nothing good in me because no matter what I do, I let him fuck me.”

“Kylo, no. Fucking no.” Poe’s hand was soft as it rested against his cheek. He forced him to meet his eyes. “You said it yourself. You were seven. You had just watched him kill someone, killed a kid. You didn’t let him do anything. He hurt you. He hurt you in the worst way. None of that was your fault.”

“But I still didn’t fight back.” His voice was hardly a whisper. “I couldn’t fight back for seven years.”

“It doesn’t matter how long it takes. You still killed him. You didn’t let him kill you or Rey. You got her out. You got yourself out. You survived.” Poe took his hand and brought it to his lips, pressing a light kiss on the tips of his fingers. “And now you’ve told me. I can be there to help you. I know people you can talk to. They’re not doctors, but you can talk to them. You’re not alone anymore. I really promise, Kylo, I still like you.”

Kylo had closed his eyes, still being drawn back into his mind. At the final words, he looked at Poe again. “Why.”

“A person doesn’t have to be perfect for you to like them,” Poe answered in an instant. “And I’m not trying to fix you or trick you or whatever you’re thinking right now. I just want to get you a couple of notches closer to normal. You know, like you want.”

Rey’s arms weren’t as strong as Poe’s, but her hugs were sweeter. Still, he leaned into the other boy’s embrace and felt safe. Letting out a long sigh, one that came from his toes and left his mouth, he wanted to shake his head. Instead, he leaned closer and kissed him. The salt from their tears tainted the kiss. He tried to push it away, reaching again for the warmth of intimacy to overtake the emptiness that had swept over him at his confession.

After returning the kiss, Poe pulled away, resting his forehead against his. “Let’s go to bed, okay? We can talk tomorrow after we get home. I think you’re done talking right now, right?”

He nodded and felt his companion give him a parting kiss before leaving the bed. Not wanting to move, he curled up against a pillow and studied the wall. The wallpaper was peeling in the corner. The pattern was faded and didn’t line up. He finally found a seam along the wall and watched it start to grow before his eyes, spreading out to swallow the room. Longing to dive into the abyss, his trance was only broken when he felt a toothbrush shoved into his hand.

Poe made him get up. He felt like Rey when she was having an empty day. He was guided in his motions to finish the night. Brushing his teeth, washing his face. Poe even ran a comb roughly through his tousled hair. He wouldn’t even let his mother do this for him. Managing to smile at him, he avoided the mirror as he wandered back into their room.

He silently stripped down to his boxers and turned off the light.
Climbing into bed beside a warm body that was much closer to his own size, but still small enough to make him feel secure, he hoped that sleep would come easily that night.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for graphic depiction of a past rape and...

...teenage boys kissing.

byeeeee.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Rey and Ben are both conflicted about the change in Poe and Ben’s relationship.

Read the tags and the warnings at the end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Rey woke up when she heard the back door open. It always sounded a little clearer than the front door. It also meant someone who wasn’t a stranger was coming in the house. She’d figured that out long ago. Kylo had told her to go to sleep when he’d called earlier from the road that they’d be late, and she listened when her body had started to make her cry out of frustration. She was so glad that this was the last weekend that Kylo would be away. He didn’t sound disappointed about state; he just started talking about next season. He asked her about how dance practice was. She said that she didn’t want dance to end because she had so many friends there. But then he had to go and she focused on how it meant he would be home soon.

Her hands felt weak as she pushed herself out of bed and tried to make her sleepy legs work as she made her way towards the bedroom door and then out towards the stairs down to the kitchen.

Instead of just one voice talking to mom and dad, there were two.

Poe was there with Kylo. He was leaning against the fridge, with his arms folded, retelling something from their weekend away from her. Kylo had his back to her, sitting at the table, looking bored. She could tell by his shoulders.

“…he was doing really well too. The other guy probably cheated.”

She was yawning at the top of the stairs, looking down at them. The way down to the kitchen suddenly seemed bigger, like it grew since she’d eaten dinner. Kylo glanced up and smiled at her; it was a rare smile for anyone else, but normal for her. She tilted her head and fought back another yawn. Why was he smiling if he lost? He left the other three at the table and strode to the bottom of the stairs. She found her feet and quickly ran to him.

“Hi Rey,” he said, hugging her tightly. His arms felt better, warming her. “I missed you.”

“Where were you all night?” She asked, wanting to sleep again.

“I’m sorry. There was a problem with the car. I’m sorry it’s so late. I missed you,” he repeated. His voice was enough to wake her up. She wanted to tell him about how Finn hadn’t listened to her today in school and that their project had been ruined. Shaking her head, she pulled out from the hug and then smiled at him again.

“I missed you too,” she said. “Is Poe staying over again? Like Hux used to do?”

She must have been tired to say his name, but she also knew that Kylo missed him too. Time was mixing again as her mind rocked between before and now. It was hard to tell when bringing up
someone who was not gone, yet still gone, would make him react or not.

“Yeah. It’s too late to drive him home. His dad is…not like our dad. He doesn’t love him. And he’s my friend.” Kylo looked like he had more to say but stopped, to smirk at her. “Really, this time.”

“I already told you that.” She grinned at him then glanced up at Poe. He was talking to mom and dad, pretending that he wasn’t listening to them. “Will you be up soon?”

Kylo nodded, only after looking over his shoulder. “Really soon. And we’ll have tomorrow together.”

Rey liked the promise. She nodded and turned to climb the stairs again. It was always annoying to be caught between being asleep and awake. She didn’t see everything and she was still caught in dreams and couldn’t hear all of the words.

Back upstairs, she climbed into bed. Scratching at her eyes, she forced herself to stay awake until Kylo was ready to say goodnight. Her small nails pinched at her arm, raising the colour and sending a small jolt through her body. She wanted to hear what he had to say once his friend fell asleep. She also needed to talk to someone who wasn’t mom and dad. It had been a long weekend of feelings and the problems with teachers and other children.

Still, she was half asleep when the boys came into the room.

“How are you doing, Rey?” Poe asked. “I think it’s my fault we were late. I’m sorry, sweet pea.”

She looked up and stared at him. Her eyes were blurry as she blinked off sleep. “It’s okay. I’m sorry I couldn’t stay up.”

“Nah, this is the best time to get all the sleep that you can get. Everything gets worse when you’re bigger. There’s too much to do and not enough time to sleep,” he said, sitting on the bed. “How was your weekend while we were busy losing?”

“It was okay. I got into an argument with my friend. But I’ll figure it out,” she answered.

Kylo was by her side. She hadn’t even heard him come around to sit by her until he pulled her into his arms. He nuzzled her neck and gave her a soft kiss on the cheek. It made her sigh and feel even more like sleeping. Kylo meant home.

She didn’t really hear the knock on the door until mom spoke. “Boys? We have the sleeping bag and pillow in the closet. We can also get the extra mattress, the camping one, but it’s in the garage.”

She felt Poe stand from the bed. He was quickly apologizing and saying that it was fine and all right to Leia. He didn’t mean to come unexpectedly and they shouldn’t do so much for him. He sounded so nervous the entire time. Kylo just hugged her closer, listening and not speaking.

“I need to talk to him about being here, about some things that I’ll tell you about later,” Kylo leaned down and whispered only to her. “You can go to sleep.”

She turned her head and slowly blinked to him. You still don’t trust him?

He met her eyes. After a flash of glancing up, he looked down at her again. I want to.

She snorted a laugh and hugged him. Once her arms loosened she crawled under the covers. Sleep would feel so good right now. She could push her worries down until tomorrow and maybe solve
some of them herself. Finn just needed to wait longer when he was building something. Maybe she could teach him that. She didn’t need to hear about wrestling or boy things. Those were always things that Hux and Kylo would talk about, when Kylo was having good days. He’d stopped talking about their time with Snoke. She missed when he’d talk about real things with Hux, before he went away. Maybe they weren’t friends anymore because Hux only wanted to talk about boy things. Poe and Kylo talked about real things too, but if Kylo was happy, then it was probably silly things.

Kylo stood off the bed and she started to let sleep take her. “Let’s…she needs to sleep. She’s so tired. She has so much to say to me that she can’t…Come on. Downstairs.”

They left the room and Rey finally saw black.

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Snoke was stroking her leg, his yellow eyes burning into hers. The claw grew larger to dig into her flesh. He sneered and opened his mouth. It was filled with the faces of the gone children. They were stretched out and screaming, begging her for help with black eyes. But his mouth only grew wider, trying to draw her in. She tried to reach out and could only scratch at the ground; there was no one there. She was alone. The thundering fear of isolation was pulling her closer to Snoke’s stinking mouth.

Rey jolted awake from the nightmare and reached for Kylo.

But he wasn’t there. The lamp was still on and the bed was still empty.

Rubbing at her eyes, she looked down at the sleeping bag. There was no one there.

Stupid boys. It was like with Finn and Ethan. They’d ignore her and Rose if they had boy things to talk about. She didn’t get it; why were there separate girl and boy things? Maybe that’s why they’re stupid.

She crept out of the room, only to see that mom and dad’s door was closed. They never really heard anything, but she was still careful. When Kylo was away, their door would be open to her. Now, he should have been there. Descending down the staircase, she smiled as Lumpy rose from his dog bed in the kitchen to greet her. He was the best dog. She was going to go the other way on his walk the next day. The other side of the neighbourhood hadn’t been fully explored. He needed to smell more things.

But down in the basement, she could hear Kylo. She looked at Lumpy and motioned with her head to go back and not annoy him right now. If Kylo was talking this late, it must be about the tournament or something that happened at school. Or maybe he was having the bad thoughts again, the ones that even she couldn’t chase away when they got to the deepest level.

Moving down the stairs from the kitchen, she peeked around the corner to the stairs to the basement. They led directly down from the back door. She double-checked that it was locked before turning to nudge the basement door more open. The light was on and she could make out voices but not words.

She padded down the first stairs, about to ask why they weren’t in bed when she stopped, spotting the two of them on the couch.
Poe was touching Kylo’s hair. Kylo wasn’t ducking away from it.

They couldn’t see her as she crouched down on the top step. The couch was in the centre of the room, facing the old television. But nothing was on. They weren’t watching anything. She leaned forward into the light of the basement. The small bulb on the ceiling was more orange than white now. Han had promised to replace it but had never done it. She probably didn’t see what she thought she saw.

“It’s…I like when you do that, but stop, please,” Kylo said, his voice low. Gooseflesh bristled her arm at the sound.

“I like doing it, but yeah, okay.”

“I…I should have said more when we were driving. I was talking too much now.” She could hear the scowl in his voice as she sucked in tiny breaths through her nose. “I’m still figuring this out. Why I’m not more…afraid.”

“Hey, it’s okay. You’re letting me touch you. And keep telling me when to stop. I don’t want to, but I will.” Why was he saying that? They touched one another before? Hadn’t they? The questions started to build and Rey wanted to blurt them out and stamp on the stairs.

Instead, she silently slid down one more step, still partially hidden by the slats of wood that lined the side of the basement stairs. But she could see more of them now. Her ears could pick up how hushed the room was and put her hand over her mouth to disguise her breathing.

“I don’t know why I like this. I want to hate this. I feel like I was ripped open yesterday and…you put me back together.” Kylo was facing Poe. She could only see the back of his head, but his shoulders looked rigid. She tried to shift forward without making a sound. Kylo had taught her how to do it so she knew that she could. “It’s…It’s still raw to me.”

The only person who could possibly spot her was Poe, but he was focused on Kylo. “We have more time to talk about what happened. I shouldn’t have done that. I don’t want you to be afraid of me, but I’ll get it if you want me to back off. We can just hit reset. It won’t be the first time I’ve fucked up a friendship by…being too intense. Jumping you and not reading the signs.”

“No, I…” Kylo paused and Rey’s eyes widened as he reached to cup Poe’s face. Kylo’s long fingers rested against the plush face. “I still don’t know why you like me.”

“I told you. You’re…you’re handsome. I don’t want to say that you’re cute, but you are. Don’t argue with me about it. You are. You’re tall and destroy people with your eyes. I knew from the moment I met you that I wouldn’t be able to talk to you without saying something stupid. I cut through all of the bullshit at school and liked you more when I got to know you. I’m not just spouting lines. What you told me last night never should have happened to anyone, especially not a kid. I’m…glad that you trusted me enough to share it with me.” Poe’s voice dipped and he pulled Kylo into a hug. Rey had to lean forward and didn’t hear what he said next.

From where she sat on the stairs, she watched Kylo reach up to touch Poe. And then he kissed him. Poe’s eyes fluttered shut and he leaned into it.

Her legs wouldn’t move. If she hadn’t been so well trained at being silent, by brute force and vicious threats, she would have cried out at them: No, he’s mine.

Poe shifted and whispered things that she couldn’t hear in Kylo’s ear. He could have seen her. He should have seen her.
Her heart was pounding too loudly. She needed to leave.

Despite how hard she wanted to look back, she left the stairwell. Moving to climb the kitchen steps, her mind was too full and she hit the edge of Lumpy’s bed.

He barked.

And Rey froze.

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“I don’t want to push you,” Poe whispered into their embrace. “If you’re confused, then it’s okay. We can go back to how it was. I don’t want to lose you. I promise I won’t be mad.”

Kylo nodded, sitting back to stroke the smooth face beside him. He didn’t know how to feel. He was home now. He’d seen Rey. He’d seen his parents. And he was still searching for a way to kill the fear within him.

He’d felt stuck for so long. He wanted everything to stop happening so slowly. The days that he’d waste sleeping away, he’d imagine waking up and everything being done: he’d have graduated high school, be done with college, and be an adult having breakfast with Rey in their apartment. But now, the image turned: Rey was crying because some boy didn’t like her. He’d be filled with fury that she cared about someone else, especially if that other boy didn’t return her affections.

They were supposed to be for him, but there was a decade in between them. What if he didn’t know how to talk to her about this? Being stuck had meant he was just letting the days go by, more focused on hurting himself and getting release that way.

He pulled Poe closer and their lips met again. He still had to fight his feelings from earlier. But maybe Poe was right; maybe he should stop. But this was something new, something different that wasn’t watching blood wash down a shower drain. He liked hugging Rey, and she liked his hugs. And right now, he was getting hard and was desperate to keep kissing Poe to stop the panic that still pounded in the back of his head. He was starting to feel less clumsy in how his hands moved and braced Poe’s back, more certain.

Another person could feel pain, but they could also feel pleasure. If others could share sadness, then maybe it could work another way.

Poe was still kissing him, pressing closer. He felt a rush when the other boy gripped his waist and it washed over him in rapid waves. He couldn’t breathe suddenly and turned out of the kiss.

But Poe was in his ear, instantly pulling away. “It’s okay, it’s okay. I’m sorry. I’ll stop. I was too quick. Too much, too quick. Are you okay?”

He was about to say that he wanted to push through his panic, to be normal and get off like everyone else always talked about, when the dog barked.

It was an echoing sound, like Snoke’s feet on the staircase or a dying gasp from a child that would never leave him. It meant being trapped. It meant something wrong had happened.

Poe scrambled away and Kylo instantly stood and looked up the staircase, arching his body to get the full view.
But it was silent from the staircase, the door just as he’d left it. The kitchen was quiet, except for the dog. His claws clicked for a few seconds and then he settled in his bed again.

Until his ears picked a light squeak from the floor above them.

Poe hadn’t heard it and reached for his hand. He lightly squeezed it then quickly pulled away.

“Wait here,” he said.

It had been stupid to be down there and expect his parents not to be listening or watching them. Someone was always watching. He was getting soft, thinking that he could actually trust his parents to not be like Snoke. He steadied his shoulders, ready to see his father sitting at the table when he climbed the stairs. Every step, he tried to make sound natural. It wasn’t like he was expecting an execution, despite how much he wanted one. He had excuses ready in his mind as he nudged open the basement door. He was also ready to do anything to keep Poe, to be allowed to figure out what he wanted from him on his own terms. Would his father be mad? Would he hit him? That’s what Poe expected. That’s why this was wrong.

But instead of his dad, Rey was looking in the fridge. The door was to him, but the light was softly cast on her body. Her bare feet wiggled as she looked through a drawer at the bottom.

She heard his feet and stood up, leaning back to look at him. Her face was washed out by the bright light in the dark kitchen. “When are you coming to bed?”

He blinked off nothingness and shook off his imagined arguments. She could read his body language if he did anything off right now. “Soon. We’re almost done talking. We thought it was… boring for you.”

*Lies, you’re lying,* he kept waiting for her to say. He wanted her to say it. Now, what Poe was saying made sense. *This* was why he should be confused. The haunting feelings of Snoke’s abuse pierced his mind; he loved Rey but was filled with a greater terror that he’d somehow hurt her that way, in the worst way. She could never end up like him. He’d fought with his bare hands to save her from the worst pain and now he was spiralling into his dark thoughts that had been reawakened by a memory that he had fought to keep buried. She could probably see it all in his eyes as he stood dumbly at the open fridge door in his childhood home. This was the place he’d promised her that she be safe. He quietly hoped that she would see it in him and pull away and run from him.

But instead, Rey just shrugged.

“I don’t like it when boys talk. Finn talks to Ethan and it doesn’t make any sense,” Rey grabbed a carrot and closed the door, running her fingers down the handle before turning. “If I eat this, do I have to brush my teeth again?”

She had just come down for something to eat. It was fine. There was no fight here, other than the one in his mind. They were having a normal conversation, in a place that meant warmth and love. “Yeah, you do. I’ll come help you soon. I promise.”

“Kylo, I love you,” Rey said, before biting down on her snack. She chewed loudly; it emphasized that he was being carried away from her with every bite.

“Love you too.” He smirked at her, still willing himself to calm down.

She took her carrot and went upstairs again. She’s said that because she caught the strange look in his eyes and was trying to figure it out herself. And he let his shoulders finally loosen. Shaking his head, he took the few steps down to the entrance landing, before taking only two steps down to the
basement. “I think it’s bedtime.”

He could only see the back of Poe’s head, but he turned and met his eyes. He was still trying to figure out what every look from his friend meant. But this look wasn’t the disappointed one that he expected. The second he had pressed closer, Kylo had been frozen in the moment of torture without pain. He was locked in his own head, unable to give into his own body. But Poe had still stopped, afraid of hurting him. If the dog hadn’t barked, Kylo might have wanted something more: to edge more closer to being normal; to kill whatever Snoke had forced into him.

But that didn’t happen. And now it was time for bed and he had even more questions for himself.

Poe just grinned and followed him up the stairs, brushing their hands together as they went. Kylo paused at the top, near the landing and squeezed his hand, wanting to both forget and draw on the strength he’d been gifted in the last twenty-four hours. He gave him a long look before the other boy nodded and took a step back.

They entered his room two paces apart.

Rey was still eating a carrot, petting Lumpy on his bed. The dog smelled but was happy where he was.

“Why did you wake up?” Kylo had to wrench himself from the hallway back to his room. Poe was still lingering in the doorway until he glared at him and he finally sat down on edge the bed to pet the dog. Kylo was beside Rey but he could still feel another pair of cautious brown eyes looking at him from across his broad bed.

“I had a nightmare, but it was okay. I’m learning, Kylo. You’ve taught me how to do it so I’m better than you. I wanted to draw a picture, but I got hungry instead. But it would have been better if you were here.” Rey ate the last of her carrot, in between her words. He felt a new form of hatred towards himself in that moment.

He wanted a life. He wanted to do what he wanted. She needed him to erase the last of Snoke from his veins.

His body and mind had never betrayed him more than before the last day. He would rather be stuck right then than drifting into this.

If his hands weren’t already in motion, he would have stopped to fall fully into the hole of his thoughts at that moment. Instead, he nudged her up. Without words, they went off to brush their teeth. He knew that if he opened his mouth, it would all come tumbling out with renewed tears.

He plopped Rey down on the red footstool and she reached for her toothbrush without question. It was something that he hated as a kid and he never wanted to force Rey, but after all of the annoyance of the dentist the last half year, he didn’t want her to have his teeth. It also had made him not want to be lazy, despite all of the distractions surrounding him.

He caught Poe’s eyes in the mirror and returned a small smile, in between brushing. There was almost a glow around all of them and he longed to reach for it, to break what he knew was real and what his eyes were telling him.

Rey quietly finished brushing her teeth, setting her brush in place. She turned to them both and he saw her squirm. “I need to pee.”

Kylo finished rinsing his mouth and nodded. After a brief glance and an awkward positioning of his worn brush on the edge of the sink, Poe followed him out of the room and closed the
washroom door behind him.

When they were in his room, he exhaled dramatically. At least, that’s what Paige would have said.

“I really like spending time with her, it makes me feel less mature, you know? I know people twice her age who don’t know how to say what they want without sounding bitchy,” Poe said, nervousness making him talk more than he should. “I don’t even think she can be little-kid whiney.”

He’d been too quiet. He swallowed, glad to focus on Rey when he opened his mouth. That was safe. His room was also safe.

“She can be, and she’s allowed to be,” Kylo said, before shaking his head. He quickly pulled off his shirt and tossed it aside. He slid out of his jeans and was trying to untangle how Poe was looking at him as he undressed. It wasn’t the first time he’d seen him like this. And they only had so long.

His ears burned as he finally pushed out his words. “She won’t be long. Get changed.”

“Yeah, yeah. Okay.”

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Rey had lied. She just wanted to close the washroom door and be alone. She knew why Kylo lied; her own little lies felt better when she did the same.

She wanted to run when she was in the kitchen. She wanted to run upstairs and hide under the covers and pretend that whatever she thought she saw hadn’t happened.

But she couldn’t be like Hux. Kylo hated cowards who ran when they were afraid. She wasn’t afraid, though. She had just been worried.

She stared at herself in the mirror, picking out the things wrong with her face. Her freckles, her dimples. One of her teeth was loose and wiggled too much. She liked to press on it with her tongue and push it as far as it could go. So she did that. It felt better than being jealous.

Jealously and envy were something that her and Maz had talked about. How was it fair that other kids grew up with real mom and dads and hers had always been dead? Maz would tell her that’s envy. Other kids may have a mom and a dad, but there were also kids with mean mom and dads; your pain is real, Rey. That pain won’t get better unless you understand how others are feeling. Every pain is unique and it helps to realize that others can hurt too. Poe’s dad hurt him. Thinking about him made her frown and look away from the mirror. He was nice to her. He was her friend. He wasn’t doing anything to hurt her, because it was Kylo who had kissed him. That’s what jealously was.

Could Poe take Kylo away from her?

She looked into her own eyes and pushed on her tooth again.

No. No he couldn’t.
He was Kylo’s friend. He was her friend too.

Kylo kissed her all the time. And Kylo also had other friends. Kylo needed more friends. He felt better when more people really cared about him, even though he didn’t say it to anyone but her.

He had been so afraid when he thought Poe didn’t want to be his friend anymore. He’d been so upset. He got better when he could talk to Poe. Maybe they didn’t just talk about stupid boy things.

Rey didn’t want him to feel that way again. And Kylo wasn’t a kid anymore.

She weakly kicked at the bathroom counter. That part wasn’t fair. She’d always be behind him.

But if she had her own friends, he could have his.

She was still too little. But that meant she’d always have space in his friendships. The good things about being small weren’t just because tinier hands could grab food without being seen or that lighter feet made less of a sound when hiding in a new spot to avoid getting burned by hot metal.

Kylo hated talking to Maz. But if he could talk to Poe about teenager things, and to her about real things, then she couldn’t really be jealous. She talked to Rose about kid things that Kylo wouldn’t understand.

Blinking she looked away from the mirror. Next year, she’d be the same age as Kylo when he stopped being a kid.

That part was really not fair.

She sat down on the red footstool and frowned to herself. She hated that she’d started forgetting everyone who died. She hated it so much that she would cry in the small washroom at school when the thoughts swooped down on her, when Snoke’s shadow got too heavy.

Swallowing, she stood again.

Blinking at herself, she nodded. Right. She’d feel better in the morning. Dad always said that. Mom too. She needed good thoughts before she went to sleep. She thought about being older, being grown up. That’s when things wouldn’t hurt. That’s when Snoke would stop chasing her and Kylo. They’d be happy, but stressed about normal things. About having to go to work, like Han and Leia always complained about. Like having to pay bills, like everyone had to do. At least she’d like to make dinner; she’d never complain about that.

Tomorrow, she’d make dinner. It would be good. Kylo would help her and they’d read through a recipe on his phone and he’d hug her and the hours would stop for a while. Kylo had a friend; he was a boy. But she was a girl. She owned his heart. She didn’t need the rest right now.

She stepped down off the footstool and sighed to herself.

She really did have to pee.

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Kylo kept his head down but could catch glimpses of Poe’s skin as he pulled pyjamas from his bag and then shoved his others clothes back into them. Kylo fully turned away, pulling on a t-shirt from
his closet. When he turned, he couldn’t manage a kind look at that point. They were feet apart, wearing what they usually wore on the road. He was unraveling as things started to overlap into a grey blur; he couldn’t find the edges to put them where they should be.

“Sit beside me,” he said, unsure of his own voice.

Poe was just staring at him, running his hand on the television stand. Kylo sat heavily on the bed and slowly put his head in his hands, trying to breathe.

“You can freak out. Please freak out. I want to freak out.” Poe was just nattering and Kylo glared at him until he finally sat down beside him.

“I’m not doing that,” he answered, sitting up. “You don’t have to either. I should have figured this out earlier.”

Poe kept petting the dog, but was looking at him. “Look, I kissed you. And you didn’t stop me. I was just talking before. I can handle this because I like you. I’m your friend, no matter what happens.”

“No, yes, why would you want to be,” he answered, rapidly spitting out his words before finally pausing for a breath. He pursed his lips and finally shook his head. “Okay, yeah. I’ll…I’ll figure it out soon. What I want.”

The washroom door was still closed so he wasn’t surprised when Poe kissed him lightly on the cheek. “That was just…sorry. Don’t think that I don’t get sadness, Ky. It made me do something stupid yesterday and I can’t take that back. But I can at least try to make it better.”

Kylo was always searching for pain in other people, whether or not he could cause it or what they felt from the world around them. Part of him would rather be the cause of that pain; at least then, he’d understand why it was there. And he found it directly in what Poe had just said. He was hurting from having to stay away from him, to make sure he felt comfortable. There were few people who had done that for him before.

But he was also just a kid too. A kid who was always afraid to go home. Because there was an authority figure there who made it an unsafe place.

Snoke was an adult. Snoke was an evil husk, in the body of a man. He was the ultimate authority; he decided who lived or died.

Poe could maybe make mistakes with him. He was filled with a nervous energy that splintered off in too many directions and caught him off guard, like last night. Even if he made some errors, maybe touched him when he didn’t want it, it would always be his own fault. He would always be too torn about what he wanted and what he needed. He couldn’t even touch himself in the shower, too afraid to edge onto horrific memories that he’d kept buried.

But he’d already started to dig it up. Doubt was still filling his head, but he’d started to undo some of the hurt. He was done being stuck. Rey was too little to understand; she’d kept quiet about the demons that he knew that she had. He’d tried to warn her before they got home, and he really thought that she understood. Now, her world was friends and making mistakes with her teachers. It was about ruined art projects now, not getting beaten and raped. He couldn’t tell her now that the demons would always be lurking. He wanted to tell her now, to get it over with and blurt it out, but it would just burden her with still trying to grow up too fast.

His mind was switching between thoughts too quickly. The parts of him that had been torn apart
were almost in two pieces now.

Poe was younger, but had managed to pin him a few times in practice, despite lacking really fundamental techniques, which frustrated him. Poe was strong and could stand up for himself. Well, when he let him. Kylo briefly leaned against the other boy when he realized how quickly he had gone after anyone who had shown a bit of malice against him. But Kylo couldn’t hurt him the way he could hurt a girl. He tried to imagine kissing and holding Paige like he’d done and how easily he could have pulled her too close and hurt her. This was safer. They were friends; this was a part of their friendship. Even though Poe was pressing him, he would always stop. He wasn’t like a girl like Liza, who didn’t listen. Girls could be hurt and couldn’t be trusted. Rey could be trusted but he couldn’t think about that before she had a chance to really grow up in a way that he never got the chance to.

There was nothing evil in Poe. But Kylo knew there was evil inside of him.

The way that his body reacted to him brought up a thick anxiety in his throat. The idea that someone wanted to touch him in a gentle way, opposed to Snoke’s vicious strokes and cruel penetration, was still pressing on his mind. He’d told Poe what had happened and he still wanted him and seemed to shrug off how damaged he was; instead, he seemed to focus on helping and understanding him.

The toilet flushed and he nodded again to the other boy to get on the other side of the bed. Poe met his eyes and shook his head in warning. He saw true and real discomfort in Poe’s eyes as he shifted from the bed to the floor beside him, onto the sleeping bag. Lumpy sat up and panted, looking at the door and waiting with excitement for Rey. The dog didn’t seem to care that he was melting down inside and trying to pull down others into the acid with him.

Rey’s eyes were heavy when she came into the room. But she quickly blinked out of the look and put on a smile. She had been upset that they had been late; he didn’t blame her for walking around with too many thoughts in her head when the same thing was happening to him. She still hadn’t told him about what had happened at school, nor what had brought on the nightmare.

I think it’s okay.

He frowned. That what’s okay?

It’s just okay. I just figured it out. Her smile quirked, setting off her dimples. She’d been thinking, making up a scenario in his head that he couldn’t make tangible in his mind.

There were so few moments when he couldn’t understand what Rey meant, but he always forgot how young she was. He had been so used to being caught in a closed cycle of things never changing that it still shook him that she was changing while he was trying to be stuck. She was growing and he was losing his grip on every thought that she had in her head.

It was almost two years since they escaped.

The pressure of the anniversary swooped down on him suddenly, but he still met Rey’s eyes. She seemed to understand why his face faltered and nodded at him. She didn’t know what happened last year but he still dragged up that hatred when he wanted to make the world around him feel more real. Being so close to ending his life, snuffing out his broken existence, should have been freeing. But it wasn’t. He reached out to someone he could trust and he kept his end of the deal: no one knew. He blinked randomly and Rey finally gave him an I know look.

It had always been her and him.
And now, there was this.

Or there could be this. If he wanted.

But in the end, it would always be him and her.

He slid over and Rey climbed onto the middle of the bed. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her cheek before settling down.

He couldn’t say anything. He couldn’t move.

The room was quiet, except for three breaths. And a happy, clueless dog that was scratching on the foot of his bed. He wanted to kick at the dog, but then everyone would just get mad at him.

He closed his eyes, willing the memories from how stupid he had been to fade away, holding Rey closer.

He was too tense to sleep, but tried to let his body go loose. He tried to listen to what Poe had said before.

But he couldn’t.

He was holding Rey. And she needed to sleep.

And he couldn’t react.

He hugged her again and she sighed, leaning into his embrace. She hummed a light song to herself, something that he didn’t recognize. He never wanted these small moments to end. Part of him wanted her to stay small forever, to never have to deal with the same problems that he was wrestling with.

He almost forgot about his friend on the side of his bed as he felt her fall asleep in his arms.

Lightly kissing her forehead, he shifted away, turning slowly. The rising regret and desperate panic seemed to form a block in his chest. But he still turned over. He saw Poe’s eyes as he moved closer to the edge of the bed, but he tried to only focus on Rey. She was asleep. Her chest was rising and falling in the way that told him that she wasn’t pretending.

She was exhausted, and he was thinking about something else. Someone else.

Still, he pulled his arms away and nestled her against the mattress before he turned.

He hoped that Poe realized that they couldn’t talk. Rey could wake up at any moment. He just wanted to say goodnight. There couldn’t be anything more.

Poe seemed to get it. In the dim light of the lamp on his side table, he caught his smile. He mouthed goodnight and lifted his hand. Kylo reached out and brushed against it, still trying to nail down his feelings. But there were no demands of anything more, but no promises either.

They both nodded and Kylo turned away to hold Rey.

There was peace there, peace in familiarity. He’d always have her, no matter how much he sabotaged his life with impulsive thoughts.
More teenage boys kissing. And then angst. Filled with references to past rape, abuse, and torture.

For a more personal note from the author (me, an idiot with a PhD so if you have commonsense, just disregard what I have to say): I think I've apologized enough for my poor tagging (even though I want to keep apologizing). I'm not a big author in this fandom so I'm not bearing the brunt that someone else would, but I really do want to produce something that people want to engage with and give them something to think about in terms of dealing with trauma (in this case) and healing after it. I may have torpedoed this story, but for those of you still reading this, know that I will get you to a good place but there's a long, long road ahead (I don't want to jump the gun and put a chapter count out there but from the outline we're looking at 50 to 60 chapters here with about half of those already written and the rest roughly planned out). The main relationship tag is there for a reason, so trust me on that. Today, I finished proofreading 200+ pages of a dissertation on tariffs in the 19th century and then I taught undergrads all day about pre-industrial society in three two-hour seminar groups in a row with one more group tomorrow and then a lecture on Monday. And as I say to them, both my undergrads and the author of what I proofread, every opinion matters even if you disagree with what the author has to say. Just put it into context.

And with that, I return to crying myself to sleep to Taylor Swift.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Rey tries to understand how Kylo is feeling, finding others in her life who love her too. Kylo tries to do the same but tells Maz what happened without kind words after feeling ignored by Poe. The boys finally have a conversation about what happened.

Read the chapter notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rey woke up and stretched, letting her muscles and mind reach out in the same motion. She still yawned and rolled over, trying to wake up, no matter how much she wanted to go back to sleep. There were things to do on Sundays.

Kylo and Poe were sitting at the edge of the bed. Poe was wearing normal clothes, a wrinkled shirt and jeans. Kylo was just wearing pain underneath his pyjamas.

“I don’t want you to go,” Kylo was saying. He hadn’t heard that she’d woken up. She slowly rested her head again, hoping that he would miss that she was awake. She closed her eyes, staying as still as possible.

“I’ve got work and my mom is coming. Hey, I told you last night. We’ll talk on Monday. Ky, it’s just another day. I’m not going to ditch you because of something that I started that you didn’t want,” Poe said and stood from the bed. “I really, really like you. But I’ve messed you up. So I’m going to go to work, because that’s what I have to do not what I want to do. Can you just…help me out? Your parents scare the shit out of me.”

Rey finally yawned again when the boys left the room. She reached for another pillow and was half asleep when Kylo came back to bed. He crawled under the covers and curled up on the other side, away from her.

“Kylo?”

He didn’t respond.

“Is it a bed day?” She asked, sitting up and rubbing her eyes. He could have conversations that weren’t meant for her. It felt better to deal with how he was feeling if she knew what had made him upset. But she would still have to spend the morning trying to untangle why.

He sighed and spoke into his pillow. “I just want to sleep for a while. I’ll come downstairs later and we’ll have time together. I promise.”

“Do you want breakfast?” She asked, reaching to touch his shoulder.

“Not right now.”
She left him alone to what he had to think about. She should have told him again that it was okay but he needed her to be quiet. He wanted her to be quiet but wouldn’t ask her. After stopping in her room to get a stuffed animal, she went downstairs to find something to eat. Leia was already dressed for work, making Rey frown: it meant no pancakes that day. Han looked up from the newspaper and spotted her stuffed animal.

“He staying in bed today?” Han asked, not quite frowning.

Rey shrugged, sitting her bear at her spot at the table. “He didn’t want his friend to go. Can we give him some of your money? So he doesn’t have to work? We have too much.”

Han smirked. “It doesn’t work that way, sweetheart. And it’s your money, too.”

“So, can I give him some of my money?” She asked, folding her arms. She couldn’t hold back her smile when Han gave her a stern look. Her grin made his look break as well.

She ate her cereal and held her bear, trying to plan out her day in her head. Leia gave her a small hug before leaving for work. Everyone always had to go to work, even on the weekends. She needed to do something to help. When Kylo got up, she’d help him make the bed. Then she’d find something else to organize or clean up to keep her mind busy. It never took that long and there was always time for colouring or reading when she couldn’t stop her thoughts. Kylo would help her bake cookies later, she decided. He needed to do something too; he couldn’t spend all day being worried about Monday.

“What’s going on in your head?” Han asked and she had to shrug. “Not much or too much?”

“Just thinking,” she answered. “Kylo really likes his friend.”

Her cheeks reddened at the flash of memory from last night. She shouldn’t have been sneaking around and she was sure that Kylo would tell her how he felt when he could share those emotions with her. He needed his own life, she told herself again. Kylo had the worst days when he was worried about never being normal. He would argue with his parents more and then sit and do nothing but worry. She’d hold his hand and he’d finally give her a hug, telling her that he was figuring it out.

“He seems like a good kid. Ben has never had too many friends. When he was your age, all he wanted was just one best friend. Everyone else could go to hell. Sort of like you, baby girl. You find the right people and stick with them no matter what.” Han sat back, putting his hands behind his head. “What do they talk about? Good stuff or bad stuff?”

Rey thought again about what happened in the basement and lifted her shoulders. “Sometimes good stuff. Kylo thinks that he needs to take wrestling more seriously, and Poe just does it because it’s something to do. He’s not good at other sports either. They talk about school a bunch and it gets kind of boring because I’m not in those classes yet. I don’t mind when they talk about the bad stuff around me. Poe is sad too. I think his dad is mean to him. Why are some dads like that? Finn says that his stepdad yells at him when he makes a mess but you and mom never yell at me.”

“Well, you don’t make many messes. Your Kylo is the one that makes messes and we don’t yell at him either. It’s better to talk about how to do better next time than yell about it, right?” Han raised an eyebrow, settling back in his chair. It was his favourite chair. It was the only one at the table with armrests.

Rey nodded. “I get mad at Finn too when he makes a mess or ruins something. Sometimes I yell at him and I know that it makes him feel bad.”
Han leaned on the table, shaking his head. “Yeah, but you’re also good at apologizing and telling him why you were mad, right?”

“Yes,” she answered and then bit her lip. “Most of the time. Sometimes I get sad at myself and can’t find the words. And Finn still forgives me. I help him when he’s sad too.”

They had many conversations like this in the kitchen. She loved Han but still wondered if she would have had tiny talks like this with her real father. Would they have a nice house too? Everyone she knew had nice houses, but she saw from movies and television that there were bad houses too. After summer, then the houses would be fake scary too for Halloween. She liked candy and pretending to be someone else but couldn’t figure out why people wanted to be scared of creepy things. Maybe she’d ask to stay home on Halloween so she could see everyone else’s costumes instead this year.

Han got up from the table and gave her a hug. She smiled again at the warm embrace.

“Come on, let’s take the dog for a walk. Let him sniff those bushes that he likes. Go tell your Kylo that we’re going out and then get changed,” Han said. “Something warm, Rey. It’s pretty chilly out.”

Rey nodded and took her bear upstairs to check on Kylo.

He was sitting up in bed, reading. His English notebook was resting at his side. He was still in his pyjamas but had at least unfolded himself from the blankets.

“We’re taking Lumpy for a walk. Do you want to come?” She asked, looking at him from the edge of the bed, studying his long legs.

Kylo shook his head, keeping his gaze on his book for almost too long. It renewed the nervousness within Rey that he was going to disappear for the rest of the day. “I’m going to read. Is that okay?”

He looked up at her and she frowned at the lingering redness that she spotted in the corners of his eyes. Tilting her head, she watched him close the book and try to wipe away the sadness with the back of his hand. Climbing onto the bed, he opened his arms to her for a hug.

He held her too close, but she let him. As long as he was embracing her, she couldn’t ask him about what happened last night.

“It’s been a long weekend,” he mumbled into her hair. “I want to not think for a while.”

She had never understood that thought more than just then.

Changing into her favourite sweat pants and sweater, she tried to do the same.

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Things didn’t happen quickly or slowly. They just happened.

And Kylo was left even more confused.

Poe met him on Monday and, even though it looked like it pained him, he was clear that he wanted to give him space. They had a closed conversation of hidden meanings by his locker, both talking
Poe had leaned against the row of lockers, playing with the combination lock. He turned the dial back and forth, looking at him with quick glances. He really wanted to give him time to think about it. This was so unclear for Kylo and he expressed that, asking why he needed to think about anything; the idea that someone other than Rey could read his moods was unsettling. He’d already made up his mind: he’d revealed how wrong it was for him to like him in grim details. Poe said he didn’t think that he was in any way permanently damaged, but that he probably needed time.

Poe pulled away slightly. He sat further away from him at lunch, not leaning fully towards him. Kylo now realized how often their knees would be pressed together when they ate when he lost that contact. His goodbyes were shorter. Even Paige made a remark, asking if they had a fight.

Tuesday was the same. He sat with Paige at dance practice, locking and unlocking his phone.

“That’s getting annoying,” she said, looking up from her book. “Just text him.”

“Text who?” The click of the phone locking punctuated his words.

“Ugh,” she groaned. “Kylo, come on. It’s annoying when you do that.”

“No it’s not,” he replied, looking up at her and quickly repeating the gesture on his phone. 

Click-Clunk.

Paige exhaled and looked back at her book.

Click-Clunk. Click-Clunk.

“I’m trying to finish this chapter for tomorrow,” Paige said with a warning tone in her voice. “Have you already done it?”


Paige sighed, putting her flimsy bookmark in its place. “Okay, then tell me how Chapter 10 ends. Save me the time.”

“The hunters attack them and steal the glasses.” He started fiddling with his phone again. “Mrs Yaddle is probably going to ask about the fire symbolism and how they’re splitting apart.”

She sat up, reaching for his phone to snatch it from him. He let it shift into her hand, thankful to lose it. “What are you worried about?”

“It’s nothing,” he replied. He looked up at the girls. They were practicing for the spring concert in half-finished costumes. He’d watched his mother help Rey with hers from the doorway to his mother’s office. Rey was smirking as Leia measured Rey’s arms and legs and then draped the shiny fabric over them. Turning, Rey tilted her head at him.

Just like she was doing now. He quickly blinked a response that he was just zoning out and wasn’t bored. She rolled her eyes and called him a liar.

His phone plinged and his heart quickened at the sound.

“Okay, he’s not mad at you. He asked for your physics notes,” Paige said, moving to hand him back the phone. But she paused, drawing it back for a second. She looked from the phone, out to Rey, then back to him. “You’re allowed to have a best friend who’s your own age, Kylo. She’s not going to break, you know. She already calls him your best friend.”
Poe didn’t need his notes. He was asking how he was doing.

“I know,” he said, frowning. “It doesn’t mean I’m not allowed to worry about it.”

At least that part was true.

Wednesday was more of the same. They both did and didn’t talk. Poe gave him a long look during class, and then his eyes darted back to the board. Kylo responded by pulling up his hood and ignoring him.

His leg was bouncing so heavily in the car on the way home that his father reached over at a stoplight to forcibly stop him.

“Calm down,” he said. “Whoever it is, just don’t hit him if any teachers are watching.”

He glared in response and Rey sighed, loudly, at the joke.

Thursday came and he missed school because it was a therapy day. Liza was always jealous that he got to skip school and he had given up trying to tell her that it was nothing to envy. He’d rather be in school doing something useful, even though most of it was just mindless knowledge. He had a goal in mind and that was to get into a good university, get to the FBI. Grades mattered. Grades kept him breathing. Talking just wore him out in a closed space. The world had tilted the other night and he was still fighting to gain his balance.

They took the long drive into the city to meet with Maz. The air conditioning in the car made his throat hurt. The feeling continued into the dull offices that the FBI rented temporarily there. He mildly wondered if Agent Jinn could stand being there for one second. He’d said as much in their last email exchange. Kylo had done his best to analyze a profile. It had been more interesting than his English homework and more distracting than realizing how weak he was leading up to failing to qualify for state. He had sent Jinn what he thought of the profile and really thought he’d got it all wrong before they left, before Poe wrenched him into dealing with the memory he had left buried the longest and sent his body and mind into two parts.

He finally texted Poe as he waited for Rey to finish her session, to spill her thoughts into broken pieces and try to put them back together again. Poe answered him, but not right away. It was getting to the point where he was almost furious about the unneeded space. Rey had already said that she was okay. What was his problem?

It was that frustration that made him slip up with Maz. He was frowning at his phone when she asked who was upsetting him and why. He didn’t really think that he was in the room at the moment; he was floating somewhere above himself in his bewilderment, back to the glow of Poe’s smile in their shared reflection of the washroom.

“My friend kissed me and now he’s acting weird.” He shut his eyes instantly regretting saying it out loud.

Maz just shrugged, not writing anything on her notepad. “Maybe he’s thinking that it upset you, that you didn’t want him to do that.”

He argued with her with his eyes. It was fine because they were friends and he wanted this to be part of that friendship. He trusted Poe and didn’t want him to ignore him.

Maz had tried to pry it out of him before, to get him to deal with something that her and the other therapists thought likely happened but didn’t have proof of. Well, Poe had heard it and understood it better than she could. He’d had kept that part separate from everything else he had been forced
himself to disclose. Agent Jinn would probably understand, yet he didn’t want him to think of him as dirty and wrong. Despite the locker room garbage talk about erections, making out, and fucking, he didn’t need to deal with it. It was only in the last half year that he’d wake up physically excited. He didn’t want to think of it as being better; he had just forced it away because it made him sick.

Rey would be cuddling him in the early mornings; the first time it happened, he knew what was going on but didn’t understand why it was happening to him suddenly.

Trying to stroke himself in the shower just made him feel filthy, his skin crawling, and he felt like he wanted to vomit from the stress of his own hand. So he decided to not touch himself; but that was before. Looking at Maz, in this dull, rented office, he wanted to purge his mind of any of those thoughts. But still, he was quietly pondering if Poe could be patient enough to guide him through not hating his body’s reactions, to not pull away. It had been good, too good, to kiss him. It wasn’t really sexual if they were friends, he’d decided. It was a way to do things that made him excited without meaning anything more. He needed to break what was wrong within him. That’s why it had to be another boy, one who was his friend. He hadn’t truly felt attracted to anyone else, boy or girl, before; he was attracted to him as a person who shared his sadness. He saw the empty pockets within Poe that he also sought to refill in himself. He desperately didn’t want to lose him and needed to help him too.

Still, Maz openly grinned at him. Angered, he asked if she thought he was joking.

“I’m sure you’re more open with him than with me,” Maz started. Of course he was, Poe was his friend and not some shrink who got off on his misery. “Well, then tell him what you’re thinking about. Tell him about your writings, because if there is any advice that I’ve given you that you’ve actually listened to, it’s that I know that you write. All of the time. Kylo, we, or should I say I, talk about boundaries and how to have good friendships and relationships. Our friends help us think about how we feel and the choices that we make. If you like this boy and want a healthy relationship, you should be honest and ask him to be the same. Tell him why you’re not ready for some things and why you might be upset with some touches. You own your own body. It’s yours and trying to understand it will take time. You also have to remember to ask how he feels, like you do with Rey. Maybe he needs some time to think too.”

Kylo tilted his head, anger rising. “But he started it. And he listened when I said what happened with Snoke. Not like you.”

“Oh, I listen, Kylo. I listen.” Maz leaned forward, putting her notebook aside. “So, let’s have a real conversation. This isn’t going in my notes.”

He narrowed his eyes, hands gripping his thighs. “But you’re still going to remember it.”

“I don’t forget often. But if it helps you here, I’m willing to forget a few things. Did you want this boy to kiss you?” Maz leaned back, eyeing him with a slight grin.

He levelled his eyes at her. “I didn’t stop him.”

“And you were curious? I can see it in your eyes.” Maz lifted her large glasses, giving him a firm look. He sat up and fiddled with his sleeves. “Have you ever felt curious about someone like that before?”

Kylo rolled his eyes. “Feel like what? That I can trust someone? Isn’t that what you bitch at me all the time? To trust people? Well I trust him!”

“Curious as in that you’re attracted to him. You said that he kissed you. Did you kiss him back?”
Maz was starting to sound more like Paige, gossiping about something to Liza. “You don’t have to tell me if it makes you uncomfortable.”

He had already felt that way the moment he had walked into the room. Maz’s large glasses and aggressive shoulder movements had always put him more on edge than at ease. He would never understand how Rey could stand her.

“I wanted to see what it felt like, yeah,” he answered, lifting his shoulders. “He’s not like Snoke. He would have to try really hard to hurt me. But I’m also not worried about hurting him, but not in the same way as if it were a girl. Girls are too…” He stopped talking, snapping his mouth shut.

“So, what you’re saying is that you’re afraid that you’d hurt a girl, but not a boy?” Maz kept sarcasm from her voice, but he still heard it.

“No, just him. I trust him and he’s my friend. I’ve already thought about all this,” he lied. “What’s your point?”

“Are you interested in sex? It’s good to have this conversation at this point. We’ve worked our way there and how to think about it in a healthy way. Many teenagers…”

“Many teenagers weren’t tortured by psychopaths while the police did nothing,” he snapped. “I already have to listen to this at school. Liza wears tank tops even when it’s freezing out and looks at me with big eyes and her…whatever, breasts. I see them but I don’t look at them. They’re nothing I want to look at because they’re a part of her and I can’t trust her. I don’t want to date anyone. I just want to have a friend who I trust.”

“Then maybe you should tell this boy that. Because he is probably ignoring you, or at least that’s what you think he’s doing, because he thinks about you in a different way.” Maz pursed her lips and looked very much like his mother in that moment.

From the lost part of him came a question, but his mouth crafted the response. “Is there a different way?”

“What do you think about when you think about sex?” Maz sat up, her normally passive eyes sharpening to match the tone that radiated from her body.

He couldn’t back down. Nothing in him would let him stop from arguing about this with her, even though the words were going to come out wrong. “Everyone talks about it. I don’t care who…,” he paused to shake his head out of the thought, “I’m in high school and everyone is talking about fucking and I’m just numb to it because I have to be. I mean, I…I don’t know what to do now. Or what do you want to hear? Okay, I liked it when he kissed me. Maybe it was because he’s sad too and I want to make his problems my own. Maybe it’s because he wasn’t Snoke. He wasn’t someone who I couldn’t trust who wanted to hurt me. He was just my friend. And now I think he hates me because I can’t get over all of this. You were supposed to help me and I’ve been just nothing for two years. Where the fuck did you even get your degree? Are you really helping Rey?”

He was standing by the end, filled with red-faced rage. He had shouted at her and her expression had never changed. It made him swallow a scream and sit down again.

“Do you want to have sex with this boy, Kylo?” Maz asked, her face still neutral.

“I don’t know!” He shouted. “I don’t know and it’s…why did he do this? I want to make things better for Rey and now I’m fucking stuck again. And I just want him to kiss me again and tell me that it’s all right and not want to pull away because I just feel what Snoke did to me at the same
time. And that’s so fucked up that I just want to die.”

Maz’s face finally flinched as he turned from her to stalk across the room. The artwork in this office was even worse than the last one. It was dull swirls of blues and pinks on white backgrounds.

He turned and sneered at her. “Is this your point? How much I should hate myself for not being normal by now?”

He clenched his jaw as he guided himself back to the couch with the force of her eyes. He followed her, even as his skull hurt from her command. He hated being told what to do, unless it was from someone who he trusted and that list was short. Maz was even below Hux on that scale in that moment.

“I liked that he kissed me. I’m tired of feeling like if someone touches me that I want to hurt myself.” Kylo stumbled over the words even though he’d just said them but he firmed his mouth. He wanted to keep going, to try to understand why he wanted to hurt others, while also being split when it came to those close to him. He switched to her topic, giving her what she wanted. “I’m tired of waking up and being hard and fucking afraid that I’m going to hurt Rey. Maybe if he helps me it will go away. I never want anyone to fuck me ever again. But if someone could just show me what the fuck is wrong with me then maybe I’d be okay! You haven’t done anything to help me! You’re so fucking useless!”

He snorted at her and stormed off of the couch again. He focused on the life outside of the window. He tried to think about what Rey was doing in the waiting room.

Then his phone plinged and he felt another tug at his heart. He turned from the window to grab his phone and glare at Maz again.

“Do you want to see how much he hates me now? For not being able to be normal?” He screamed, throwing the phone at her.

Maz caught the phone but it rattled in her hands. “He just asked how it was going?”

“Can’t you read what he really means? He’s asking if I like him or not. And I do. How stupid are you? You’re ancient and I’m just me. And I’ve figured it out.” He snatched his phone back and flopped onto the couch to eye her again.

“I don’t think that you believe that,” she said calmly. “And it seems like you have no one else to talk to about this because we haven’t had a conversation like this in a long time. Be open with your friend, Kylo. Let him know what you’re feeling and afraid of. Be clear what you’re comfortable or unsure of. You deserve to be respected. And if he wants to push you or to do things that make you feel unsteady or that you want to hurt yourself, you need to not worry about losing him. It’s not about friendship at that point. Okay? You need to think about these things. And I’m always here if you want to share those thoughts with me.” Maz returned her glasses to her face and gave him a nod that released him from her aggravating questions.

The words, both his and hers, pushed him into silence and he was quiet the entire drive home. Rey fell asleep, always worn out by being thrown into the fire. He ran his hands through her hair, gently absorbing the sensation of the clean and soft strands. His parents were asking him things but he ignored them. He just nodded when they asked if it went well.

When he got home, he texted Poe four words: I like you too.
They didn’t make him nervous or anxious. They were easy to write and send. He didn’t agonize over the message because it was so clear in his mind that this was what Poe wanted him to say. The answer came quickly with Poe replying with a smiley face that made him roll his eyes. But there was also a question that followed: *Want to hang out tomorrow after school? So you can bitch about therapy? I can’t tonight cause of work.*

He was in his mother’s office doorway before he could really think about it.

“Poe’s coming over tomorrow,” he said, flatly.

His mother leaned back, away from her computer to lift her glasses. “Can you maybe phrase that as a question, Ben?”

He rocked onto the balls of his feet, then back to his heels. “Can Poe stay over tomorrow night?”

“Oh course. Thank you for asking. Rey is having a sleepover at Rose’s so after I drop them off, we’ll come here. But you can’t eat dinner in your room. It would be nice to get to know him more. What does he like to eat?” Leia was watching how he was moving so he stilled and shrugged.

*Food from my plate,* he thought to say. His mother wasn’t letting him get out of there easily. He took a few more strides into the room and sat down in the middle of the floor. It was like he did when he was still Ben; his mother would be working and he’d just come into the room to watch what she was doing, asking questions that she would answer with more patience than he deserved.

He knew what Poe ordered on the road, when they had a choice. “He likes chicken. He thinks vegetarians are pus—,” he paused awkwardly and caught the sharp look from his mother. *Give a proper reason, Ben.* “He thinks that they don’t make a good argument.”

Leia smirked at him. “You wanted to be a vegetarian when you were four.”

He let his head flop against his shoulder. “I just thought meat tasted weird.”

“Hm.” Leia sat back in her chair. “Well, I’m glad you got over it as quickly as you did.”

Kylo smiled lightly at his mother. He had insisted on not eating meat for about a week. It had felt off in his mouth somehow, no matter how much sauce or salt he put on it. Then he quickly got tired of vegetables. He ran his hand along the wooden floor, letting the memory linger.

His mother turned back to her work and he sat there for a few more minutes before getting up and going to help Rey with her homework.

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Rey put her bag on Rose’s bed and finished telling her how Kylo was having a sleepover too.

“Don’t tell Paige,” Rose whispered back to her. “Or maybe we should tell her. She was mad at Kylo before. He’s been ignoring Liza a lot more.”

“He doesn’t talk about Liza anymore. He has Poe now,” Rey said, forcing her voice to be confident. Kylo had been upset all week and she really hoped that he’d cleared out some of his thoughts with Maz. She felt bad for falling asleep in the car but if she did, then they would be
They played with Rose’s dolls, making up pretend worlds for them to live in. Rey liked using her imagination; for so many years, it was all she had. Movies and television were still different; she wanted to like them because everyone else did. Rey’s doll was a doctor and helped people at a hospital. She made sick kids better and helped kids who were unhappy. Rose’s doll also worked in the hospital and fixed the machines for the kids. Rose said that her doll had a boyfriend and Rey said that her doll didn’t have one because she was too busy to take care of a boy. Rose reminded her that boyfriends took care of their girlfriends too and Rey stuck her tongue out at her.

Rose’s house wasn’t as neat and organized as her home and wasn’t as big. There weren’t that many books in the living room. Rey liked exploring the house with Rose, looking at family pictures. She’d stare at the pictures of Rose as a baby and try to imagine herself as being that small.

When it was finally time for dinner, Rey hadn’t thought about Kylo for almost two hours.

Paige was texting during dinner, smirking to herself until her father cleared his throat.

“Not right now, sweetheart,” Paige’s mother said.

“Are you texting Kylo?” Rey asked, finally having swallowed her mouthful of potatoes. She hated talking with her mouth full, but would sometimes forget.

Paige blushed but shook her head. “No. It’s not him. I’m sorry dad.”

Rey ate the rest of her dinner wanting to ask Paige more questions about how Kylo acted at school. She’d been to his school a few times. She wanted to see his classroom and where the teacher sat. The lockers were so much bigger and the hallways were also longer. The classrooms weren’t as colourful or happy, not like at her school. They sat in the big desks and she kicked her legs, looking at the windows. Kylo had already told her about how her school was the same one that he went to before Snoke took him. She’d sit under his tree, the one that they planted to remember him, and thought about how she’d feel if someone that she knew in the real world disappeared. Would adults tell her what was going on? She loved Kylo’s tree; it was still a part of who he was before. She wanted to get to know Ben but Kylo always said that he was gone. But the tree still had his name and would just keep growing. She hoped that it would be there forever.

They played a game that was more fun than the last time she had been at Rose’s. It had been a trivia game and it had frustrated her to the point of near tears that she didn’t know the same things as Rose or Paige. But this game was about acting out a job, object, or a certain type of person. Rey liked pretending to build a house; she was really good and Rose’s mom got her clues quickly. She didn’t want Rose to feel bad about losing so Rey guessed wrong when Mrs Tico did her actions. Rose’s dad watched as his daughters played the game. He had small glasses and a serious face, only smiling when someone made him. Han would have been laughing or teasing her the entire time if they played this game at home.

Kylo called before it was bedtime. He sounded relaxed and let her talk about her thoughts and plans for the future. She was glad to go to bed knowing that he liked the dessert that he’d helped her make.

It was also easier to go to sleep knowing that he was feeling better.
Poe stole three haricot vert from his plate before he managed to stop him.

He hadn’t said much during dinner. He managed to answer some of the questions, just to help Poe out. He had given him several panicked looks when Han or Leia had asked him about what his parents did.

Finally, they were allowed to go to his room. He could still hear his parents finishing the dishes and slowly let the sound die as he shut the door.

Poe asked if he could hold his hand. He said yes.

They sat on the bed and Kylo launched into what he’d talked about during therapy, letting it spill out of his mouth angrily. Poe let him complain about Maz and how she overthought most of his responses to her questions or made them seem like nothing. It was always gray with her answers. She didn’t understand that his silences were better reactions than anything he said. The words still held the confusion and bitterness that he held about being ignored, and if he hated him for being the way he was: fragmented and disfigured. He didn’t hold back, disclosing his fears in a low but steady voice. Poe just nodded and gripped his hand, listening more to him with concern, but also questions in his eyes.

“You should never feel like you want to hurt yourself. Especially because of me and something stupid that I did.” Poe rubbed small circles with his thumb on the back of his hand, keeping his eyes low. “I was thinking that you’d be more mad. It’s all I could think about all week; like, why am I doing this to you. I even asked my mom, like hey I like somebody at school who’s been through hell and back and now I’m just fucking him up more.”

“No.” Kylo shook his head. “If you hadn’t kissed me, I’d still be stuck. If you hadn’t wanted to be my friend, then nothing would have changed and I’d have stayed how I was. I’ve never told anyone how badly he ripped me up inside. It was hard to talk about what he did to everyone else but if I told him how he took my soul, then maybe it would be real. But I don’t want to be trapped there with him forever. He killed me and then tried to keep me there forever.”

Poe slowly looked up, guilt still heavy in his eyes. “I don’t want to put you through all that again. I’ve thought about how you kissed me too and it’s hard but it’s also like I said, we can just go back to how it was. Just hang out, but talk more about this. I like you, but I guess I’m like you too. I don’t want you to stop wanting me around.”

Kylo was drawn into the sorrowful feelings that were etched on Poe’s face. He was taking it all on, like it was his fault that Kylo couldn’t just be there with him. It was like with Rey. She would constantly try to take all of his sadness and put her own away. He had pulled back from her in minor ways just to give her the space to let her tell him how she was feeling. Still, his own greedy ache kept him from only focusing on her and what she needed. He would explode into recklessness if Poe took on his feelings too and stopped himself from saying what he wanted and how he felt. Fucking Maz was right.

“You’re more normal than you think, but okay.” Poe exhaled. “I think about this way: heart and head. That’s something that my mom told me and look where it got me but whatever. My heart is the one making me screw up. I want to keep kissing you, holding you. To feel your arms around
me, mushy stuff like that. It’s the stuff that I know makes you afraid and tears me up inside and makes me want to try harder to think about what you need. That’s where the head part comes in. I just want to listen to you, and have you listen to me because I don’t really talk about serious stuff to anyone. My mom tries but she’s messed up too. I guess I just want to be with you because life is shitty but also short. Who knows when my dad will want to pack up and leave and I’ve got no real say in what he does. So I guess I’m stuck too. But I’ve stopped feeling so goddamned lonely since we started being friends. I don’t want to go back to how it was before.”

Kylo tried to think like Rey and gently let go of Poe’s hand and pulled him into a hug. He felt cautious arms wrap around him in return. “I’m sorry.”

Poe laughed and pulled back. “What for?”

“For not realizing that you were lonely too in the beginning,” Kylo answered. “I just thought you were annoying.”

He shook his head, snorting a laugh. “I can be both.”

“You make it better.” Kylo sat back to stare at his friend. He’d spent last night trying to unravel why he hadn’t been more upset about Poe ignoring him. He hadn't torn the house apart, searching for answers. He’d promised that he wouldn’t go away; and he didn’t. He'd drifted in the periphery, but still there. It had taken Kylo to break the dam with kind words. He needed more kind words and more softer thoughts. The first weeks of school, two years ago, were some of the first times that he and Rey had spent apart for so many hours. It felt like forever for her and he knew that and if it weren’t for his ultimate goal, he would have given into being with her rather than focusing on what he should. But they’d agreed on those priorities: graduate, get out, get a life together. He couldn’t run to her when he wanted to, and she didn’t have him to protect him. But then he saw her at the end of the day and his fear was replaced by joy. That fear was eroded by time, knowing that she really was being taken care of by his parents. They loved her too and weren’t going to make the same mistake that they made with him with her. If they did, then they really would never see him again. But those warm feelings had started to creep into his heart every time he saw or talked to Poe. He had listened to him when he had set out his darkest memory and didn’t go away.

“Make what better?” Poe asked, squinting at him, his eyes taking on Rey's tones for another brief moment. "Sorry for the stupid question but..."

Kylo cut him off. “Make it easier. You know when to be quiet when I need it, most of the time. When you are talking, you make me almost think differently or at least about other things than how I can’t figure out if I’m angry for a good reason or if I’m just mad from nothing.” He looked down at their hands again and squeezed lightly, testing how far he could go. “I didn’t want to be your friend and now I don’t know what I’d do if we went back to how it was before.”

Then Poe asked if he could kiss him again.

He beat him to it, leaning over to kiss him instead. He gripped Poe’s hands to the bed, too embarrassed to say that he was still afraid of having him touch him. Still, he leaned into the kiss and let his heart be lifted by the feeling.

When they parted, Poe grinned at him.

They sat in silence for a few minutes until his father called from the living room downstairs about some movie on television that they should watch with them. Still floating, Kylo reluctantly agreed, mostly to have something to escape into. Sitting on the couch, with his parents in their chairs on either side, they watched the silly romantic comedy about people meeting in a dog park. This
wasn't what his father watched when he was a kid and he gave him a long, dark look when he watched the opening scene with bright colours, plucky music, and idiotic dialogue. The lines were so easy to predict and he spent most of the movie with his eyes closed. Poe’s hand was warm against the side of his thigh, pressed as close as he dared to go. It was more engaging than the garbage on the television.

He called Rey when the main characters found their happy ending and the world could be real again. His father was snoring softly from his chair and his mother had just shook her head at him, letting them both escape into the kitchen. He was trying not to listen to Poe, speaking Spanish to his mother softly in the corner by the oven. He turned his ears towards Rey and smiled. She was filled with stories about how Rose and her were planning to work together when they were older, how they were going to take care of animals. She asked how the dessert was and he told her that it was perfect, like her. She giggled at him, making him blush. He looked up and met Poe’s eyes, burning the redness even deeper.

His mother finally sent them to bed, complaining about Han and his choice of movies. She asked Poe how his mother was and he licked his lips and said that she was fine and it was good to talk to her. He knew that Poe’s mother wasn’t at home. His Spanish was still poor, but he blamed that more on his teacher than himself for once. He had been watching Poe, trying to stay quiet but still trying not to make it seem like a secret. He had given him a soft look when their eyes had met in the kitchen and Kylo had to settle a new thought in his chest. The day had been about knowing how Poe wanted him to treat him and he knew he’d only disappoint him if he didn’t focus more.

He wanted to watch Poe change when they were upstairs in his room, but couldn’t lift his head. He pulled on an old t-shirt and decided that it was too warm for anything but boxers. He still watched Poe try to decide what to put on before finally just taking an old, faded t-shirt from his tattered bag and pulling it on.

He felt a surge of life as he hatefully flossed his teeth. Poe was frowning at him, watching the blood gather from his mouth as he spit into the sink.

“Can you help me?”

“With what?” Poe smirked. “Teach you how to floss?”

“No, help me with Spanish. I need it.” He could only meet his own eyes in the mirror, but turned to meet Poe’s in reality. He couldn’t trust what that mirror was telling him. “For the FBI.”

Poe rinsed his mouth and then gave him a grin that crept into his veins and lit up his insides. “You know, you can’t tell anyone. I’m acing Spanish right now because none of the teachers realize that I’m not Italian. Seriously, don’t tell them. Yeah, I can help you. You’re about the only person who won’t ask me for the swears and dirty words.”

His parents’ door was closed. So with fresh mouths, they shared a kiss in the washroom that Kylo wanted to go on forever.

They still watched an even dumber movie in his room, but now they were at least alone. Stretched out on their stomachs, they were watching each other more than the television.

Poe’s hand left his when someone knocked on his door.

“Goodnight, boys. Don’t stay up too late,” Leia said, when he told her it was fine to come in after internally seething for too long.
“We won’t, mom.” His answer was quick, with his head down. “Goodnight.”

The door shut again and he exhaled, annoyed again that his world was also driven by his parents.

But Poe was giving him a look that he still couldn’t read, making him frown. He raised his eyebrows, trying to keep his look neutral when curiosity was overwhelming him. “What?”

“Nothing. Just thinking about you.” Poe smiled, reaching for his hand but stopping before they touched. He took the offered palm and squeezed it, lingering in the kiss from before. The warmth of the touch made him smile again. Poe would probably have something to say about it, but today had been about letting his happiness show.

They spread out the sleeping bag, even though they were sharing the bed. He hadn’t asked, but that’s what they were doing. Poe had snickered as they set out the blue sleeping mat and Kylo reached for both of his hands, looking down at him with the waves still rocking through him. He gripped his back and pulled him closer, enjoying having the younger boy in his arms for an embrace rather than the heightened intimacy from before. When he parted he could only shake his head, trying to apologize without words for not kissing him. For once, he was able to turn out the lamp at his bedside. He still didn’t understand how Poe could look at him like he wasn’t a monster, to want to be there with him and escape from loneliness together.

“Ky, I know I’m not always going to say the right things, but I want you to let me try to handle your bad days too,” Poe finally said after they’d stared at one another for ten minutes in the quiet, dark safety of his room and each other’s arms. “And, you know, let me have bad days also.”

“I can try,” he answered, reaching up to touch Poe’s cheek. He wanted desperately to mean what he was saying. “I can really try.”

Poe leaned forward, pressing their lips together. Kylo deepened the kiss at the contact, pulling him closer to feel him fully against him. The light touches throughout the evening had left him more calm than caught up in perplexities of feelings. Holding Poe closer, he sighed into his mouth, feeling the temptation of going further start to press on him.

He stopped the panic from rising too far by breaking the kiss before it deepened beyond his control. “Stop.”

“Okay, it’s good. It’s all good.” Poe shifted away, taking his hand to steady him. “Keep telling me that.”

He nodded and looked at their hands. “Goodnight.”

“Night.” Poe didn’t look sad. Instead, he had his head on a pillow and was smiling at him.

Kylo shut his eyes and felt himself smiling as well.

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The next week, Poe was back to sitting closer to him at lunch. He’d grip his leg when he was laughing at something Paige said and let the touch linger.

They both managed to skip class one morning and sat out on the bleachers, looking at the empty
soccer field. The smokers had left them alone after a hateful glare from him. The beauty of being alone meant a long and heated kiss out in the open, not just inside. Kylo had told Poe how he had missed being outside when he was trapped. How he missed the sun and the wind and all of the sounds that were drowned out by terror. How much he missed baseball. He wanted to watch more of it on television but he didn’t know most of the players anymore and didn’t want to ask.

Their time together always felt short at school. Too many classes with too many different people. They had quietly volunteered for sorting through the wrestling team’s equipment. In the dark storeroom, he’d pulled Poe on top of him for the first time. The kisses grew deeper and his body still wouldn’t let him go further. He had to let his head fall forward, his hands on Poe’s hips and quietly sob that they should stop.

And he did.

No matter what happened, Poe understood him. Even though he failed at everything, he could still be lifted by creeping progress. He wasn’t stuck anymore. Just stuck a little less.

At night, when Rey had fallen asleep, he’d roll over and they’d exchange text messages about things that they could never say during the day. Kylo never really thought he’d miss anyone other than Rey, but there was a new ache growing in his heart when Poe wasn’t there. Sending messages back and forth wasn’t real.

He’d write in one of his devoted journals, letting his feelings and thoughts take shape in careful and neat handwriting. He could hardly read what Poe wrote when they did homework together. It was dreadful and messy, just like his wrestling style.

It was easier to get up in the morning. In the evening, it was easier to go for a run and listen to music without feeling crushed by too many thoughts. Making dinner or baking with Rey seemed more real and easier; food wasn’t so disgusting to him anymore. He’d laugh more with her, letting her tell her stories from school without being distracted by lingering memories of death overtaking them. He could feel almost happy that other kids were content and doing things that six year olds should be doing. They should be making up games on the playground and arguing about the rules. He remembered doing that; now, it didn’t hurt to think about those times.

He talked to Rey about his childhood again, imagining that he was talking to Poe but still focused on her eyes and her small face. He was still coming back together; the two parts of him were almost aching to have two separate goals. But with Rey, she needed to know that he wasn’t always broken either. Now, his memories weren’t polished half-truths based more on emotion than reality; they were real in his mind too now. They were about how much he loved Chewie and how Lumpy was a good dog too and he didn’t mean to compare them. They were about learning how to ride a bike with Hux and laughing rather than crying when they both fell too often. They made plans for Rey to learn how to ride a bike in the summer. She was smiling brighter, or at least he saw her smile in a different way. It didn’t hurt as much to think about being six.

But, like with everything, he still had to deal with his thoughts about the evil still lingering in his veins and tainting his heart.

Poe came over another week later, looking exhausted but still smiled brightly at him when they found time to be alone. They were in the garage with the excuse of vacuuming his car. In the backseat, Poe pressed their lips together with clear desperation after carefully asking him first. He could always see his hands shaking before he set the question into the air. Kylo was the one to pull him onto his lap, soaking in the feeling of having their bodies so close together. He had made that move with determination and without thinking through how hard he was. When Poe arched against him, rubbing their erections together through their jeans, he had to gasp and felt his chest tighten
until he couldn’t breathe. He turned out of the kiss and apologized before Poe could. He put his head on his shoulder as Poe hugged him, saying that it was okay. It would get better.

His body wouldn’t let him have what he wanted, no matter how much he tried to fight it.

Chapter End Notes

Teenage boys kissing. References to most things in the tags (mentions of self harm, rape, suicide ideation, probably something I forgot because I live this story and forget.)

Again, thanks for the lovely comments, even the critical ones are appreciated. I’ve got this arc almost completely written (chapters 25 and 26 are currently breaking my heart...from both Rey and Ben's sides) but I start teaching my next course next week and will have to deal with that plus research and life. But my lovely cat (even though he can be a bad boy) got very good results from the vet yesterday - his kidneys are almost normal again. Thanks again for hanging in there with me on this depressing ride.
His parents were taking Rey for a weekend at Luke’s. They left early on Friday morning and he gave Rey a long hug in the doorway because she wouldn’t let him go. He didn’t want her to go away, but he didn’t want to go either. And it just wasn’t about skipping school. Luke’s place would always be empty of real love. She was worried about missing school and missing him: he had heard more and more about how Rose and Finn were in ‘a fight’ and would only talk to her and not each other. He was mildly surprised that six year olds could hold grudges but then thought about how Rey had started separating everything on her plate so the food wasn’t touching because of some off-hand remark Han had said to her a month ago. Something about how she couldn’t do it and she had to prove him wrong. He had been the same as a kid and smirked at the memory rather than wanting to snuff it out.

He also remembered her distress about the last time she’d been away for longer than an evening, but things were different now. The last month hadn’t been just school, home, and then school again. He told her as much, telling her that he’d be okay. He even gave her a poem he’d written about how he was feeling almost normal about everything in his head.

He left out the part about how it all was dwarfed by the turmoil in his head about having a weekend alone with Poe.

They skipped school after lunch and went to a movie. Poe didn’t care about his attendance and Kylo could just lie and say that he had to go to therapy. Holdo would hold his eyes, trying to break him and he wouldn’t let her win. The theatre had become a refuge for him. It was dark, it was cool, and he always knew what was going to happen. Kylo always let Poe pick what they were seeing; he couldn't bring himself to care because nothing really could hold his attention. They hadn’t truly been alone since the last road trip when this whole thing started a month ago, other than the night in his bed. Part of him felt lifted by how Poe shifted nervously in his seat at the theatre, knowing he felt the same thing.

It was a weekend without his parents.

But also without Rey.

Poe kept pressing him to tell Rey that they had a deeper friendship now. Kylo’s response was still silence. He didn’t want to keep anything from her, but it was also etched on his soul to not hurt her. He had to respect her and never treat her differently as he grew up. But part of this had to be private. He shared everything with her but this had to be just his. It was a mistake to tell Maz; that
part he couldn’t take back but it only confirmed his turn towards keeping it from Rey. He would teach her about how hard it all was when she was older. She had to grow up more and by then he’d have made all the mistakes for her.

And he was slowly giving in to how good those mistakes felt.

It was still early in the evening. They’d ordered a pizza and Kylo ate more of it than Poe for once. He still tried to pick off most of his pepperoni and Kylo only smiled at him and let him take it.

Poe was resting his head on his stomach, up in his room. They had the whole house to themselves and his room was still the safest place to be. He could hear the dog pacing downstairs and he’d just been taken for a walk. He narrowed his eyes at nothing, aggravated that the dog didn’t like him as much as he liked Rey.

“We could have a party,” Poe teased. He was looking up at the ceiling and playing with his hand. He was running his fingers across his knuckles as he’d never seen a hand before.

His response was shutting his eyes and giving a purposely embellished sigh.

“Fine, no party.” He sat up and grinned at him. “It’s better just to spend time with you anyway. You’re my favourite person.”

“I just told you about why I hate stairs,” he had to pause because he couldn’t hold back his smile, “and you yawned three times.”

“Come on, they were yawns of agreement. And stairs are fucking awful.” Poe sat up and moved his hand towards his chest. “I know I just touched you but can I keep going?”

He’d been waiting for him to ask that. “Come here.”

Kisses felt good. Having Poe on top of him was slowly becoming even better. The way his hips moved and how his hands slid up his body made it easier to let go and drift off into why Poe could touch him and he couldn’t touch himself. He tried again that morning in the shower. He had thought about how Poe would kiss up his neck, nipping at his ear until he had to tell him to stop. He stood there under the warm water, letting the feeling go from his mind to his dick. He’d wake up some mornings half-hard already, lost in warm dreams rather than aching nightmares. He’d have to turn away from holding Rey, afraid that she felt it. He wanted release, yet his hand would shake too violently to stroke himself beyond one or two shaky brushes of his fingers against himself.

He’d punched the wall after, bitter tears coming to his eyes rather than ones of pain.

Poe sat up, sleepy eyes looking down at him. “I came up with another reason why I like you.”

“Because I’m boring?” He reached up, cupping the younger boy’s smooth face. Soft but strong, that’s what he was. Kylo was hard and broken. He hadn’t talked that much that day, keeping some feelings inside. There hadn’t been the same small conversations about the small doses of sadness that they had to swallow every day. Poe hated working, hated the shitty store and his managers. Kylo imagined hating it too: being told what to do was only freeing when there was an end in sight. He’d wait to work with something that solved bigger problems other than just not being poor.

Poe also hated not being able to stand up to his dad. He’d argue with people at school, get into scraps that Kylo didn’t know about because he’d have to see how his father beat his mother and then come after him. Kylo’s hatred for the man deepened with every conversation. He could do something about it; all Poe had to do was ask. But he could solve the problems at school for him.
Kylo saved his worries for quieter moments, when Poe turned to him and shook his head, still admitting that his problems were nothing but having to deal with an asshole. His father was a drunk; he wasn’t evil. He’d never been hurt like Kylo had been.

Kylo would carve out pieces of darkness and present them to Poe with low tones and distant eyes. Lunch had turned into the two of them finding somewhere quiet away from the others and Kylo slowly bringing old wounds to the surface. Every time that he did, he expected it to finally break them both. Still, the bleak memories didn’t. How he had been forced to watch others, even younger kids than him, be held down and brutalized. Having to try to comfort them as they bled and sobbed, not understanding what had happened and why they couldn’t go to their moms and dads. Picking up a tiny finger off the basement floor and trying to remember whose it was. Being forced to stand on a broken leg and fight through the pain so Snoke wouldn’t see him be weak. Did he even know that his leg had been broken at the time? Not eating for days and then still giving it to the smaller children. Being trapped in a closet and hearing him hurt Rey when he realized how much she meant to him. And every day, being mandated to hear his insane and hateful rants and not believe them. Each story would come from any year of his life there. It just hurt all of the time and the moments bled together.

And Poe would just take it in, letting him cry and crying with him.

Paige asked if they were out smoking pot and he let her believe that.

Poe took his hand, kissing his thumb and pulling him out of the thought. His mouth was perfect. His hands were kind. He was really there; he wasn’t trapped in hell. He wanted more of the softness. “I like that you let me be me, even though it annoys the shit out of you.”

“When are you somebody else?” Kylo focused on how Poe’s mouth moved on his thumb, how he lightly sucked on the tip. The pressure was starting to build in the bottom of his stomach, spreading from the double sensation of Poe’s light body and his soft lips. The constant struggle between being comfortable and feeling awkward and out of place, not in control of his body, would never leave him alone.

“You hate stupid questions, so don’t ask ‘em. You know what I mean. You do the same thing. You don’t fool me anymore. How you act with Rey, that’s real. How you act at school, that gets a little…murky.” He paused, tilting his head. “You’re also pretty good at kissing.”

Kylo was tired of being teased, of being given lines about how he was in any way talented with something that petrified him. He took that fear and turned it into action, reaching up to pull Poe’s mouth down to his. Hearing him moan, he kept moving. He flipped him over, onto his back and pinned him down. He ground their hips together and hissed at the sensation. It was like at practice; he was stronger and quicker but Poe could match him if he needed to overpower him.

Taking command, holding the younger boy down, sent shivers through his veins. He could feel how his insides crossed over one another, the overlapping getting stronger as he pushed his tongue into Poe’s mouth. Poe’s hands were in his hair, squirming underneath him and sighing in small exhales. Then Poe’s hands were pulling him closer before reaching down to tug at his shirt.

He didn’t think he could get closer to bliss, but he was almost there. He had control. He could do this. His mouth pressed harder, demanding more from the boy beneath him. His lower body wasn’t working but he still tried to force it into listening to him. Why did this feel so good but hurt at the same time?

As Poe’s fingers caressed his bare stomach, the jolts, the shivers, the lightening arched in his body. They blossomed into a flash that blinded him behind his closed eyes. The weight in his groin
imploded into the light of a star and he groaned as his mind left his body.

How did he get there? Where did he go? Why was his entire body suddenly so free?

When he snapped back to himself, he felt warm dampness in his jeans.

Poe was still kissing him, touching him.

“Stop, stop,” he ripped his mouth away to gasp. “Get off. Get off!”

He wasn’t moving fast enough so Kylo knocked him aside as he sat up.

He couldn’t breathe.

His skin itched with the revolting moistness. Disgust rolled over him and he followed the feeling.

He was going to be sick.

He was repulsive.

He was wrong.

Snoke told him that this was going to happen. Giving into his body, tasting another boy’s mouth, he was just as bad as him.

Scrambling away, he gripped his hand over his mouth and scrambled for the washroom, barely making it before he vomited.

He let himself feel every retch, every thrust of nausea, jab into his body like a dull knife in his side.

A cold cloth on the back of his neck. Kind words without touches. The room slowly spun back from nothing when he sat back.

“It’s okay, Ky. It’s okay.”

An angry glare. “It’s not fucking okay! Look at me. I’m not…” A broken sob. “You shouldn’t like me. You can’t even touch me without…”

Poe was kneeling beside him, shaking his head. “Ky, it fucking happens. You’re still…I’ll slow down. Okay? You have to trust me. I trust you. I know you’ll never hurt me.”

Pushing away from the toilet, he wiped at his mouth. “I want this so bad. And I can’t have it.”

Poe brought the damp towel to his face, wiping at the sweat on his forehead. “We’ll figure it out. Go slower. Or stop. You were sick right now. We can stop and I won’t get mad.”

Kylo put his head back, rolling it along his shoulders. “How many times have you done this before?”

“What, make out and come in my pants? I don’t really keep count.” Poe brushed their hands together, seeming to not care how sickening he was. “But it happens. It doesn’t make us anything more than just…really turned on. By each other.”

He slowly turned, seeing the same mess taint the front of Poe’s jeans as well. Meeting his eyes, he watched redness start to stain the other boy’s cheeks.
“I, um, felt and heard you when you…yeah, and I was just…gone. Lost it.” Poe’s eyes darted away and he shifted his weight, avoiding reality.

“Ejaculated.” He cut through the metaphor with a flat, annoyed tone.

The redness thickened. “If we’re in sex ed, yeah. But here, maybe we just took the edge off.”

Putting his head in his hands, he forced all of the air in his lungs through his nose. “I don’t want to be uncomfortable about this. You’re not pushing me, but I’m pushing myself. I don’t like not being in control. Especially over my body.”

He heard Poe nod and then stand. The toilet flushed and he could feel Poe looming over him. Looking up, he watched him work through the problem in his head. “You’re in control, Ky. I should never have kissed you without asking, but after you told me what happened to you, I really shouldn’t have. This whole thing, what we’re doing, we can stop and I won’t stop being your friend. The last month, you’ve told me so many things and I get why you think you’re dead. I’d kill him again for you guys if I could. I wish I could do something that would erase those fucked up years. What he did to you is so awful and I can’t stop thinking about it. I want to make it better and I’m fucking it up. I…this would probably be easier for you if I didn’t…. ” Poe dropped his head, “want you so much.”

Want. Need. He didn’t think he could feel those things until Poe had kissed him about a month ago. And he had to deal with them now because they weren’t going away. They were just getting stronger.

He pushed himself to his feet and grunted at how shameful and sticky his jeans felt. “We need to shower.”

Poe’s eyes were still low and he nodded. Kylo had to reach to grab his arm when he quickly tried to flee the washroom.

“Ky. I can’t shower with you. You can’t even shower with people at school so please don’t push yourself like this. Don’t make me do this to you.” Poe exhaled and shook his head. “It’ll be too much.” Poe tried to turn again and he pulled back. “Come on, let me go.”

He dropped his hand but still shook his head. “I want you too.”

Trapped in the doorway, almost in the hall, he heard Poe mumble to himself before shifting back towards him. “I really fucking like you.”

He nodded and undid his pants, sliding them off and tossing them towards the laundry basket. Removing his shirt, he let Poe see his scars. Undoing the armband and his watch, he was eyeing the other boy as he traced the lines on his body. He’d seen most of this before, so it was strange to see him hold his breath from across the expanse of the washroom.

Turning, Kylo hid his shaking hands by twisting the knobs to bring the shower to life. He couldn’t let this beat him. He kept his eyes forward, not wanting to know if Poe had left or not.

He tugged off his ruined boxers and stepped over the bathtub’s ledge and behind the shower curtain.

His own beating heart kept him from hearing anything until the curtain parted.
The washing machine thudded into the next cycle, the water rushing out into hidden pipes and drains. Their jeans started spinning rapidly, destroying the last of what had happened an hour ago. The rest of it was already gone, down a different drain upstairs.

“Ky?” Poe’s voice was soft. He was leaning against him in a borrowed pair of his old pyjamas. He hadn’t worn them since he was fourteen. When they’d dressed upstairs, he’d teased Poe that maybe he’d have better luck in Rey’s closet. He wanted to say something to break the silence that had fallen around them after the shower. Poe had mock punched him, calling him an asshole. But the pyjamas were comfortable; he remembered that. They were some of the first clothing that he realized that he liked when he came home.

Poe was resting against his shoulder, sitting next to him across from the laundry machines in the basement. They’d both avoided really speaking until now, the washing machine an excuse to evade discussing what happened in the shower.

He’d seen Poe naked before, but he hadn’t openly seen him in the same way. The height difference was clearer now; it wasn’t like when they were lying down and things were even. Poe was younger than he was by a little over a year. Smaller, more compact. Less legs and arms. They both had only a light spread of chest hair, an awkward reminder that they weren’t anywhere near being adults.

Nothing had really happened. They studied each other, under the warm stream of the shower, before Kylo turned and started scrubbing his skin. He washed away the itch from his crotch and sighed in greedy satisfaction about being clean. But he was also half-hard again.

Poe saw it. He saw the reaction. He’d felt Poe’s erection before. That’s why they were in this situation because he couldn’t handle it. But seeing it then made the sensation seem more real, still. He didn’t have control either. They had both came for each other. They’d taken the edge off. It was okay. He wanted it to be.

But they didn’t touch one another, other than to awkwardly switch places so Kylo wasn’t the only one showering.

They let the water run until it wasn’t warm anymore, sitting in opposite corners of the bathtub. There was a mess of water on the floor and their feet were the only parts touching.

“Ky?” Poe asked again and he looked away from the swirling clothing. “I know I talk a lot but I’ve never been this far either with another guy. I mean, yeah, maybe a little further but I don’t know what I’m really doing either. It just feels good so I go for it. And it feels good to have you in control. That this is more yours than ours.”

Kylo knew his look darkened because Poe bit his lip in response. His response was cold. “You already know I’m not a virgin.”

“Kylo, you were hurt in the worst way. I don’t know how that feels or what it would do to me. I’m just trying to be here for you, to let you know that what we’re doing right now is the same for me.” Poe gripped his hand as he spoke. “I...What happened before, it’s happened to me but never with someone like you. I think I’d be more scared if it was anyone but you.”

Kylo nodded, still doubting most of what he’d just said.

“I’ve been dead for years. If it weren’t for you and Rey, I’d want to stay that way.” He stared at
the washing machine. “Rey needs to grow up normal and I won’t be able to help her if I feel like this all the time. What happens the next time I want everything to stop again?”

He could feel Poe’s eyes but didn’t meet them.

“Ky, I…when was the last time you talked to someone about this?” His voice was soft, hardly rising above the clunking machine. "Someone that wasn't me."

“I don’t remember.” He shook his head, covering up the lie by shifting his eyes. “I’m supposed to tell Rey everything and now I’m not keeping that promise. She can’t know how fucked up I am. She sees that I’m sad and angry, and tries to fix it. I’m making her so serious, like she has to be perfect. She already is perfect. When she figures it out, she might stop loving me and I’d be alone.”

A shaky breath. “She’ll never stop loving you. And I’ll be there for you too. I’m not perfect either, Kylo, and I don’t want to be. I suck at everything that doesn’t involve math and I talk too much. I’m mad a lot of the time too and turn it into stupid jokes or bad flirting. But I want to listen to you. No matter what happens with us, if you think I’m mad at you or if…whatever…you can always call me and I’ll listen. If it means anything, I don’t think that you’re dead. You’re alive and just figuring it out.”

Kylo slowly turned, finally meeting his friend’s eyes.

Poe kissed his cheek and then put his head back down.

He nodded. It needed to be quiet. He needed to think.

The washing machine wouldn’t run forever.

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“Ben can’t know that Luke bought that motorcycle.” Leia shook her head and sighed, turning to look out the car window. “And don’t look at me like that, Han. You’re not allowed to get one either.”

“Come on, Leia. It’s just a motorcycle. Maybe he’d like it. It would be something else he could focus on,” Han replied and Rey couldn’t help but smile. “He needs more hobbies. Team sports are out the window. Writing is good for him. He also likes watching me work on the car when he’s bored enough. It would be something to do other than skip school and go to the movies with his friends.”

Rey still didn’t understand that much about Uncle Luke. He had moved closer to them again, but it seemed like it wasn’t going to stay that way. His apartment was still half in boxes, like he was planning to go somewhere. It smelled almost like Snoke’s the first time she stepped in and asked if she could sit outside for a while. Dad sat with her, in the red hallway, holding her hand and going through her breathing. Kylo had taught her that and she had taught dad. It was fair. But when she finally found herself again, she got to see that it was just Luke’s not-lived-in apartment and nowhere else. Rey only knew about moving from television and movies. The fake people there would have to move away or into a new house. Other fake people would be sad because their friends were going away, somewhere far from them. She knew that the same thing would happen with Kylo when he had to go to college. Han and Leia had talked about that earlier on the drive home, when they thought that she was asleep. They were already worried about him moving away
and being on his own, how his moods could change, and how he’d just lock everyone else out. Rey knew that Kylo wouldn’t be alone because she’d be there with him one day.

Leia’s phone was in her lap, but she’d shut the sound off to her headphones to listen to their worries about their son. They didn’t have to be nervous about him being alone because Poe was there. Kylo’s writing had been about her, but she knew that he would be taken care of.

The houses started to look familiar and Rey grinned to herself. Lumpy would be happy to see her and so would Kylo. She was hungry, lunch long forgotten. They’d get to order food. It wasn’t as much fun as making it, but it took less time.

“Should we have called the boys?” Leia sounded like she wanted to say that earlier, but waited until it was too late. “Who knows what they’re doing.”

Han shrugged. “Reading. Watching movies. Playing video games. What was the last one that he wanted but didn’t want to ask for? Went around pouting for a week until Rey told us what the problem was. What I wouldn’t give to read his mind like she does. Leia, they probably destroyed something and tried to hide it, badly. I was a teenager once too and as long as they didn’t drink too much of my booze, then I don’t really care. It’s Ben — they wouldn’t have a party. Maybe the girls came over and helped them clean up whatever they broke. Rey says that they talk about things that he’ll probably never talk to us about. It was good for him. I thought he’d never get over Armitage and this kid, he seems messed up too but maybe that’s what makes them tight.”

Leia shook her head, but Rey nodded. They probably did break something or had made a mess somewhere. Kylo’s room was very clean and neat; he hated messes there but everywhere else in the house was fair game for him to destroy or put into chaos. Except for her room; that place was also special and just hers.

She also wondered if they kissed while she was gone.

“Rey, sweetie, you’re kicking the seat a little hard,” Leia said to her and Rey realized she’d been swinging her legs too hard. She pulled off the headphones and yawned, handing Leia back the phone. The video wasn’t even that fun to watch anyway. She’d rather have been drawing but it was too hard in the car. “Have you thought about what you want to eat?”

Food was a good distraction. Good food. Something yummy. She would usually wait to ask Kylo want he wanted but the memory of him kissing someone who wasn’t her kept from thinking about him for once.

“Yeah. Can we get Chinese food? From the good place and not the bad one?” Rey quickly shoved her hands under her thighs to keep her legs in place.

“They’re all bad,” Han mumbled as they pulled into the garage. The door started to roll shut behind them and Rey sighed at the familiar sound of home. “Hopefully he remembered to walk the dog.”

“Of course he did, dad,” Rey answered, undoing her seatbelt to follow them out of the car. “Poe likes Lumpy too.”

“He actually seems like the type of boy who’d be afraid of dogs,” Leia said, retrieving their suitcases from the trunk. She seemed to think too hard about how to put Poe into the picture. Rey had overheard mom and dad talking about how they needed to do something for him, how it seemed like he never wanted to go home. It was like Kylo had said. Kylo always thought that people were either good or bad. But then there are the people in between who couldn’t do
anything.

Rey had shrugged on her backpack and nodded. She knew him better than mom but still didn’t see why it was important. “He is, but not ours. His lito has a big mean dog in Mexico that he’s really afraid of. He wants Kylo to go with him to visit in the summer and said I could come too.”

“We’ll talk about that later, okay?” Han said. “I really promise, so don’t let me forget."

She had heard other parents make similar assurances on the playground or at the store and always wondered why both Han and Leia said things like that. They had so much to think about so Rey had to remind them. It was just something she had to do. It was like helping with the dishes or sweeping the floor. If she did it without being asked, then everyone was happy and could have a good day.

Rey trailed after mom and dad as they walked into the house, but shot by them the moment her shoes and jacket were put away.

“Kylo?” She called, stepping up the entrance steps and into the kitchen. Her socked feet felt comfortable on the familiar floor.

She heard Leia swear about many piles of paper towels left forgotten and wet on the counter. The suitcases stood in the doorway and Lumpy ran into the kitchen from the other room. He gave her damp kisses and she had to laugh, hugging him closer.

“See, he’s tired,” she said, looking up. “They played with him.”

Grabbing Lumpy by the collar, she let him guide her to the living room.

The boys were asleep on the couch, wearing pyjamas. She recognized the ones that Poe wore as Kylo’s old set from years ago. She hadn’t seen them in a long time but still thought about how soft they were back then.

Kylo stirred at her footsteps and he blinked awake. She was still thinking about the pyjamas and had missed how they had felt when they were sleeping against one another, safe in Kylo’s bed. Kylo liked to sleep, but he always needed it to be without too many thoughts. That’s how Rey felt too. Sometimes she’d worry too much about forgetting the other kids, or worry that shadows could become real and hurt her. Her dreams still weren’t clean; she’d put her head against Kylo’s chest at night and try to picture happy and good things. What she’d get him for Christmas. What she’d do in school the next day. Sometimes, it would be just being grown up already so she wouldn’t have to worry about school and Christmas and the embers of terror that were still burning in the corners of her mind.

Poe lifted his head from Kylo’s shoulder and sat up too, giving her a sleepy smile. He blinked, bracing his hand on Kylo’s leg before quickly pulling away to stretch.

“Hey, you guys are back already,” he said. Kylo was avoiding looking at her, turning off the forgotten movie on the television.

“Yes, it got too boring there. Well, not really. Mom wanted to go. She got upset at something Uncle Luke said. We had to stay at a hotel because Uncle Luke doesn’t have a couch. He doesn’t have anything but I think he likes it that way,” she tried to smile as big as she could as she hopped up onto the couch. “But I got to swim in the pool there so it was really fun. There were waterslides and I went down the tallest one without dad.”

Kylo gave her a soft look of regret that he hadn’t been there to help her if it was scary, but she
wasn’t scared of real things. “I told them that he wouldn’t have a couch or extra beds.”

Leia called to them from the kitchen and she heard them both groan. She giggled to herself at the reaction. They should be more like her and not make messes.

Kylo leaned against the kitchen island as Leia asked what they had done in the kitchen. She wasn’t angry, but she looked tired. Rey wanted to apologize for them; if she’d been there, then it wouldn’t have happened. It was something about making breakfast that morning and how they’d forgotten about it. And then they forgot about it again at lunch. Poe was talking the most, apologizing and saying that they’d just ran out of time. They’d been out with the dog, then wanted to finish their homework and watch a movie.

“Those are good excuses,” Han said. “But did you touch my booze?”

Poe’s eyes got wide and he shook his head.

“He’s joking. And his jokes are bad,” Leia quickly added. “Rey and I are going to take the dog for a walk. She missed him. Order some food and set the table and finish cleaning this up, please. It’s your house too. That room upstairs is yours, but this is really your house. And why are you in pyjamas? Have you been wearing them all day?”

”All weekend.” Kylo shrugged. “We got dirty. We needed to wash our clothes.”

Rey looked at Kylo with puzzlement.

“You never wash clothes.

He smirked at her. That doesn’t mean I don’t know how to do it. It was a good weekend, Rey. I hope you had fun too. I missed you.

Missed you too.

If he’d missed her, he could have called at least once while she was gone.

She helped Leia attach Lumpy’s leash and reluctantly put on her light jacket. It wasn’t that cold out and she wouldn’t get sick from a little fresh air. It was still early in the evening, but Rey liked every time of day. Even late at night, when things were dark, there would always be a light and someone to protect her.

They were taking the shortcut through the alley when she heard what she thought was a sob coming from mom. Rey paused, concern gripping her as she took her hand. Had Kylo really made too big of a mess? Was she also worried that something serious had happened that they were hiding? Then, Rey heard it with more clarity, her small ears twisting to adult tones. Leia was laughing.

Rey giggled too but still asked what was funny.

“I’m just happy, Rey. We went away for the weekend and the worst thing that happened was that they left paper towels everywhere. There was no fighting. There were no phone calls that there had been some argument or that he was upset. They were just…teenagers for the weekend. He was just a kid, hanging out in pyjamas. There haven’t been fights at school. He talks to us more. I don’t think it will ever be perfect for him, but now I feel relieved that I was worried for nothing.” Leia squeezed her hand. “I’m sorry, Rey. I didn’t mean some of that. You both are allowed to be upset. We’ll never tell you not to be. But seeing him have a friend again who makes him relax is a very good thing. Especially if he feels like he can talk to him about what he’s going through.”

“Kylo really likes him,” Rey said, feeling the ache from keeping a secret press on her stomach.
“They talk a lot, sometimes about stuff that me and Kylo talk about.”

Leia nodded, still holding her hand. Her steps slowed for a moment. “Are you worried that he’s not making time for you? That this is a bad change?”

Rey quickly shook her head. It wasn’t bad. She had made up her mind a month ago, even though Kylo hadn’t told her what exactly was happening. He was so good at explaining things but this went left unsaid. “I’m okay, mom. I…sometimes I can think about things that aren’t him. I have my friends too. Rose lets me draw pictures that her mom thinks are scary, but Rose says that her mom’s a fart.”

“Really? A fart?” Leia laughed again. Rey’s ears burned at saying something so silly and she straightened her shoulders, trying to remind herself that she shouldn’t say things like that. “I’ll have to talk to her about that. Do you want to have more sleepovers with Rose? And with Finn? We can always ask. They like you too.”

“Maybe,” Rey shrugged. “I like having friends. I have school and dance class and gymnastics. I meet people all of the time and like finding the nice ones. And Kylo needs them too, the nice people.”

*Is it okay for him to kiss his friends?* The question burned in Rey’s mind but she pushed it down again. If it was something important, Kylo would tell her.

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Poe couldn’t stay the night. Rey was sitting at the top of the stairs, watching them say goodbye as night set in within their house. They’d both changed into their wrinkled clothes, left too long in the cool drier. But Kylo still let him keep the pyjamas. He handed them to the other boy and they held each other’s eyes and Poe finally nodded.

Han drove him home. She and Kylo were finally alone. Mom was in the home office, catching up on the work that she’d missed on Friday. Rey didn’t really like going to mom’s work. It was too stressful, with too many people always walking too fast. But the home office was a nice place of peace. She’d give her old paper to draw on, filling the opposite side of something demanding and adult with colourful pictures of life and imagination.

“Leia’s happy he’s your friend,” Rey said. She liked sitting at the top of the stairs. She could see the entire house and could picture every day that they’d spent there. Sometimes, she could imagine Kylo when he was small, climbing the stairs or playing with his old dog.

Kylo met her eyes as he climbed the stairs. He didn’t look upset that Poe was gone. He just looked tired. He had blinked several apologies for forgetting about her, but she wanted them in real words now. Instead, there was another question. “Are you?”

“Yeah,” Rey said and grinned, trying not to act confused. “It makes me happy that you’re happy.”

He sat down next to her, looking down at the darkened kitchen. “I’m sorry I forgot to call you. I really shouldn’t have forgotten that. I thought about you the whole time. It was like I was talking to you a lot of the time so I thought I was…just talking to you. We were talking. A lot.”

She put her hand on his and made him look at her. “About there?”
Gazing down at her hand, he bit his lip. “He understands. I don’t know how, but he understands what happened to us. Or at least he’s really good at trying to understand. He’s got problems too. And I like hearing about them. I’m trying to make sure that it’s fair. I didn’t listen to Hux enough and now he hates me. I can’t do that to Poe.”

“I’ve seen him sad too. He can be sad around me. I told him.” Rey was getting tired and a yawn escaped her mouth. “Can we go to bed now?”

He kissed her forehead, letting his lips linger. He was quiet for a few moments, resting his head against hers. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

Yep. More teenage boys kissing, references to rape, suicide, and murder. Thanks for reading :)
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Rey's demons start to rise. And Kylo deals with a new problem at school. The kids share a night alone with consequences. See chapter notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rey sometimes forgot her nightmares. Sometimes they would disappear when she woke up, but other times they’d stay with her all day. It had been that way for the last two years, when she’d stopped living in a nightmare and just had to deal with them. Sometimes she would see Anja’s face in a hallway, her arms hanging limp at her sides; she would scream for help but no one heard it but her. She wouldn’t be able to focus at school and grew more and more frustrated until the classroom helper took her to sit somewhere else, somewhere where she could think. Her mind would clear and the present would be right where she left it.

But just when she thought they were getting better, they would happen again.

Kylo would be there to help her, but he couldn’t be with her at school. He probably would be there if they let him. And now that he was driving on his own more often, they’d have less time together. He was fighting for independence, not to get away from her; that’s what he would say with his eyes when they fell asleep together at night. But on the mornings when she had nightmares that she remembered, he’d ride with her and keep her safe until they were apart. Kylo hated how he couldn’t take away her bad feelings like he used to. Maybe being in the world just made more space for her problems to get bigger.

She felt like the time that they spent together was less, but the way that Kylo spoke and acted was more even important. He wasn’t zoning out as often; he’d spend more time reading or texting, but he wasn’t in his head as much. Crying to him felt easier. He’d hold her and she wouldn’t feel like he was reverting back towards hitting bottom.

Sometimes she could ignore the shadows and ghosts that followed her at school. Those things were all in her head. Maz would tell her that they’re still important, that they mean something, but the things that mattered the most were what was happening now and how she kept moving forward. Everything was supposed to take time and she had to make the images seem less frightening. But to Rey her legs were still too short so her feet couldn’t make big enough steps.

She was forgetting the other children more and more. That’s where her feet were taking her. The people around her now, her friends, filled up her life and made her days mostly happy.

Kylo made her happy, when he was happy. When he was sad or upset, she would have to try harder to be happier for him. But that also made him feel guilty. Climbing into their bubble and floating away together was something that Rey depended on everyday, even when she was looking for other people to help or to help her. The world was too big to just have one person. Mom and dad would always be there too. And Kylo had her, but Poe too.

But sometimes, Rey just thought about what she didn’t have.
The last few weeks were making her not want to talk again.

The argument with the other kids at the spring concert had made it all clear to her. They were supposed to perform two dances. She had practiced extra hard, ignoring how her costume itched when she moved and stretched. She would always squirm and the teacher would ask her if she had to use the washroom. She would leave practice and enjoy having her leotard off for those few minutes. It itched worse than panties did. But she had to do it. She had to practice more, like Kylo did with his training.

Mom and dad got him a weight set for the basement for the anniversary. They didn’t say it was for that day, but they couldn’t forget it and the world wouldn’t let them either. A journalist followed them home from school one day and they had to get a police car outside of their house. It was better if he just spent time in the basement. She could hardly lift some of the weights, but he looked at the set with intense eyes and clenched hands. She got to practice her dancing with him and he always flopped on the couch with her, letting her wipe the sweat from his forehead.

But the police car went away and things were almost normal again. Whatever normal meant with how much her underwear itched now.

Agent Jinn came to see them that week, the week of the anniversary, a week before the concert. Kylo showed him his report cards and wrestling score sheets, exploding with excitement over seeing him for the first time in so many years. He let Kylo take over the conversation over dinner. It was all about progress for Kylo then. He had practiced with her and Poe in his room, going over what he wanted to say and do when Agent Jinn was there. His eyes disappeared into his head and the words that he was emphasizing repeatedly. Poe had given Rey a long look of concern, then his arms folded across his chest. *Yeah, sounds good, Ky.* Kylo’s eyes narrowed at him then, studying the words like he didn’t believe them. Poe challenged him with raised eyebrows, before they shared a look that Rey didn’t see anyone share with Kylo before except for her.

Poe had the same look at the dinner, being the quietest one at the table for once. He had shaken the agent’s hand, looking at Kylo intently during the introduction and then spent most of the dinner looking like he wanted to disappear. Kylo seemed to forget he was there. It must have hurt.

Rey sat next to Agent Jinn, holding his hand. He had big hands, ones that had helped save them and protect other children and other people. She wanted to listen to what he was saying, but touching and being quiet felt better. She ran her hand on the golden band that stood out on his finger and ran her hand along the ridges.

He couldn’t come to the spring concert. Rey felt bad for asking, but he looked like he really meant it. He was only there for a couple of days and had work to do. But he was really sorry. His eyes said that more than his words. She knew that he asked about her; Kylo would tell her.

She gave him the pictures that she’d been drawing of the other kids, to help their parents. Leia had stopped talking that much about the group for the parents of the murdered kids. It felt strange to Rey when she realized it. Didn’t they want to remember their kids together? But Agent Jinn had nodded firmly at Rey that she was always helping with her memories if she focused on how much the children meant to their parents: how they died needed to be put in the past. He had put the pictures in his bag, telling her that she was doing so much by continuing to move forward too. She’d added more details about what she could remember before she forgot.

Thinking about forgetting always made her underwear feel more itchy.

It was strange to get ready for the concert. Other kids would be singing, but they’d be dancing. Kylo put on a crimson red sweater, turning to ask her if it looked okay. It was a little tight, his arms
stretching the fabric. But she still said that it looked nice. At least it wasn’t black.

He looked like he wanted to say something else, but they were going to be late.

She was already dressed in her sparkly outfit, but squirmed in the backseat of the car.

They were the third group to perform and Emily was crying. She was whining to their instructor that her grandmother had come from far away, real far away, to see her perform for the first time. And she wasn’t allowed to take pictures. She didn’t understand why and Rey felt her face getting hot, knowing that she’d been the reason why. Han and Leia had talked to her after they spoke with Agent Jinn before he left, before she went upstairs to sleep with the boys. The interest in the case always spiked at that time of the year, Jinn had said. People would be looking for pictures of Rey and Kylo. The same people that ran the websites about them, which drove Kylo into aggressive and silent anger, would be looking for them.

So, no pictures during the concert for their group. Everyone had to sign a form. But could a piece of paper really stop people?

They could have their own pictures, for memories, but don’t share them.

Emily deserved to be upset, but it wasn’t Rey’s fault, even though it was her problems that had brought them to that point.

“If I don’t go, they can take pictures,” Rey whispered, grabbing her instructor’s hand. It was a constant stream of kids, parents, and dance teachers. It would have been overwhelming if her insides weren’t screaming at her to do something.

Her instructor knelt down, her curly blonde hair flopping into her face. “You don’t have to do that, Rey. There are other kids in our group that can’t have their pictures taken too. Other parents have signed those sheets too. This isn’t your fault.”

“But it means so much to Emily.” She gripped her teacher’s hand more. “Please. I don’t want to do it now.”

The first group’s music started and Rey knew that she was running out of time. Her teacher led her out of the area behind stage and down the short stairs into the hallway. This was her normal school, but it looked so much different at night, with so many different people around. The shadows were heavier and more demanding, making every corner looking more menacing.

“Can I talk to Kylo?” Her voice came out in a whine.

“Your brother? Yes. I’ll go get him. Wait here.” Her instructor was nice, but didn’t understand everything.

She left her sitting on a bench in the hallway, by herself. The lights were dim there and she drew her legs under her chin. The costume would get wrinkled, but she didn’t care.

She heard Kylo’s shoes before she saw him. She looked up and he knelt beside her.

“Don’t do that, mom will…” she started to say and then her voice stopped working. She whimpered and he pulled her into his arms. “You’ll get dirty.”

“I’m already dirty,” he mumbled. He’d touched the side of the car earlier and had bit the inside of his cheek hard. “We’ll wash them when we get home. But forget about that.”
He didn’t need to ask what was wrong. She’d tell him anything. “Everybody hates me because they can’t take pictures.” She forced out the words, knowing the tears were already ruining her makeup. “Emily was upset.”

“Is Emily everybody? She’s not even your friend Rey.” Kylo sat back, smoothing her hair. “She’s also the worst dancer in the group. And it’s important that you’re protected. This is for your future not hers. No one is allowed to take pictures of me at wrestling. And I don’t want that for other reasons.”

She managed to giggle at his tone. He’d been at almost every one of her dance practices, doing homework and waiting with Paige. Poe snuck in once, laughing with them both about something that she couldn’t hear until the teacher told them to be quiet. She turned away and when she looked back, it was just Paige sitting and reading a book. They were only gone for a few minutes, but it was Kylo alone who returned. Paige said something to him and he just grinned before looking up at her with bright eyes. He watched her do a step perfectly and smiled at her. Even when he wasn’t there, he was still thinking about her.

Those same eyes were looking at her right then and his face softened when she laughed. He also saw through her fear, touching her shoulder and leaning closer. “You don’t have to be afraid of messing anything up. You don’t have to be perfect all the time. Don’t be like me. I’m…I didn’t mean to make you like this. But you get mad when I’m worried about being…upset too.”

She couldn’t help it, but she did try to listen. She tried to learn from him because that’s what he wanted. He’d beat himself up for losing, driving himself harder the next time. She never thought that Kylo would let himself give up, but he did stumble quite often.

Maybe this was her turn.

She heard her instructor start to pace down the hall and quickly switched to blinking.

*I’m scared. I’m scared to mess up in front of everyone.* She bit her lip and shook her head. *I told Maz I could do this and now I don’t think I can.*

*You’ve worked hard for this, so I think that you deserve to be there. I can stand backstage. I can stand where you can see me. You can’t see anyone when you’re on the stage. Remember that we checked? But if you can see me, you can go out there and show off all of the hard work that you’ve done.* He was holding her hand, repeating what he had offered earlier. She’d said no then. But now, she needed him.

*You won’t feel dumb? Standing there?*

*No, because then I’d be with you.*

Kylo took her hand and her instructor turned to look at them.

“Ready, Rey? Is your brother coming with you?”

They’d told her so many times that they weren’t brother and sister. They were more than that.

He stood backstage, watching her with his head tilted. He wasn’t anywhere than with her.

Her performance wasn’t perfect, but being with him there was a better feeling.
Kylo had always thought his life would end by Snoke’s cruel treatment or by his own hand. The former thought had been pushed away over time, but he still knew that part of what Snoke had forced him to do was always lingering within him. Ending his own life, however, had also subsided into a minor bruise in the back of his mind. It had been almost two months since the urge to even harm himself had bubbled to the surface.

But now he wanted to be absorbed into the atmosphere when Mrs Yaddle decided he would be partnered with Hux for the last major project of the term: a paper and a presentation. Having to work together. And he couldn’t work on his own, like he usually craved and demanded as prudently as he could. Mrs Yaddle, with her caring eyes and calm voice, would usually let him do what he wanted.

But not this time.

They didn’t look at one another. Kylo could only see how Hux mirrored his dejection. It had to happen at some point. Why now? Kylo renewed his hatred for the world in that instant. He only had one class with Poe and they could never work together. Next year, they’d already decided that they’d be lab partners from the beginning. But this year, he had to deal with this.

Even as they both slowly turned and shifted to desks closer to one another, he wanted to flee from the room and be done with school. But another part of him, the one that was mostly hushed, kept him grounded: finish school, get out.

The classroom was filled with voices of others talking. It was always random chatter that would normally cause him close down and focus on his breathing. Now, he could only focus on the silence.

Hux sneered as he sat next to him. “Why now.”

“How now what?” Kylo snapped. “I didn’t steal your fucking girlfriend.”

Liza had even pulled away from him slightly at that point. He would pointedly only talk to Poe at lunch and ignore her, but then he’d catch the hurt in Paige’s eyes and would have to listen to some story about a nail salon or shopping or how great her dad was. One time, one lunch period, a thick feeling made his chest tighten when Poe reached out to look at the designs etched onto Liza’s nails. She smiled brightly at him, explaining how it had taken an hour to get them all done. With his hand still on Liza’s, Poe shot him a look with a wink that took him a moment to understand. He let go of the apprehension that had claimed him then when he unravelled the look: I’m just trying to get along with her; this is a boring-ass story. He’d stopped calling her a bitch to her face mostly because Paige would get upset.

They never saw how they’d brush hands after lunch, before parting for the afternoon block of classes. They never saw stolen kisses in empty hallways before leaving for home.

Now, the last person he’d ever tell was looking at him with dark eyes and impatience.

“That’s not the problem…uh. Um, okay. Fuck. Let’s just…how many weeks do we have to work on this?” Hux shoved the paper away and rubbed his eyes. He looked tired. Kylo instantly pushed the thought away; he couldn’t feel sympathy for Hux. Never.

But the knot in Kylo’s stomach tightened. “Three.”
“Great. Just great.” Hux rubbed his eyes. He hated him this much; he couldn’t stand to work with him for the project either. Kylo only hated him as a reaction. They had their childhood. That part had only been tainted by what had happened afterwards. “Let’s…go work in the library. I can’t think right now, can you?”

Kylo almost wanted to smirk, seeing how uncomfortable the redhead was. “No.”

“Mrs Yaddle? Can we go to the library?” Hux raised his voice over the other questions from the class. He got a firm yes and they gathered up their books. Kylo was just grabbing random things. They probably weren’t the right ones.

Paige’s eyes burned into his as he left the room, trailing after his former friend. He kept that thought with him as they ended up in the library. His legs didn’t get him there, but he was somehow in their dingy library. Middles schoolers were crowded around the computers, giggling about something. The librarian was moving around, her cart squeaking as she returned books to their spots. It would all have been boring on a normal day but he wanted just to focus on the random background noise rather than what he wanted to do. Hux sat down heavily and glared at him before looking at the assignment again.

“It’s not that hard. Why did she give us three weeks?” His former friend put his head in his hands and leaned heavily against the brightly coloured table. “How are you going to stand this?”

Kylo wrinkled his nose as he sat down across from him. It was three weeks because they would have other work at the same time. Didn’t Hux see that? “You’re the one who hates me.”

Hux exhaled and pretended to read the sheet again. “It…it’s not my fault.”

The stupid project forgotten, Kylo stood from the table. “Of course it’s your fault,” he hissed.

Hux’s pale cheeks reddened as he glanced around at all of the nervous faces around them. The middle schoolers sat up, staring at them and hoping for a fight. He heard the librarian setting down books heavily against her desk, but he didn’t react.

“Sit down, Kylo. Let’s work on this. Or at least start working on it,” Hux started. “And it is my fault. I’m…sorry.”

It came out in a stutter and Kylo sat down, glaring at the redhead. “You don’t mean that.”

Hux closed his eyes and leaned back. Kylo could see the stray blonde hairs on his cheeks, where he’d missed shaving. Of course he couldn’t get that right.

“You’ll never believe me. So just…come on. Look at the assignment sheet and stop glaring at me so I know what we need for the next part.” Hux was talking and he followed the orders but his eyes were always glancing at his face. “Okay, we need to finish an outline for today…um…”

The period couldn’t end soon enough.

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Poe was waiting for him by his locker, full of smiles and happiness. He flinched as Kylo snatched his bag out of his locker and shoved what he needed into it. He slammed the door and ground his
teeth together at the sound. He pulled on his jacket, grabbed his keys and then nodded at him that he was done with today.

It was only when they were parking in his spot in the driveway that he finally put his head down and screamed. Sitting with Hux for the entire period had lifted a burning frustration and reminded him that Hux didn’t want to be his friend anymore. He wasn’t supposed to do that. He was a liar and a betrayer.

“Look, Ky, I’m going to touch you now,” Poe said softly from the passenger seat. He’d almost forgotten he was there. “Let me know if that’s okay?”

“Yeah,” he managed to say. “Please.”

The last part came out pleading. But he did feel better when a warm arm came around his side to pull him into a hug.

“Tell me what happened.”

The words were so simple, but the answer escaped him. He just leaned into Poe’s neck. He felt a light kiss to his forehead and then he grunted, kicking at nothing.

“Hey, so, you’re upset. Can we go inside and talk and not scuff up your car?”

Poe was right, like so many times before. This was all despite how wrong Kylo’s reaction was when presented with a challenge that was easy for someone normal.

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Rey had thought that today would be normal, but nothing about it had been. Even in the couple of weeks since the concert, she’d noticed more and more wrong things around her. She’d only made it through the performance because Kylo was watching her from beside the stage.

She’d gone to school and Rose and Finn had an argument. Kylo had been humming to himself before they parted before school. He was sitting at the breakfast table, writing in the blue journal, not the red one. He smiled at parts of his scribbling before he closed the book and told her to have a good day. She didn’t understand where his good mood came from.

Then came the annoying talk at school. And her teacher got mad at her because she didn’t want to sit at another table because that spot was hers. Her underwear was itchy and she could only sit in one spot because of it.

She had been grumpy when she got into Han’s car. She had spilled her thoughts to him in rapid and unending sentences. She was tired of her friends and she was tired of her teachers. She said that with shaking words to Han and then shut her mouth to frown out the window. She was just confused about Kylo. He’d be listening to her with kind eyes and soft touches, seeming like he never wanted to be away from her. She liked having Poe around but it wasn’t fair that Kylo could kiss people and she couldn’t. Her teacher and principal had to have a stupid meeting that day at the school with her when she had just kissed a couple of boys. They weren’t even cute boys; they were just boys and she wanted to know why Kylo thought it was so special.

Maybe it was just Poe who was special because she didn’t feel anything with those boys.
“It sounds like a rough day, sweetheart,” Han said, tapping on the steering wheel. “But it’s Friday. It’s the weekend. You’re going to have some time to think about all of this and put it in order. Maybe we can fill out the chart again.”

The chart. The chart. In her grumpy mood, she bit her lip as she thought about the stupid chart. Happy, less happy, sad, more sad, and neutral. She hadn’t done that since she was five. There were too many things that were under neutral and she was so angry at that moment; it might feel good to fill up some of the other squares. Teachers were stupid and she should stop trying to impress them. Boys were stupid because they didn’t know how to kiss.

“I don’t think I need the chart,” she mumbled, clutching her pink backpack. “I just need to talk to Kylo.”

She liked the pictures on her bag. They were bright and happy figures holding hands. It felt silly that she still had the same backpack as last year but she didn’t want to be wasteful. Finn was the same. He loved one jacket, even though he had holes in one elbow.

“Did he have practice today?” Han asked.

Rey rolled her eyes. “The season is over, dad.”

He glanced over, parked at the stop sign down the block from their house. “That’s right. I forgot.”

“You didn’t forget,” she answered. “You were making sure I was thinking.”

Grinning, Han leaned back and winked at her. “But it wasn’t a test. Just checking on how you’re feeling.”

She wanted to talk more, but settled for putting her head against the window.

Even though the ride had calmed her down, she wanted to throw her backpack when she got inside. She had stomped up the back porch and was mildly satisfied with every small thunk against the wood. She thought it would feel good just to toss something and let it sit there, to not care about whoever had to pick it. Still, she hung it on the hook, narrowing her eyes at the fabric. There were spots of dirt and pen marks on one corner. Nothing ever stayed clean; she knew that she didn’t make it ruined, but it was still there. She huffed, flopping down to pull off her shoes.

“I think our girl needs a snack before dinner,” Han was behind her, calling to Leia in the kitchen. Rey had already heard the sounds of feet in the kitchen as she climbed the stairs. “Where are the boys?”

“In his room,” Leia let out a sigh that told her that Kylo was having a bad day too. But Leia quickly shook her head and her face changed into a smile when she looked at Rey. “Let’s get you something to eat so I can hear about your bad day. Then I’ll try to give you the barebones details I got out of them.”

Rey quirked her lips before nicking her head. She felt mildly selfish revisiting her own thoughts as she tried to read Leia’s look from earlier. It was almost easier to hold back whenever Kylo was angry or worried about something. But she had too; Maz reminded her to take more space and get her feelings out. She ate crackers and cheese, telling mom and dad about how everything had frustrated her and how she was always being told what to do, even when the things that she was doing weren’t really wrong. When it got to the point about trying to kiss the boys, she saw the familiar uncomfortable look between Han and Leia.

“Did they want you to kiss them, Rey?” Leia asked, leaning closer. That usually meant she did
something wrong and they were afraid to tell her.

“Yes, but then they lied and said they didn’t. I just wanted to try it. I don’t want them to be my boyfriend.” She tried to shake off her frustration and not sound whiny. “I promise I won’t do it again.”

They still sat down and explained why the boys probably lied. It sounded believable; maybe they were afraid that they were too young for kissing. Rey couldn’t explain why she’d wanted to do it. But if Kylo could keep secrets from her, she wasn’t going to tell him. Leia and Han held her hand and asked her about other feelings that she was having. She bit her lip, telling them how her underwear were more itchy again. Leia nodded, and said they’d try another type again. Han asked her about her most recent nightmares and Rey had shrugged. They were about Snoke breaking her arm, how it burnt and stung; they were about being trapped in a closet, remembering how Kylo taught her not to cry; they were about holding Anja’s hand when she was hurting. She didn’t get why they were asking about the nightmares.

“We’ll have a meeting at the school on Monday with them, okay? I’m mad that they didn’t call us.” Leia frowned, leaving the last part for Han. “But Rey, you need to tell us when you have these feelings too, okay? Not just Kylo.”

“I think I get it. Kissing is for when you’re older, with real friends. Right?” She asked, trying to nod away mom and dad’s worried faces. “Just don’t tell Kylo. He’ll get upset. I’ll tell him, okay?” She finished her snack and heard mom and dad talking about cancelling their plans for the night. She also heard dad call her school, leaving the house to talk outside, but Leia assured her that it wasn’t her that he was mad at. But there was some office party that they couldn’t avoid or cancel. Now that both Rey and Kylo were having bad days, maybe they should stay home.

“But I’m okay now,” she interrupted. She had been looking forward to not having the adults around for an evening. It would make up for the awful day she’d been having. They were going to watch movies and play normal games, not video games. Kylo had promised.

Han folded his arms. “We have a couple of hours to think about it. Go see what those boys are doing.”

They weren’t doing anything. They were sitting on the floor near Kylo’s bed, playing another dumb game about people in the woods. Kylo turned when he heard her and tried to give her a small smile, but she still saw that he was worried about something. She quickly sat next to him, pulling his arm around her shoulder for a hug.

“Kylo has to work with Hux on a project,” Poe said, setting his controller down. “I told him it’s not a big deal, the world isn’t ending. They don’t have to see each other outside of school or anything.”

“I still don’t want to work with him,” Kylo shot back. “He hates me.”

“Maybe.” Rey started, thinking through her words, “maybe he’ll not hate you anymore if you do a good job?”

Poe smirked. “I already told him that.”

Rey grinned at him, but her smile faltered. “Mom and dad are worried to leave us alone.”

Kylo’s head fell back against the bed. “I already told them it was fine.”

“I had a bad day too so they’re…” she shrugged, “…worried, I guess.”
Kylo flopped his head towards her, eyes instantly switched off his problem to hers. *What happened, angel?*

*Just silly things that I got mad about. But I’ve thought about it enough now. I’ll be fine in the morning.* She answered. She’d tell him more later, and he’d let her cry about it. But right now, they had to pretend that they weren’t upset anymore.

Rey shrugged out of Kylo’s arms to get her drawing book from his desk. She climbed onto the bed and started to turn her thoughts into forms to help her figure out how everyone must have felt instead of just looking at her own reactions. No one really understood her pictures except for Kylo. Maybe Agent Jinn; probably Agent Jinn too. He knew what the colours meant and what the shapes meant. He never wanted her to be sad, but still talked with her about it. He’d talk more when Poe wasn’t there, with kinder words and looks.

“**Kids?**” Han knocked on the doorframe, pulling them all out of their activities. “Everyone okay to be alone for the night.”

Kylo didn’t say anything. He just stared at the television.

“**Yeah, Mr Solo, we’re good,**” Poe said. “**I’ve figured out how to open the lock on the liquor cabinet.**”

Han sighed, folding his arms. It was a joke back at him and he didn’t like those. Rey had tried them. **“Yeah, but just stay out of the good stuff. Kylo, can I talk to you alone for a minute.”**

Kylo and his friend exchanged wide-eyed looks before he slowly stood up to talk to his father in the hallway. His shoulders were stiff and Rey hoped that they were because dad told him to do something and not because of anything else.

“**What’s up?**” Poe asked, biting his lip and turning to her.

“I don’t know,” Rey tried to shrug as she spoke. “But it’s probably something I said.”

“What’d you say? What happened at school today?” Poe’s voice was always kind and careful. He didn’t look sad right then. Maybe she could tell him. It was always hard to tell another sad person about how she was feeling. They never understood. Right now, he just looked worried. She could trust him. He was Kylo’s and they shared everything, like her and Kylo did.

“I kissed some stupid boys. It wasn’t special. It feels dumb now,” she slowly said. “But don’t tell Kylo I told you first.”

Poe stared at her, not speaking. “I don’t think that it’s that bad. Everybody played kissing games when I was your age and I kissed so many girls. If we were in the same class, I’d probably have kissed you too. But I think dad’s probably worried that it’s more about what happened there. Ky’s going to be worried too.”

Rey quickly shook her head. “But it’s not. Nobody kissed me when we were there. Snoke just bites people. I keep having a dream about him eating me. It’s like I can feel it. I wake up all itchy.”

“Hey, come here,” Poe said, pulling her into a hug. “Don’t you tell Ky about your nightmares?”

She nodded. “But I’ve been lying. And I don’t want to tell him about the boys. I don’t like lying, but he’s been happy now and I…”

She felt a light kiss placed on the top of her head. But it only came after a long inhale. “Rey, you
don’t make him unhappy telling him your thoughts and that bad stuff. You’re so special to him that even if he’s in a bad mood he’ll always listen to you. But you’re allowed to be confused too, you know? Don’t they tell you that in therapy?”

“Yeah, Maz does,” she answered, cuddling closer. “I like your hugs.”

“Hey, I like your hugs too.” He gently pulled her against him. “You can always talk to me about this stuff too, right? I’m here to help you too, since I’m with Ky.”

She nodded, closing her eyes. A warm feeling spread across her chest. “I like talking to you too.”

The door opened and Kylo’s arms were folded but his face wasn’t red. His eyes darted around the room before settling on her. After a brief second, he smiled lightly. He still glanced back and gave Han a slight nod before he sat beside Rey at the foot of the bed. She moved to shift into his arms, worried what dad might have told him.

He quickly looked down. He just said to take care of you tonight. That you were upset from school and were frustrated about other kids too. Guess we keep having the same problems.

She nodded, believing him because Han would never say anything that she wanted to be private. Maybe Kylo just needed a reminder.

Han looked at Rey with raised eyebrows and she gave him a small smile and a nod. Han still looked reluctant to leave, but he’d already changed into fancy party clothes. Rey liked getting dressed up, but was starting to like it less with how Kylo acted when something he really liked to wear didn’t fit anymore. She felt the same, but knew that she’d find something else to make her favourite. Mom and dad would always get her new clothes.

“Okay, well, there’s money for pizza on the counter. Rey, don’t drink that much soda tonight. Boys, remember to clean up your messes and walk the dog. Good bedtimes, all right?” Han said, opening his arms to her. She hopped from where she sat near the bed and hugged him. “Love you, baby girl. Make sure the boys take care of you.”

“I will,” she said, pulling back. “Bye dad. I love you.”

And they were alone. The house stilled around her and she shifted her weight, still standing in the doorway.

Poe turned off the television because Kylo was just staring at it, not moving.

“So, how can I cheer you both up? It’s shitty that everyone had bad days, so let’s do something about it. Ky, show Rey that picture I drew. The one you hated,” Poe was speaking, already standing. It was almost like Rey had always known him. He was more open than Hux, even when it came to being upset or mad about something.

Kylo put his head in his hands. “I need those notes. Why did you do that.”

“I like to make you mad,” Poe said and then grinned. “Come on, Rey. Get his bag.”

“Don’t touch my bag.”

Poe ignored him and lunged over the bed to grab Kylo’s satchel. Rey was frozen in the movements, not understanding why Poe didn’t listen to Kylo while at the same time wanting to tease him too. She never wanted him to feel bad, but he wasn’t actually angry. He was just acting like he was. She quickly grabbed the bag too and Kylo looked at them with mock hate in his eyes.
She could still feel the love there and let herself go with the joke.

“It’s in this one, yeah,” Poe spoke rapidly, handing the notebook to her while he half hung on the edge of the bed. Rey let her eyes grow wide at how many notebooks Kylo had in his bag. He didn’t want to let go of any idea, but it must have been heavy. “Look at it. It’s genius.”

Poe opened the notebook to the right page. Everything was carefully dated, with topics and subjects donning the top of every page. Neat lines and coloured highlights for different things that Rey didn’t understand. Some things were underlined.

“Hux is a pig man,” Rey read, looking at the silly sketch in the corner of Kylo’s carefully detailed physics notes. Poe had drawn the figure in pen in the corner of a man that looked vaguely like a pig if she squinted. “What’s a pig man?”

Kylo groaned. “He’s making fun of me. Don’t listen to him. It’s about what I finished reading in English. Now I have some dumb Shakespeare shit.”

Poe raised his eyebrows at her. “It’s Othello. Do you know Othello?”

“No, I’ve never met him,” Rey answered, confused.

But Poe didn’t laugh at her. She’d said a stupid thing but he still kept his face positive. “You’ll know him one day. In like ten years. I think he’ll be the same when you get to him. Still bitter and jealous because he got manipulated.”

He held her eyes and she nodded, trying to put herself in the higher classes that they were taking. Would they be harder for her? Kylo would be grown up, but he’d still help her so she could grow up too.

Breaking out of the prison of the future, she giggled again, mostly feeling happy. “I know what game we should play. It’s really fun. Can we play it?”

Poe didn’t even look at Kylo. “Yeah, let’s do it. Whatever makes Kylo forget about the pig man and you forget about the kids at school.”

She held Poe’s hand as they walked down the stairs, Kylo following behind them by a few paces. She was quietly feeding off of Poe’s energy with the teasing. Kylo looked miserable but he wasn’t really. There was a hidden smile in his eyes when they sat on the sofa and Rey started explaining the game, taking out the box from below the coffee table. They had a bunch of games, but this one was becoming her favourite. Having the two boys look at her and listen to her made her almost forget what an awful day it had been. She saw, out of the corner of her eye, how Poe put his hand close to Kylo’s leg. The second he moved his hand closer, Kylo’s shoulders relaxed. She tilted her head and smiled. And then they started playing.

The game went exactly like she thought it would. Kylo was a bad guesser.

She laughed more than she thought she would at how Poe acted. They made a team against Kylo, determined to bug him into caring about the game. He hated losing so when he finally realized that he was, it was almost too late.

He took a card and frowned. “I can’t do this. This card makes no sense.”

He was slouched down on the couch, frowning at the piece of red cardboard in his hand.

“Come on, do it Ky. I believe in you.” Poe was smiling, gripping at her shoulder.
“You’ve thought wrong,” he answered and slowly stood. “You’re just going to laugh at me.”

“That’s what’s fun!” Rey grinned, pushed by the hand on her back. “Be silly, Kylo. That’s why you’re losing.”

He steadied his eyes at her. “I’m only losing because it’s two against one.”

She felt her smile touch her eyes and he finally set his head back and started acting out the card. She tilted her head, watching his arms and body move in more and more concentrated patterns. She frowned when he glared at them for not getting it.

“Oh, oh! A clock! Is it a clock?” Poe suddenly said.

“Yes! It was a fucking clock!” Kylo looked at them like they were the stupidest people on earth. But Poe still leapt up and hugged him until she heard a long sigh from Kylo as they embraced. Her smile only brightened as they parted, both looking red-faced and avoiding each other’s eyes.

Kylo’s hand brushed Poe’s as they sat back down on the couch.

“So, we won, right Rey?” Poe asked, instantly turning to her.

“We beat him,” she answered, forgetting how bad the day had been before then, when all the words and feelings were blocked in her chest. “Can we get dinner now?”

She hugged Poe’s waist rather than Kylo’s when they went to the kitchen to decide what they wanted to eat. Pizza was good. She liked pizza. But now she wanted to try something else.

“Kylo, what haven’t I eaten before?” she asked, holding Poe’s hand as they danced to no music in the kitchen.

She wavered in slow dips and turns, the ones that were her favourite in class. He let her spin with his hand, easily figuring out how she wanted to turn.

She looked to Kylo when she heard music start to play from nowhere. He set his phone down on the counter and smiled at her. She saw how big Poe’s eyes got as he looked over at Kylo, but he still took her hands and danced with her in her second-favourite room of the house. Lumpy whined at their dancing; he stuck his nose in between them and pushed Poe away. She laughed and danced with the dog as the boys moved closer to one another. The song didn’t matter. Rey just liked being silly for once. She felt like she had to act a certain way at school; she had to tell her friends how to act and couldn’t show them too much silliness.

“Dance with me!” she shouted, reaching for Kylo’s hands.

Kylo could make jokes, but he was too serious. He had never really danced with her like this before. They’d never had a reason to. But now, he took her hands and swept her up into his arms. She wrapped her arms around his neck and she let her imagination take them to her empty space: the one where it was just her and him. How he acted most days, this wasn’t him. His happiness was more just an opposite sadness. It made her want to be like him, but also to teach him more of the softer side of the world that she could see. But he was getting there and it helped her remember it too.

Caught up into his space, Rey let her happiness blossom in her chest. He was so close and wasn’t mad. He would sometimes be mad when things turned silly or dumb. She hugged him and kissed his neck. It was so good that mom and dad left.
She wasn’t sad anymore.

They ordered sushi. There was still a long list of things that Rey hadn’t tried but it was the first thing that he realized he might want too.

Kylo didn’t want to leave them alone to pick it up, but it was the only way to do it. He hated the idea of a stranger bringing their food to his house. He didn’t want anyone to know where he lived that didn’t have to know it. Memories of the annoying and intrusive journalist flashed in his mind and kept him steady in his decision.

He also needed to steal a few minutes alone.

So he sent Poe out with Rey to walk the dog. She was already telling him about Lumpy’s favourite bushes when they parted in the alley.

He didn’t play board games, especially charades. But he would for Rey. He didn’t dance to bad pop music in the kitchen. But he would for Rey.

The problem he was having now was that he’d never done it before without having Poe’s eyes there to push him out. Rey had easily accepted that he didn’t want to play the game with his parents. He told her that he’d rather watch her, and that was true. His father had danced with Rey in the kitchen on New Year’s Eve and his own stubborn unwillingness to embarrass himself, to act truly childish, kept him from doing the same.

He’d been drawn into her harder, because he wanted to make them both happy. He wanted Rey to forget her bad day. The words from his father didn’t make him nervous at first. But over the course of the evening, it was clearer that Rey was working harder to keep up with them and smile more. However, he had liked taking care of her and making her feel special. It helped him to keep crushing his bad day into dust.

And he also didn’t want Poe to leave.

Being alone meant he could sort through the two boxes in his head. Poe’s touches had been light that evening, with all of his attention on Rey. They were both there as a team.

He was desperately trying to make up for what happened last time that they were alone in the house. He wanted to let his body go loose and felt grounded by having Rey there. The touches were just as careful as they needed to be; he’d taught Poe how to ask him with his eyes over the last few weeks. They had found hidden moments to be alone at school and exchanged embraces on his bed on the few evenings that they’d been able to steal between homework and bedtimes and goodbyes that were growing more and more painful.

But it was a good hurt. He never thought that he’d think that way, but the last two months had taught him that. There was always the promise of school the next day, or text messages late at night. He wasn’t doing anything to push Poe away, but was also not able to do anything to get them closer.

Tonight was surfacing from under a frozen pond.
He wanted to leave his fear in the cold water, to scramble out onto the ice.

But he knew that it would still crack and he’d still fall back into it.

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Rey woke up when mom lifted her up. She hadn’t realized that she’d fallen asleep. Flashes of her eyes drifting shut rattled to her memory as she slowly realized where she was. The images were from the last movie: she had managed to stay awake that long. They’d watched movies after dinner. Sushi in front of the television had turned into more laughing and teasing. Kylo had tried to give her all of his shrimp, but Poe had made him eat one. He looked disgusted and said that he hated them both; she just laughed along with Poe as they shared the same look. She still saw Poe steal from Kylo, taking the pieces that he liked more.

They watched three movies. Kylo let her take his pick; he had made her do it because he felt the same way about deciding anything at that point. Or maybe he trusted her more to pick something. She was nervous picking a movie for boys, especially how they were. She left to go to the bathroom and made sure she opened the door upstairs loudly to make sure that she wouldn’t make them feel worried around her. She was in between them on the couch and decided to pick a fantasy movie. Something about dragons. When it got too scary, both boys hugged her and told her that she was safe. She already knew that it wasn’t real, but she hated seeing kids hurting. Both Poe and Kylo wanted to turn it off but she shook her head. If she could just shut her eyes, she could remember good and real things. They weren’t getting hurt for real.

The next movie was something about sports and she was more confused than anything. Dad watched sports. Kylo would come downstairs and say something about a baseball or hockey game like he knew what was going on. Han had sat with her and tried to explain a hockey game to her a few times. It still seemed silly. Everyone should win. Everyone should be happy. Losing was something that Kylo hated and she started to understand why; losing meant hurting other people who cared about you.

Parts were in Spanish and she looked at Poe with big eyes as he smiled at the screen. He was telling things to them both. Rey didn’t want to take Spanish. She wanted to take French, like Leia. When she had started real school, they had a big meeting. It was like having her future laid out for her in sheets of paper and lists with expectations. Leia took French so she wanted to do that too to make sure mom still loved her when she got bigger. But watching Poe teach Kylo how to pronounce words made her want to still take French. They needed to have this part. She’d teach Kylo French like Poe was doing with Spanish when she was older and knew it perfectly.

She was too tired to make her final choice. And they ended up watching something really, really boring. Kylo had looked it up and it was supposed to be good but they were all falling asleep within the first half an hour. People were just talking and not doing anything, and then there was running and more nothing. She put her head in Kylo’s lap and stretched her feet out on Poe’s. He rubbed her ankles and she looked up at him with a small smile before lying back down again.

It was late and she was awake after midnight, still forcing herself to watch boring people in brown coats pretend that they were in a movie.

She could do big kid things too.
Still, mom and dad were home. And she was back to being small.

Yawning, she hugged Leia and looked down at the boys. They were stirring awake, pretending that they hadn’t fallen asleep as well. Kylo tried to fix his messy hair before giving up and staring off into nothing.

“They should have known better,” Leia mumbled. “What were you watching?”

She shook her head. “It wasn’t scary. It was really boring.” She leaned in to whisper to Leia. “It was about the FBI.”

Leia still watched the two dark-haired heads on her couch with a frown. She was wearing her glasses and smelled like a party. Rey took a deep breath to inhale the smell. Han came into the room and she saw a dark blotch on his shirt. They were also too tired. Rey felt herself creeping closer to Leia and hated that tears were coming to her eyes. She hated being tired. She’d done a good job. She’d been so good the entire night. She wanted to argue more, but it would only come out in sobs.

She just wanted mom right then. She hugged her closer and gripped at her hair. They must have been tired if Leia’s hair was down and long.

She hated her own whimpering when she heard it.

“Boys,” Leia raised her voice, looking down at the two half-asleep teenagers on the sofa. “Go sleep downstairs for once. You’ve worn her out. Ben, we don’t tell you what to do because you know better. Can you look at me for a second?”

Kylo lifted his head and blinked at her. “We know better. But it was fun. It really was fun, mom.”

Leia sighed and hugged Rey closer. “What did you eat tonight?”

“We got sushi. And we cleaned up everything,” Poe said, his nervousness clear in his voice. “Rey really liked it, right Rey?”

She nodded and then whispered into mom’s neck, to make it feel like a secret. “I really liked it. It was really good. We took Lumpy for a walk and Kylo went and got it. I didn’t have any bad thoughts.”

“Okay, everyone,” Han finally said, striding into the room. “It’s two a.m. Ben, Rey had a bad day. Give her some space. There’s a couch and a bed in the basement. No playing video games all night. Go and sleep and don’t stare at screens all night, boys.”

Kylo sat up and was about to argue but she watched the fight die in his eyes and drop his head.

“We’re okay, we can do that,” Kylo answered. “I’m sorry, dad. It was nice tonight. Rey just wanted to be like us and we…we messed up. I messed up. She wanted to spend time with us and I…”

She was being carried upstairs as the conversation continued without her voice. She was too tired. She was already falling asleep again. Rey wanted to object, but instead she just rested her head against Leia’s neck and let herself get taken away to bed.

Leia let her change herself, even though her hands were sleepy.

“Were the movies really okay, Rey?” she asked.
Rey nodded, feeling the softness of her pyjama top on her body. Her pants were better; she loved how the pants felt. When she slept, she didn’t have to wear panties. That part was the worst at school. She had told Kylo how much she hated it and he had spent days thinking about why she didn’t want to wear them. There were so many struggles that they shared and this part brought them both pain. Her underwear shouldn’t be such a big deal but he hated, with pure agony in his eyes, whenever they needed to buy new pairs. Other kids would have accidents at school. But mom and dad bought these things for her. She couldn’t ruin them. Kylo would blame himself when they talked about it, but it wasn’t his fault.

She settled into bed beside mom. “I picked something kind of scary in the beginning, but Poe and Kylo helped me. It wasn’t really scary because it wasn’t real. Then we watched Poe’s movie and it was kind of boring. I think I messed it up. I didn’t know what to pick for the last one so Kylo told me.”

She yawned, breathing in dad’s cologne on mom’s skin. They both smelled like Kylo, but covered up. “He should have picked something that everyone would like. Hey, Rey, we’re not keeping you from him. But maybe he needs to rethink his choices right now. He gets upset when he’s away from you.”

“No, you’re not,” she mumbled, nestling onto the bed. “He’s got…he needs his friend. I’m still…I’m…”

She lost her words, drifting in and out of sleep.

“Go to sleep, okay, sweetheart?” Leia said, kissing her on the cheek.

She’d spend many nights when Kylo had been away with the parts that made him the real him. But she still wanted to argue and be more like him in that moment. But she was pulled down too heavily by sleep. She knew that he loved her more. No matter what happened.

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Kylo’s face was still flushed when he slammed the door to the basement guestroom closed. He tried to stop from shaking but the room was too bright. He hit the light switch hard with his palm, sucking in the brief jab out of numbness.

“He wasn’t exactly being unfair,” Poe said, switching on the lamp by the bed. He stretched, the hint of his midriff catching Kylo’s eye before he sat down. The bed squeaked, and Kylo turned away again. When he spoke, Kylo could hear the shrug in his voice. “I tried to take some of the blame too.”

“He didn’t understand. He never gets it.” He was still looking at the closed door, tracing the knob with one hand as he lingered in the distance between them.

He finally turned and Poe was frowning at him. “You’re really exaggerating right now. We stayed up too late. You said that Rey wanted to stay up but we both saw her yawning. She’s still a little kid, no matter how tough she acts. Guess we didn’t want the night to end either. But he wasn’t really telling you what to do. And he was drunk and still didn’t punch you in the face so maybe calm down a little.”

Rage flared and then quickly snuffed itself out in his chest in one look from Poe. “He…he’d never
“Hey, come here.” Poe motioned with his hands and Kylo was drawn towards the bed. When he reached it, Poe took his hand. Still, the guilt remained. “That was…stupid of me to say. I was feeling sorry for myself. I know your dad isn’t like that. Totally unfair. Be mad at me now. I deserve it.”

Poe squeezed his hand, but his eyes were still glancing at the door. He was thinking about leaving; Kylo had upset him by being like he was. He needed to say something to keep him there. He thought again about the conversation upstairs. He’d been tired, but also upset at himself that he let Rey get that exhausted. Han was right; he should have known better. But they were trying to undo what had happened at school. He hadn’t thought about Hux all night and knew that Rey hadn’t thought about her friends either.

“It wasn’t stupid, you were right.” He leaned over, placing a light kiss on Poe’s cheek, hoping he’d turn towards him. “I guess I’m tired. I know that my dad is nothing like yours and that’s not right. And I’m more mad at myself than you.”

“I know that you see it, but they walk around on eggshells around you. They put up with me being here all the time because maybe I calm you down a bit, but I don’t know if I really do that. Like eating dinner with Jinn. Nothing could calm you down then. He means that much to you so I didn’t want to hold you back.” Poe’s eyes were still in the distance, not looking at him. “Ky, I like being here. I liked tonight, hanging out with you and Rey. I didn’t want us to get in trouble either but maybe it’s okay to get in trouble here. It was for Rey.”

Kylo sucked in a long breath. Poe saw right through him and his family, how they interacted. He kept wanting to hate his parents. He wanted to lash out at them for so long. In the beginning, it was the easiest way to sort out what had happened: they had left him, they had forgotten about him. They had left him to be cast into a life of agony and he had to get himself out, without help. But now, two years later, he’d only went through his bitterness when he needed it. It wasn’t always burning in the back of his mind.

Poe was letting him think, staying quiet. He turned to study him, tracing the line of his jaw. His hair had gotten longer, spilling around his ears. Kylo freed his hand to stroke down the other boy’s neck, feeling the length of the dark locks.

“Hey, stop it. I know I look stupid.” Poe leaned away from his hand. “Don’t remind me.”

“No, I like it.” Kylo countered, dropping his voice. “What did I do? What’s wrong?”

He finally turned to face him. His normally lively eyes were still, making him tense. “I’ve been thinking about what Rey told me all night. It’s why I was trying so hard. I couldn’t think about it anymore.”

His throat tightened. “What did she tell you?”

Confusion wrinkled the corners of Poe’s eyes. “Didn’t she tell you? With the blinking thing?”

He shook his head, reaching with his tense hand to grip Poe’s leg. “What are you talking about?”

Poe squeezed his eyes shut, frustration creasing his forehead. “Fuck. Fucking fuck. She didn’t tell you? She got in trouble at school because she was kissing other boys and I thought that it was because you told her and…”

His hand tightened. He tried to steady his breathing. Poe would think he was angry at him. “I didn’t
tell her. This is why I didn’t want to say anything to her. I told you.”

Poe flopped down on the bed, pulling away from him even as he scrambled to take his hand. He yanked it away and stood from the bed. He had rings under his eyes that Kylo rarely saw. It was after 2 a.m., closing in on 3 a.m. He squared his jaw and Kylo could see the tears forming in Poe’s eyes and he had to fight to stay on the large, plush guestroom bed. It was the biggest bed in the house. Kylo had intended a different conversation at that point. He wanted Poe’s comfort and not an argument. But if Rey was hurting and turning to Poe instead of him, then he had to push beyond what his body wanted. His hand went to press on his wrist, still keeping his eye on Poe.

“I’m not mad at you, okay? I’m just frustrated right now. Like, keeping this a secret from your parents? Yeah, I’m all for that. Your mom would tell mine and then I’d never see you again and I’d probably end up dead because my fucking dad isn’t giving me nice small talks. But you don’t lie to Rey and I just want to know what you’re really thinking if this is happening,” Poe took a deep breath and turned away. Kylo watched the rise and fall of his shoulders before he turned back. “Okay, I guess I am a little mad at you.”

“I…” he started and then bit his lip. He ran through several arguments in his head and none of them felt right every time that he looked into Poe’s eyes. He let his head drop and played with his wristband. The warm sensation of tears pricked at the edges of his eyes and he desperately tried to blink them away. “I don’t think that this is about us.”

He heard Poe take a breath and slowly step towards him again. “Tell me I’m wrong here, Ky. Please tell me that he never did to her what he did to you.”

He quickly shook his head. “But there was other stuff. Stuff that I was just hoping that she’d forget. I know that she didn’t. It’s just started happening recently. It’s like it’s coming back to her in bits but in the wrong places. She hates wearing underwear. I let her...she made me think that she’d forgotten. I hate anything that I can’t fix for her and I can’t think straight if I’m in my own head too much. That’s why I need you. I need you to let me say these things. To take the sadness away. She knows what happened but doesn’t understand it and I can’t fix it for her without you.”

Looking up, he met a pair of eyes that mirrored his sadness. “I mean that much to you?”

He swallowed. He wanted to tell him how much he missed him when he wasn’t there. He wanted to tell him how he felt lifted every morning when they met at school. He longed to tell him how he wanted to make up for what happened the last time they were alone. Instead, his mouth just croaked out, “Yeah.”

Poe reached out for his hands and he took them, standing into an embrace. He curled around him, pulling him closer. He’d caused all this: his anger, his pain, his inability to figure out what he wanted. Poe kept thinking he was confused and didn’t want this sort of friendship. He kept telling him that they could back off. But he needed this.

He settled his hands on Poe’s hips as he gently tried to pull away. “I can’t put this on Rey right now. I hate lying to her, but I’ll just...go away, in my head, if she’s hurting and I can’t fix it.”

“Ky,” Poe started and then reached up, touching his face after pausing to ask him if he could keep touching him; of course he could at this point. He finally started talking again once his hand cupped his face. “You need to tell your parents about what happened. They need to know how to talk to her about what she doesn’t understand right now. Not just what they hear from the shrinks.”

He watched a lazy curl drift from the top of Poe’s head down to his forehead. He was right. He wanted to brush it aside, to dip down and kiss him. Still, he clenched his jaw. “So I’m wrong
again?”

“Not wrong, no way.” Poe shook his head. “You need more help. And not just mine.”

He dropped his forehead against Poe’s, wanting to be closer to him but denying himself because of how torn he felt about everything. It meant admitting his weaknesses. And he had to. “I’m not good at that.”

The silence held them for a few breaths and Kylo shut his eyes, taking it in. Finally, Poe sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

He took in the energy from the quiet and poured it into the kiss he pressed on the shorter boy’s lips. He heard Poe inhale as he leaned into him. And then the feeling changed in an instant.

“Ky, you’re not okay,” Poe said, pushing back, yet still resting his hands on his shoulders. He drew on the warmth and let it melt the ice further. “Let’s just go to sleep. Your parents are upstairs, with Rey and…”

The pressure from earlier returned. Playing the stupid game: slipping up and hugging him. Watching him dance with Rey: dancing with her too. That part was for her: this was theirs. He kissed him again, feeling light resistance at first and then finally acceptance. Once he had him on the same level, he pulled him down against the large mattress. This was the biggest bed in the house. It had always been. Even when he was small, this was supposed to be Luke’s room but he was always running from something that Kylo still didn’t understand. He’d missed seven years of other people’s lives too.

He gasped at the thought, pulling the other boy closer, more harshly than he intended.

“Ky, stop,” Poe managed yank himself away, looking at him seriously for a moment before letting it fade into gentle eyes. He stroked his cheek, looking at him with an expression that made Kylo even more frustrated because it wasn’t clear what he wanted. “You’re looking at me weird.”

“This started off as an awful day, but now I’m… I’m worried about everything. I’m in two again. I don’t know where to focus. I’m upstairs with Rey but I’m also here…” he trailed off and shook his head, trying to get his thoughts out, but they were too twisted. “And then I was just thinking about how this bed is too big. And that we’re alone.”

Poe pursed his lips, his eyes darting away as he shifted slightly closer. It was still okay. He had to believe that. “I like being alone with you. We both need to know that we’re feeling the same thing and mean it. I hate saying that you’re bad at anything, but you kind of forget other people when you’re in your own head. I’m glad that you said it just now.”

“I know,” he answered, quickly. He brought up his own hand, letting his thumb dip into Poe’s mouth. He felt him tense at the intrusion, but slowly accept it. Warm lips, dull heat. “Empathy. Maz says it all the time.”

He moved his hand, settling to lay himself down next to Poe. He finally shifted away, dropping his head. He needed to back off. He was just coming together and now he was getting drawn into the physical part of darkness. He pulled away more, seeing the way his hand slipped so easily into Poe’s mouth when he couldn’t do it himself, let him touch him that way. Panic was only a breath away when he finally cast himself outside of his own body.

“Your parents call you Ben still.” Poe’s voice was soft, distant from the other side of the bed. “Does it make you mad?”
He breathed in and out, feeling every movement of his lungs. He wanted him to touch him again but also didn’t want it. He was starting to hate himself again for all of this, especially with what Poe had just mentioned. “To them, that’s who I am. They don’t want to believe that I died and came back like this. All fucked up.”

“I can be there, you know? To talk to your parents about this.” Poe leaned forward, slowly lifting his hand. Kylo gave an exhausted nod and then felt the release of the palm against his cheek. He closed his eyes, leaning into the warmth. “Hey, I get free meals out of this.”

He blinked and then saw Poe’s grin. He managed one of his own, but still fought back for his serious tone. “Don’t joke.”

“The last part, yeah, but the first part…” Poe shifted closer, letting his face fall again, matching how Kylo felt. “This sadness won’t get better unless you spread it out. That’s what we are doing when we are us, but for Rey, maybe spread it a little more. We’re all just kids and I’m smart enough to know that adults don’t have all of the answers, but they know how to get them.”

“How can you still trust them?” Kylo narrowed his eyes. “Trust that there is anything out there but misery?”

Poe shifted his hand to his shoulder, rubbing small circles until Kylo sighed. “It takes a while to find the right people. Maybe my, whatever, misery was built on people, but I guess I’ve known more of them than you. And most of them have mistreated me, but I’ve still known some good people, or at least people who could be less shitty to me. That’s really god awful when you think about it, but I’m always talking or fighting my way out of things. Don’t feel bad that you’re not as good as I am when it comes to figuring out who to trust. Your parents, yeah I can trust them. They’re figuring it out.”

Kylo almost smirked at the long statement that he’d just had to listen to. “You’re nervous.”

“Course I am. You looked like you wanted to eat me before.” Poe’s voice was gentle, but still reminded him that there were consequences to his moods. “Ky, you’re tired. I’m tired. Let’s just go to bed.”

Kylo moved forward, pulling the other boy into an embrace. He just wanted the conversation to be over. “Yes.”

Poe settled into his arms, finally. He felt sleep start to tug at him as he was lulled into the warmth of the body next to him. He nestled closer, sighing. Feeling Poe tighten his arms, he breathed him in. The room was too clean. The sheets were too firm. Flashes of a distant hospital room sparked in his mind, back to when he thought he was strong but was ultimately weak. Now, he was a mixture of the two, losing himself in two places: upstairs and downstairs.

A light kiss on his forehead. “Don’t sleep in jeans. Come on.”

He shifted slightly, moving only to meet Poe’s eyes. He searched them, looking for something to say that would make him stay so he wouldn’t be alone. “You let me be me too.”

He said the right words.

And got the right response.

Poe smiled and took his hand. He smirked at it and kissed his palm. “Tonight was…for you and Rey. It was only a little for me. I can’t think of better perfection for her, seeing you let go a little. If we can help her, then maybe we can figure ourselves out too, right?”
He was almost glad for the lack of full light because he cheeks burned with the implications of hurting Rey more, but it was a pain that would take time to heal. When he was making his grand plans back when his face first hit sunlight, holding her tightly and leaving a husk of a corpse behind them, this was never a part of all of it. He was supposed to be dead and stay dead and not haunt them every step of the way. Emotions were meant to be stuffed in barrels and left to rot, like the bodies of the children that he’d help kill. Now, he was being forced to deal with lids not fitting and clasps breaking. Rey. Rey. Rey. She would have to know the truth one day, beyond what he’d already told her. But the world that he was building now meant new lies and truths. He could share Poe with her for silly moments and other more childish times, but he couldn’t share him like this. This was only for him. And he hated himself for that. Even as he ran his hand through Poe’s hair and sighed at how it curled, he rode on two different levels. Rey’s hair was straight and light. Poe’s was curly and thick.

He could have two people. But he was hurting them both with his in decision.

“Were you really okay tonight?” he asked, still letting his hands thread through Poe’s hair, feeling warmth grow in his groin at the feeling. Rey was soft and innocent, the corruption only dawning in pinpricks that would break the dam. Poe wasn’t the opposite; he saw how quickly his moods could shift and was the only one who knew what had happened to him still. Yet, he stuck with him, wanted to be around him in this friendship. Enough conflicting emotions remained within Kylo to make him realize that he needed to stop splitting the world into black and white. Poe was grey, no matter what he tried to spout off when Kylo cornered him in what he was avoiding saying. He kept touching him, wanting to find out which way he could turn.

“Shit, I should ask if you’re okay again, but this feels too good,” Poe said and tilted his head. He wanted him to lean in more. It was all he cared about in that second. Getting Poe to respond felt like his only goal. “Hey, Ky, I’m going to kiss you now. Is that okay? I won’t touch you.”

“I’m okay, really okay,” he breathed out his reply, forcing his demons down to see the white over the black and grey before their lips met again. It was a tender and deep kiss, letting him know that he’d done what he had to do to get what he wanted. He still let his tiredness feed into how reckless he wanted to be, the pressure from before returning to his chest and spreading down to his dick. He was so done with the circling that they’d done the last month. Poe had almost given him space: not too much, but enough to make him nervous about what had happened earlier, when he’d forced intimacy upon them that he wasn’t ready for. It was his fault for pushing him. He had to let his body go, to let Poe feel in control. He had to give up his grip on it all. He didn’t want to be sick or hate himself: those were the only goals he had for the night. To feel release was there too, dominating how he wanted to feel. He wanted to let Poe do to him what he wanted him to do.

The kisses deepened and he groaned, reaching for Poe’s shirt.

“Ky, I need to back off. You’re getting spacy and…” Poe’s hands quickly pushed him away and he huffed, earning him a glare of warning as the other boy stood suddenly. He had moved off of the bed so quickly that Kylo didn’t realize that he was alone over the covers. Poe could only look at his harshly for so long before breaking and looking away. “Don’t do that to me. I want you too. Just get changed.”

He blinked, anger willing itself to the surface before submerging again, and then finally nodded. He turned and numbly took off his shirt. He watched it hit the wall, suddenly distant from the bed, and fall dully into the darkness. Destroying the calm was all he could do. Frustration started to pierce his mood yet again as he took off his belt and move on to his pants. With his jeans in his hand, he aimed for the idiotic painting that Leia had hung there years ago. The denim hit its mark; the stupid, tranquil scene fell with the sharp air of glass shattering and he eyed what he had done
with aching satisfaction.

The bed creaked. Poe was still moving and that meant that he’d be talking soon too. He had
distantly heard him take off his clothes as well, letting them fall onto the floor without as much
noise as he wanted to make. “Come on. If you’re breaking things, you’re tired too.”

He turned and slipped under the covers, holding to his corner of the bed.

Slender, yet strong, arms slid to grasp his waist. He turned instantly, his stubbornness dying with a
needed touch.

Poe was smiling at him as he shifted to meet his face. He was a master at grinning through pain so
Kylo didn’t know what he should expect when he started to talk again. “You know what? You
could destroy this whole room and your parents would just say ‘Well, I guess go clean it up’ and
I’d be there helping you like a moron, taking half of the blame. Or most of the blame, since it’s
probably my fault. Why are your parents so nice to me and to you? They let us get away with so
much shit.”

“They’re really not that easy,” he paused, but then let himself react to the white teeth of his friend,
finally letting a wryness take over his voice as he nestled himself closer to Poe, “but that is how it
would go.” His lighter tone vanished as he worked through the rest of his thoughts. “This is why I
told you not to like me. This is my entire life. I’m worried about Rey, I fight for control all of the
time, I try to hate my parents but I…”

Poe interrupted him with a light kiss, pulling him closer despite what he was saying. “Don’t, Ky.
I’m not going anywhere. Mostly because it’s 3 a.m. and…”

“Shut up,” he said, bringing their mouths together in a rough kiss that made them both gasp. He had
shocked himself with how quickly he could switch from misery to desire. It would have confused
him more if he didn’t want to kill what was inside of him; he needed his friend to end the
indecisive emotions that still weighed on him. He gripped Poe’s back and then let his hands drift to
Poe’s to guide them up his chest. If he helped the touches, they shouldn’t frighten him. If he was in
control at first, this should be easier. He hated contradicting himself but this was how it had to be
as long as every part of his body wanted him to start and stop and then start again. He could do
this, even if it meant forcing himself to do it.

Poe’s hands were around his neck, his mouth still on his. It was just another day; the annoyance
and pain from before were losing ground to today’s early hours. But time really meant nothing.
There had been years in his life in which he only knew the when it was in the day by Snoke’s
movements, up and down the stairs. Time only passed when the smell from the basement grew to
be too much to breathe and Snoke finally forced him to move the rotting flesh to be underground.
Rey would say that they’re going to heaven only because he’d told her that. They didn’t go
anywhere. They just went into the abyss. Tears rose in his chest and he turned them into motion by
pulling Poe on top of him. He went willingly, straddling him and letting him know that he was just
as turned on by his kisses and touches. The rush to his dick happened in that instant and he
groaned, lunging up to kill the dead memories. He wanted to tell him that it was okay. He was
sleepy, only because of his lingering headache from being angry before, but still awake and
wanting this, whatever it turned into. The edge was already taken off. He could let himself come
without shame tonight. He had to.

“Fuck, Ky,” Poe hissed, kissing up his cheek to his ear. That’s where he was the most sensitive.
Snoke had never touched him there. This was a spot for love. This was a spot for care. He was
lunging against him, hard too. Fuck, this was what he wanted as well. He had to breathe. He had to
feel himself be alive.
“Touch me,” Kylo forced out. “Please.”

He felt Poe’s heavy breaths against him as he leaned back, letting his hands trace along his chest before stopping. He started to feel lost without the touches when they stopped. Poe bit his lip before he started to speak in an almost whisper. “Not if you don’t really want this. Kylo, I want this so much but you’re still…think about me okay. Focus on that.”

He nodded, letting his head sag back. Poe’s hands moved tentatively down towards his stomach, caressing and not hurting. He could do this. His brain was telling him to feel the wrong things. His brain was guiding him towards panic and fear, flashes of hurt arcing through his mind. Snoke wasn’t there. He wasn’t seven. He was in control over what was happening to him now. He was home, safe. He’d put himself in this situation because he desired this. Desire, want, need; Snoke told him those feelings were wrong. But he was guiding his own path now. He’d started this on a warm day in California, even when he didn’t know where he was. Poe’s hands were there suddenly, helping guide him through his panicked state.

“Help me let go.” His voice wasn’t his own, speaking like the dead boy that he had been and still might be. In that moment, he was still lost in the memory of breaking down a door and escaping into sunlight.

Poe’s lips were against his in an instant, shifting from kissing along his jaw back to his mouth. He was light and gentle, holding him closer than he should feel comfortable with. But he could feel how he wanted him too; his erection was brushing against his with every motion of his hips. He sighed at the sensation instead of letting tears take him. The sun on his face warmed him with each step. He felt the heat in the air rather than the pain of being trapped.

“Tell me the second this feels wrong,” Poe whispered, leaning down against his ear. He nodded instantly, afraid of responding with words.

When he felt him moving down his body, he totally lost whatever he could have said. The hands and fingers were soft, caressing his stomach. There were no scratches, no demand. He could say no. He could stop it. Poe kissed his navel and he jolted upwards, hoping that it was the right response. He knew that his body felt want and panic as the same emotion.

And then he instantly lifted his hips when Poe’s hands hooked onto his boxers. He wanted this. They both did. He heard him inhale, then his soft breath brushed against his erection. He couldn’t look at him and what he was seeing. He was disgustingly hard.

Warm lips kissed the start of his pubic hair. He wanted to apologize, to say anything, when he jolted up again at the feeling of warm breath against his dick returned. He opened his eyes, daring himself to be afraid.

“Ky, I’m going to, um, hold you and then do this,” Poe whispered, meeting his eyes in the darkness. But in that same moment, he was bathed in the California light, on the dirt path to freedom. “Please, please tell me when to stop.”

“Just go,” he answered, setting his head back down and closing his eyes again. He was running, his weak legs holding what mattered most to his chest and trying not to weep at what he’d just done.

The moment was shattered and he knew where he was after a sharp intake of breath and a light grip around his dick. His eyes opened in that instance and he tried to be there in that instant. He knew it was a wanting and eager tongue that swirled suction around his dick. He knew it was a careful hand that was stroking in time with the beautiful mouth that the tongue belonged to. He fell into the fantasy that this was normal, that he wasn’t ruined as a person, that he wouldn’t always be
running on gravel that cut his feet, forever in a place that wasn’t home. And he let it all fall into the growing pressure in his lower half. Heat traveled down his body and he could only see the ceiling of the guest room, even when he closed his eyes. Poe’s mouth was perfect because it was his: his lips, his teeth, his tongue. He still couldn’t touch himself but he was letting this happen. The slight pressure of teeth and tongue made him groan.

He couldn’t run from it now. He was going to come soon from Poe’s hand and mouth, moving in tandem with the perfect amount of concentrated sensations. He wanted to come but didn’t know when and was suddenly nervous that Poe wouldn’t like how he tasted. There was a smell in the air that he knew was desire; he was almost familiar with it now, this intimacy. And he didn’t want to disappoint anyone. Especially Poe.

“Fuck,” he said in a gasp. “How can this be happening…?”

He let the question go out into nothing.

His heart was beating quicker with every motion that Poe made. He could feel how Poe was rocking his body in time with his hand, rolling his hips against the mattress. When he looked down, meeting his eyes, he could see how he filled his mouth. Poe broke the eye contact after pausing, withdrawing from him for a second to lick his lips and focus on whether or not Kylo wanted him to stop. Sharing the gaze made him realize that they couldn’t go back from this. Poe would still tell him all of the time that they didn’t need to do this. But to Kylo, he frantically couldn’t give up this part of their friendship. He would see how Poe’s face would transform when he saw him. He was giving him somewhere to go, somewhere that was a home.

He nodded to Poe and he took him in his mouth again, returning to bring him closer to release. He could handle this. His body needed it. The months of teasing, both the stolen and hidden embraces and kisses, had brought him to this point; but what mattered most was what they had said to one another. Poe would be talking right now if he wasn’t doing this for him. And he also knew that Rey needed help that Kylo couldn’t give alone. This was happening without words, lifting him physically to catch up to his head and heart.

He didn’t say anything before he came, letting his nerves explode in an instant when the suction and pace of Poe’s hand forced it to happen. He had felt it build, and the panic was still there; his heart thudded like a forgotten hammer, falling to a workshop floor in repeated succession. He fought to cling to the light that blossomed in his eyes rather than fall into his dread because he felt Poe’s mouth shift to start swallowing him; he should have said something. Poe was doing this for him, he should have warned him. He couldn’t let the shaking take over. His hands were clenched in the sheets, gripping the fabric harder as he came.

He knew what was happening and he felt Poe suck down his release. There were long clunks as he thrust up. Time in his mind slowed down, locking him in the moment. He’d hit a new peak, gasping and moaning as his body still lingered in the afterglow, but that only meant that there would be a harsh fall after.

He’d asked for this. He wanted this.

Poe sat up, searching his eyes for fear and anxiety. Kylo reached for him, but he turned away from the embrace, avoiding his mouth and offered kiss.

“Hey, um, you probably don’t want to do that. How are you feeling?” Poe was wiping his mouth, keeping his eyes away from his even as he brushed his hand with his free one. He took two deep breaths and then moved off of the bed, lingering in the doorway to make sure that he was okay. His eyes glistened for a moment as he took two deep breaths. He was apologizing with his eyes and
Kylo didn’t understand. “I’m going to be right back. Promise. I need to...my mouth.”

Poe left him alone and he shut his eyes, letting the guilt that he knew was coming roll over him. He was alone and could only hear himself breathing. His face felt warm when he thought about if he had made any sounds, but no one had heard him on that dirt road either when he cried out. He fixed his boxers, pulling them up and then arranging the covers.

Blinking in the darkness, emptiness started to take over. He stared at the closet, running his hand along the blanket.

Poe returned, quietly getting into the bed beside him. Kylo lifted his eyes and nodded, desperate to have arms around him, wanting to chase away the temptation of feeling nothing. It had been too much, but almost the right sort of too much. The lamp blinked on and then off again and Kylo reached for him, rolling him over to kiss him. His mouth tasted like the toothpaste in the downstairs washroom: too much mint. He clung to him, nestling his head against his neck, forcing himself not to cry.

“We shouldn’t have done that,” Poe said, roughly into his hair. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“I wanted to,” Kylo managed to answer, his mouth feeling dumb. “I’m sorry.”

“For what? I should be sorry. Ky, you’re shaking.” Poe’s voice dropped. He couldn’t let him think that he did anything wrong. He didn’t. He was perfect.

He was the one who was wrong.

Kylo lifted his head, meeting the other boy’s eyes in the darkness. “I don’t want to go back.”

Poe closed his eyes, letting his head rest against the pillow. He slowly sat up, gently pushing Kylo to sit up as well. He switched on the lamp again and brought his knees up to rest under his chin. He was pulling away, afraid. Kylo stared at his eyelashes, hoping that they stayed dry.

“Ky, what happened just now, I liked doing it, I liked being in the moment, but dealing with this stuff afterwards...it wears me out. I need time too. Let me catch up. Today was great, but tomorrow will probably suck and I don’t want you to feel like this was something bad.” Poe slowly met his eyes and he saw the tears start to shimmer in the dull light coming from beside the bed. “Please still like me.”

Reaching out, he covered Poe’s knee with his hand. He was warm and safe but he’d made him scared. He shouldn’t feel this way, ever. “I still like you.”

Poe’s eyes settled on his hand and he nodded. He pulled Poe into his arms, trying to take away the heavy sadness and thick silence of the room. He heard Poe mumble into his neck as he finally accepted the embrace. “I lo— I like you so much.”

“I can sleep on the couch,” Kylo said, pulling back after hearing his indecision. “If you want to be alone.”

Poe rolled his eyes and grinned, the tension broken as quickly as it had settled around them. “That’s what I’m supposed to say.”

He leaned down and kissed him, taking in the moment of being not fully happy, but also not drawn into sorrow either. He’d take it for now.
Kylo woke up to the buzzing of something. He shut his eyes hard, willing a full headache to take hold, before he sat up. He shifted Poe out of his arms and reached for his jeans, trying to nab them from the edge of the bed.

He glared at his phone. 5.30.

_Can you meet to talk about the project today? I need this grade._

Fuck off, he was about to write. He was about to send the phone flying into the wall but the flash of Rey’s disappointed eyes made him stop. Instead, he just tossed it weakly onto the floor.

Poe mumbled something as he gathered him into his arms again.

“What?” he whispered, trying to fall asleep as he squirmed against him.

“Thirsty.”

He rolled his eyes and moved away again. He let his body guide him out of the room. Pausing at the couch, he quickly spread out the quilt before going upstairs.

The house was quiet. His parents had been out the night before. No one was awake. He snatched a bottle of water from the fridge and then quickly went downstairs again.

He had already drank half of it before he handed it to Poe.

“Well, good effort,” Poe said, squinting at the bottle before drinking the rest of it. “Who the fuck was texting you?”

“Hux,” he mumbled, curling up next to him.

“Fuck that guy.” Poe tossed the empty bottle away. It felt like he was instantly asleep again when he joined Kylo’s embrace.

The next time he woke up he realized that he forgot to close the guest room door. He could hear the dog scratching at the backdoor and groaned. He had to do everything. Leaving a very comfortable position, he snatched up his phone. 7.45. Fine.

“Hey, I’ll be back,” he said. He reached for his jeans and cringed at the broken painting. He shrugged it off as he found his shirt. Poe didn’t respond, still asleep.

He met his father’s sleep-deprived eyes in the back entrance, both of them still fighting with their clothes.

“Well, do you want to walk him more than I do?” Han asked, rubbing his eyes. He looked so much older than Kylo thought he could ever be. Dads should live forever.

Kylo just stared at him, clenching his fists at the voices telling him to go on as his own cries were being drowned out. He was the only one that wanted to keep this a secret. But it was only fair; the others were right. “Maybe together?”

Han shrugged on his coat, still looking unsteady before he leaned against the doorframe. He gave him a recognizable look, the one that meant promises would be kept rather than broken. He was
more familiar with it now than he had been before. “Sounds good to me.”

He hadn’t really noticed that summer was coming, but the morning air hit him hard. He’d slipped on his shoes without socks. He hid his hands in his hoodie as the dog guided them down the alley. He was gripping at his wrist, aching for some other comfort at that moment as they walked together. Their footsteps broke the Saturday morning air. There had been moments like this before, when he was small. He’d run ahead, not caring who would stop him. He remembered his father laughing rather than yelling. There were memories here too and he’d been denying them for too long.

“Hey, dad,” he started and stopped. “I mean, Han.”

Han turned and smirked at him. “Funny, I was getting used to you calling me that.”

They stood in the bright May morning in their back alley, metres apart. Han was holding the dog’s leash and Kylo’s hands were still hidden in his sweater. He was almost as tall as his father now. He was going to be taller. He could meet his eyes and tell him this.

“I used to think that this wouldn’t help Rey but now, I…” he looked absently at the dog, trying to focus on anything but the feelings building in his chest. He took a deep breath and met Han’s eyes. “I need to tell you what happened to us.”

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Teenage boys kissing; boy/boy oral sex; mentions of past sexual abuse, rape, murder, self-harm, etc. it’s in the tags.

This chapter has been written and re-written several times so that's why some parts feel short or jump around too much and also why it's so long. Thanks for hanging with me on this one, guys. I've finally worked through how to get beyond Chapter 26 and into the Reylo angst as our main boy and girl age up into more...compatible territory.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Kylo's confessions to his father bring up new emotions for Rey, and the possibility for new solutions.

Warnings are in the end notes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rey woke up and enjoyed the lingering feeling of sleep as she rolled to the empty side of the bed. Dad was already up. She was happy that she remembered where she went to sleep the previous night. It was something that she had started focusing on with increasing intensity. Falling asleep in the car after a night out meant waking up somewhere else. It meant a morning with a stomachache the next day.

Shifting, she looked over at mom. She was asleep, hair spilling out onto the pillow. Rey reached out, making sure that they were both really there. Running her fingers through her hair, she tried to remember the name of another girl who had long and beautiful hair. She was asleep with them, upstairs in the quiet room where they spent most of their time. They were always dirty, but the new kids were clean at first. Kylo was usually the only one who dared and could find them something to eat. He could move silently, avoiding the creaking stairs and floorboards. The girl still had fresh patches of skin; she was shaking and hungry. Kylo had given her the blanket, covering her. She was cold and didn’t have any clothes on, but her skin was still pure.

Kylo had come upstairs then, carefully opening and closing the door. The other two kids in the corner sat up, hoping that he found something, anything to eat. But Snoke would stop biting her when there was someone new.

Then he told her that he couldn’t help her more than the others and she’d have to figure so much out on her own. And that she was probably going to die because everyone who came there died.

She was gone not long after.

Kylo had helped send her to heaven.

“Hey, Rey.” Mom had blinked awake, sitting up. “You’re crying, sweetheart. How are you feeling?”

“Just remembering.” Rey dropped her head and wiped at her eyes. “Can I go see Kylo now?”
Mom hugged her and sighed. She was tired and needed to go back to sleep. Rey shouldn’t have woke her up. Maybe she shouldn’t go wake up Kylo too.

“Go see how he’s doing,” mom said, lightly touching her cheek. She felt a tear roll over Leia’s finger and frowned. “Get a glass of milk on your way down. There’s chocolate milk in the fridge for you.”

Rey nodded. She hadn’t had any of it last night, wanting to save it for the next day. She got off mom and dad’s bed, feeling her feet hit the cool wooden floor. It was a nice way to wake up most mornings. The floor was always clean; she never got dirt on her feet that would never wash away.

Kylo’s room was empty, the bed still neatly made. She smiled at how his room smelled before going downstairs. Each sound she made seemed louder as she moved the stool in the kitchen to get a glass. Shrugging, she took down two more. The chocolate milk looked bubbly and she didn’t spill anything. She drank hers first; it was helping her calm down. It was sweet. It always reminded her of the first time that she got candy in the house.

Kylo had found it after he’d been locked in the closet for an afternoon. He’d given it to Rey when she remembered him coming back into the room. She’d forgotten why he was in the closet. The candy took away the itchiness. He always hugged her too close when he had been trapped in that small space. Rey had been in there too. It was too dark. That’s why she always needed lights to protect her.

Taking the two glasses, she went downstairs. Someone had slept on the couch and it brought sweetness back to her mouth. Kylo would do that. He’d sometimes like to wake up uncomfortable. He told her he was getting it over with, starting the day with a cramped neck or legs. He was always there with her too.

The door was open, but she still made sure they knew that she was there.

Poe was alone, sitting up in the bed and watching something on his phone. “Hey look, room service.”

She smiled at him, remembering the fun from yesterday. It had been worth it to stay up so late. She didn’t have any nightmares from the movies. She only felt warmth when she thought about sitting on the couch with the two boys. “Where’s Kylo?”

“Think he went out with your dad and the dog.” He took the glass of milk and finished it in three large gulps. “Come here, we can watch something while we wait for him.”

Rey felt bad for drinking Kylo’s milk, but did it anyway. She snuggled next to Poe and breathed him in. He smelt like Kylo too. His hair was messy and he hugged her to him, setting the phone between them. Poe let her watch the show that Rose liked and Rey was trying to make herself like. It was too colourful and noisy. But she heard Poe chuckling at some of the jokes, so it must be okay. Rose would laugh when the characters couldn’t solve a problem and Rey had pointed out how silly it was to have the arguments that they did in their pretend world.

She heard two sets of feet enter the house and the backdoor closed. Poe clicked off his phone and she watched his face fall slightly.

“What’s wrong?” Rey asked, still following the feet around upstairs.

“Just worried about everything.” Poe’s voice was soft, but he wasn’t sounding anything normal; his hand was spinning his phone on the bed. “I have to go home at some point. My dad really hates
me being here all the time, so I’m worried about going home and seeing my mom all beat up. Guess that’s why me and Ky get along. Always trying to be in two places at once but still messing up.”

Rey took his hand. “You don’t mess up. I’m sorry dad was mad at you last night.”

Poe’s eyes darted to their hands and he looked like he was trying to smile, but it faded before it could really start. He turned his head away and stared at the broken picture frame against the wall. “I know. Feelings really suck sometimes, don’t they?”

There were finally footsteps on the stairs and Rey tightened her grip on his hand. Kylo filled the doorway, leaning against it. He didn’t lift his head to look at them, but Rey could see that he’d been crying. His eyes seemed smaller, more away from her. Poe let go of her hand and scrambled off the bed to pull Kylo into a hug. He was whispering things to him, asking if he was okay. He made him sit down on the edge of the bed, but Kylo wasn’t speaking. Rey’s heart kept beating faster with every second of silence.

“It’s okay, Ky, it’s okay.” Poe squeezed his leg, leaning in closer. “What’d you tell him?”

Kylo shook his head. “He wants to talk to us upstairs. I don’t want to talk any more. I think I messed up. I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No, no. We’ll see how it goes, okay?”

Kylo looked away from him, to her. *Dad’s not mad. I’m just tired.*

_Can we sleep and then talk to him?*_ Rey tried to come up with anyway to avoid going upstairs.

*Let’s ask him.* He reached for her hand and she nodded, crossing the covers to sit next to him. _I’m sorry if you can’t answer some of his questions. Don’t feel stupid about it. I don’t know how to answer them either. But we can do it._

They let Poe get dressed, drawing out the final moments before facing whatever was about to happen upstairs. She wished that Kylo would tell her more, what he had said. Did Poe tell him what she had said yesterday? She told him not to. It wasn’t nice to share secrets. Kylo wasn’t supposed to know and now he was upset.

Anger prickled the edges of her eyes and she pulled away from Kylo, going upstairs alone. Her feet were moving without thinking and she wasn’t waiting for them.

Dad was sitting at the table, meeting her with a small smile. “Good morning, Rey.”

“It’s not,” she huffed, folding her arms. Hurt spread throughout her body and came out as tears. “I want Poe to go home. Right now.”

Han moved to grip her shoulder, kneeling down next to her. “What did he do? I just want to talk to all of you. No one’s in trouble, if you’re mad at him about that. I think he did the right thing. They really care about you, Rey. And we do too and we want to talk to you about some things to help you feel better.”

Rey bit her lip, letting her eyes go wide. Now dad was on his side too. Did he understand that Kylo was upset about this? “No. No!”

She grabbed the coffee cup on the table and smashed it on the ground. Sobs broke out of her mouth and she just wanted to be alone. She didn’t want to talk to anyone or answer any questions. There
were always too many questions and they made the feelings real.

Mom’s footsteps snapped her head towards the staircase. “Are you okay, Rey?”

She was wrapped in her comfortable robe, the one that felt good to hug. But Rey didn’t want any hugs or anyone to touch her.

“I want Poe to go home and to stop being Kylo’s friend.” She pouted, sitting down on the floor and pulling her knees under her chin. Leia knelt beside her but kept her hand away.

“I’ll talk to him, okay? Do you want to go for a ride with dad? He’ll take you to get something to eat and then you’ll feel a bit better. Okay?” Mom was talking with the nice voice, the one that usually meant that things would get better, but only after a long time. She finally nodded, rubbing her nose. “Han, take her for a bit. I’ll talk to the boys.”

Han sighed and Rey buried her head against her knees.

“He told me some stuff this morning, Leia. It’s not going to be easy to get that out of him again. I’ll fill you in more when I get back, but our baby girl needs some space and some food.” She heard him move over to her and reached out her arms to be picked up. “Come on, sweetheart. Mom will sort things out.”

Rey let herself go limp in dad’s arms, just wanting to get away from the house. Maybe food would help her aching stomach.

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They both froze at the sound of a mug breaking upstairs.

Kylo reached for Poe’s hand and felt his body tense in time with his. They were both too tired to go upstairs now. He wished that he was just physically tired. He also wanted desperately to hide: to crawl under the bed and dare his body into panicking over darkness. Opening his mouth had been out of how exhausted he had felt that morning. Their conversation had sat heavy in his chest; he just wanted to get it out, reduce the pressure.

He didn’t expect the words to feel so real when they left his mouth.

And he didn’t expect his father to understand.

He talked about Rey like she wasn’t waiting for him back at the house. She became like any of the other kids back there, coming in and being pulled into suffering that would never end. The first years with her, he’d been left alone. Rey was small, Rey needed to be cared for. The other kids hurt more those years and it was his fault. He couldn’t take the pain for them because he had to protect her. Snoke needed to keep her alive, to keep tying them together with strings of care that he would later pull to break him. Rey must have been two—she was walking and talking—when Snoke took her for the first time. He had to see how he’d scream and fight for her to test whatever twisted game he was playing with their lives.

Snoke hit him with the typewriter. The old man gripped it with both hands and swung it at him as he charged forward. He was too small and weak then. He blacked out. He had headaches for months after, fighting the urge to throw up every time that he was forced to move.
But that pain was drawn to a hot pinprick when he saw the bite marks under Rey’s tattered underwear. How she couldn’t go to the washroom for agonizing days without breaking down into uncontrollable sobs at being hurt and touched.

He was putting his mouth on her, tasting her. The other girls talked about his fingers and how he didn’t care how they cried when he shoved them inside of them. He never told them that he knew that burning sensation as well.

He felt the same rush of nausea in the alleyway, unable to stop the memory or himself in the moment. Two years he’d hurt her; breaking bones, burning her, but also taking her innocence and leaving scars that were too deep. It was the same thing he’d been robbed of too and he couldn’t stop it for Rey. He had fought to forget and wanted her to forget too. He’d tried to teach her how to forget when they were there. There had been no end in sight there and he needed her to stay as his sunshine to pull him through the darkness.

But now she was remembering.

And he needed to stop it permanently this time, not just through forgetting.

That’s what Han said too. That the reports from Maz, the watered down summaries that detailed signs to look for and what they suspected all along, had told them the same thing. But now they could move forward, use the right resources. The councillor at school wasn’t enough and the monthly sessions weren’t going to help Rey as much as she needed. He’d done the right thing by telling him. Poe had done the right thing by forcing him to talk.

The things that he still kept secret were about himself. Rey needed help right now and he’d waited too long because of his own selfish wants and needs. And Poe was helping him. This morning had shown him that he was working through his problems in his own way and it was getting better. Getting so close to him wasn’t a mistake; the intimate way he’d held him and touched him was about not turning sex into suffering. Rey was too young to understand all of this. What he had with Poe was his way of getting help. She needed more comfort. And his tears came because he couldn’t give it to her.

“She’s upset with me, shit,” Poe said, standing closer to him. “She just took off.”

He hugged him, still too weak to move but needing the relief. He’d seen the look in Rey’s eyes and could sense her rage. “Then she’s mad at us both. I shouldn’t have talked to dad alone. You should have been there.”

Poe was still in his arms, wearing yesterday’s clothes as well as their sins.

Forward, not backward. He couldn’t fall away now.

When the backdoor slammed shut, Kylo let his shoulders relax. He’d heard the jingle of dad’s keys and the sound of his boots. Rey liked driving in the car. He was going with her to make her feel something other than anger. “Let’s go talk to Leia. Get it over with. I just want to go back to sleep and for it to be tomorrow already.”

“She wants to talk too.” Poe let go of his hand and took a deep breath. He mumbled something under his breath and then shook his head. “This has to be about Rey right now.”

He studied how Poe was shifting his weight from side to side, getting uncomfortable by not moving. He finally took his hand again and led him upstairs, letting go at the final step. Leia was sweeping up the shattered ceramic from the floor and gave them a long and exhausted look. She
reflected how they both felt in one short shrug.

“Han took her to get breakfast. And you two must be starving too. Let’s get that out of the way so you can tell me why she’s upset and how we’re going to fix it.” Leia shovelled the broken pieces into the trashcan and leaned against the counter. “Because we have to find a way to make her hurt less.”

Poe cleared his throat and avoided his eyes.

“I can go home, if that makes it better for Rey,” Poe’s voice shook slightly as he spoke and he folded his arms. “I’m just in the way.”

Kylo’s back went rigid. He shouldn’t feel that way. None of this would be happening without him. He urgently wanted to reach out to touch him, to make the feeling go away, but Leia turned. She eyed Kylo with a distant sadness before looking at Poe. She sat down at the kitchen table and her look firmed.

“We haven’t missed the signs, Poe.” The words made them both take a step closer to one another, panicked hands staying planted at their sides.

But Leia continued. “We’re always devastated about having to send you back there and then seeing you come back to us hungry and covered in bruises. We’re surrounded by how our kids are hurting, but when you’re here all of you are safe and happy. We’re not experts and sometimes love doesn’t fix everything, but we’re trying. Having to see you going through troubles at home when you’re so sensitive is not right. So, right now? It’s okay for Rey to be upset with you. Han will get her to understand or at least calm her down so that she’ll listen and talk. But you’re staying here until the last possible minute.”

He stepped forward, taking a chance.

“Poe can come live here,” Kylo said instantly. “He can be here all the time.”

Leia closed her eyes and he knew he’d said something impossible. “It doesn’t work that way, Ben.”

“I know.” He dropped the fantasy with two defeated words, letting the idea die before it could spread. “I just feel better when he’s here. And he cares about Rey too. He told me what she said and I couldn’t just keep it inside anymore. I’m sorry I waited so long.”

Leia’s eyes briefly lifted, meeting his admission with a small nod. But they always wanted him to talk and now he was. This was despite wanting to bottle it all up again and go back to being quiet.

“Then let’s talk about that.”

Leia made coffee and they decided to sit on the couch rather than the table. Well, Kylo decided for them, he thought to himself as they sat in the same spot as last night. With Leia still in the kitchen, he gripped Poe’s hand for a moment and then pulled away. His hand was soft and held memories that weren’t painful. Poe’s eyes held his for the length of that moment before he turned to focus on the silent television. He understood, Kylo told himself. He could handle what he was about to say.

“That meant a lot to me,” Poe whispered, leaning towards him. “What you said.”

He nodded, not able to find words. Sleep was tempting at that point so he rested is head against Poe’s shoulder and shut his eyes. The house was quiet and empty without Rey there and he needed the warmth of the boy next to him. His mind searched for pleasant feelings rather than the dark tones churning behind his eyes.
“We should just run away,” he mumbled. “Go somewhere and just be alone.”

Poe kissed his forehead, forcing him to sit up.

He had to focus. The words would be different this time, but the feelings would be the same: healing always felt out of reach for him, but he had to get Rey to it. His life would be meaningless if he let her down this time.

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Rey wasn’t angry when she came home. She was filled with a good breakfast and she’d gotten rid of most of her tears. Dad said that secrets like the one Poe had told Kylo weren’t meant to be kept inside and ignored. Maz also knew that something was making her feel how she was. She tried to replay their last meeting and didn’t think she’d said anything to make everyone so upset. But they were.

Because they cared about her.

She hadn’t done anything wrong, dad had said as he let her take more maple syrup. She got to eat in a restaurant in her pyjamas. It was something that she’d never done before so it felt good to have another moment to cherish and to replace the bad things in her mind.

When they got home, mom and dad hugged for a long time. She sat on the floor, playing with a shoelace that had gotten itself untied because no one cared about it. She left them alone until her heart made her hug them too.

“They’re asleep, upstairs. You should have seen them, Han. I can’t send him home when they’re inseparable like this. I don’t think I would have gotten a word out of Ben without him,” Leia was speaking into Han’s jacket so it was hard to hear, but Rey understood. And her anger from before built a guilt ball in her throat. “But how’s our girl? Everything starting to make sense now, Rey?”

She shook her head. “Dad says I might need to see more therapists? Because Snoke bit me?”

Mom gave her the smile that meant she’d said the right thing. “Yes, but we’ll find a therapist that you like. Maybe someone who will be your friend, and come by the house so we won’t have to drive that far.”

Rey tilted her head. “I can get a new friend?”

She thought again about having to be around kids all of the time. On good days, she liked playing pretend and using her imagination. Last night she’d used her imagination during the game and she had done a good job being little. Nothing hurt when she could go to the good part of her head. The bad part would be shut off.

Focusing in a group, with kids who only had imagination and good parts, that’s when she would get frustrated. It would be like Kylo always said; it was never fair.

“One that you get to pick. After you meet a few of them. You get to pick your friends.” Han knelt down next to her. “Do you want to see the boys? Talk to them or anything?”

She shook her head. “Not right now. Can I go sleep in my room?”
Dad nodded, tapping her shoulder as she left them to be alone. Still, she stopped outside of Kylo’s room and nudged the door open. Kylo’s door never creaked. He wanted to know where everyone was, but the sound only made him angry. It would make him go quiet and he would sit and scribble for a few hours before, now he would just work out. The sounds and smells didn’t bother her. But Kylo was still living there, even as he tried to move away.

Poe was resting on Kylo’s chest, like she normally did. Both of them were asleep. Kylo didn’t even twitch as she stepped closer to the bed.

They just wanted her to get better, to understand her dreams. That’s what dad had said. He sounded like Kylo when he said it. Those were his words. Dad would have put it a different way, a way that made sense to him.

She turned to go, but she heard someone moving on the bed. Glancing over her shoulder, she caught Poe’s eyes as he blinked at her.

“Hey,” he said, carefully moving off of Kylo to sit up. “Where’d you go?”

“Breakfast with dad.” She watched how Poe avoided waking Kylo. She was already whispering. Sometimes, when he slept like this, he wouldn’t wake up right. “Did you have breakfast?”

Poe shook his head. “We were talking too much.”

She stared at him. Before, she had him figured out. The picture in her head was clear. She wanted him to be her friend too. He was nice and always smelt like Kylo. He would make Kylo play the game with her. He should always be around. He could kiss and hug Kylo and fix him. And her new friend, the one that mom and dad promised, might help fix her too. But right now, she only had her fantasy friend. Poe was there right then. She should apologize for being mad at him. But maybe, like Kylo did, she could do it in another way.

“Can you make me unsad too?”


“I know.” She nodded. “I’m sleepy.”

He jutted out his chin. “You want to sleep with us?”

She shook her head. “Alone. Too many thoughts.”

Poe looked like he wanted to say something more, but instead he gave her a single nod. She turned away again to go to her room and didn’t see where he put his head.

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Kylo rolled over, pulling a comfortable body closer to him. He heard a light groan in response and pulled the form closer. It wasn’t Rey, so he could hold on tighter.


He swam up from sleep, not hearing him right. He sat back, blinking in the afternoon sunlight.
Poe moved away from him and off of the bad, closing and locking the door. His hands made the mattress squeak as he crawled back onto the bed, back into his arms. “Hey, what’s happening?”

He shook his head. “I don’t remember. I don’t know what I was dreaming.”

“Whatever it was, it wasn’t real right now. Rey’s home, she’s asleep in her room. She’s okay. I talked to her. If you’re worried about her, it’s okay.” Poe was kissing at the corner of his eyes, reminding him that he’d been crying.

Even though he was leaning into the embrace, he was still shaking his head. “Stop saying it’s okay. I know it is.”

Pulling back, Poe sighed. “Your mom came by to check on us too. I was still awake, after Rey left. She didn’t see anything. She’s worried that talking about all of this will, I don’t know, fuck you up more or something. I didn’t really say anything. I just nodded, like a moron. She’s not even mad about the painting.”

“I slept through everything.” Kylo shut his eyes, flopping his head down against the pillow. “I don’t sleep like this. I hear everything.”

“Maybe you still heard it? Like, in your dreams?”

He weakly lifted his head, but still focused on the darkness behind his eyelids. “Rey was talking. You were talking. So was mom. But I was seven, starving in a closet and I didn’t have any hands or feet. And then the rest of me kept disappearing.”

Poe hugged him again, telling him that he wasn’t stuck in that body, in that place. “Then you’re still you, you’re still protecting everyone.”

He hummed lightly, turning to pull Poe closer again. “Mom doesn’t like it when I lock the door. Rey doesn’t like it either.”

He felt a light kiss on his forehead. “I think she’s still mad at me.”

Sleep was pulling at him again. It was still so freeing to just be able to sleep when he wanted to. He felt greedy for giving in to it all of the time. To be warm and safe, that had always been a goal. So many of the other kids never got to feel that again.

“How are you doing?” He was kicked in the chest by their conversation from last night. *You wear me out.* “Really.”

A deep and warm breath swarmed around his neck. “Your mom talked to mine. I can stay the night again. But I’m going to catch hell tomorrow because of that. So I’m fucking scared right now. Scared that he’s going to take it out on my mom rather than me. And then there’s you and Rey. And I’m…”

Poe’s voice trailed off, and Kylo felt new tears. Tears that weren’t his.

“Ky, I just want to be with you so bad. So fucking much. But yesterday, today, tomorrow…I’m really just in the way. I should just go home and get what’s coming to me. I should just take it like a man, like he always tells me.” Poe was sobbing, but his voice was a whisper. Kylo just held him, not sure what else to do. He knew how to hold Rey like this. He knew what to do then. “You always ask me what to do, but can you tell me what to do? Please. Please just tell me.”

He didn’t know. His first reaction was to say just that. He met his eyes and they were the eyes of
dozens of children who’d asked him the same thing, pleading with him to tell them how to escape this, how to survive. His reaction by the end was to pull away from them, to only protect Rey. He’d have to say to them that there was no end to all of this; they could never go home and their parents had forgotten about them. The world didn’t know where they were. That it would only end in him having to see them dead and gone and having to tell Rey that another friend had gone to heaven, even though it was a fucking lie.

But now, there was an end to this. No one was going to kill them if they cried. No one was going to hurt them if they huddled in a corner, searching for comfort.

“You stay. And we talk. And you’ll feel better,” Kylo murmured into Poe’s too-long hair. “And then I’ll go with you when you go home and I’ll kill your dad.”

Sitting back to look at him, Poe blinked through his tears. “What will that fix, Kylo? It will just fuck things up more for you.”

“It will fix things for you.” He stared back. “And I’m unstable. I’ll just get sent away because I’m fucked in the head. But then you can come live here when I get back and…”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Kylo, it doesn’t work that way. Don’t go into your head about this. Don’t go building a fantasy life where everything is just perfect because it won’t be. I’ll have to go back to wherever, probably Florida, or back to my mom’s family. Or I’ll end up in foster care. Do you know how fucked up that system is? It’ll be even worse than it is now. Even with rich white people, I’ll still get fucked over.” Poe sat up, pushing him away as he moved. He pulled his legs under his chin, hugging himself. He was making himself look smaller, drawing away into feelings that Kylo kept ignoring. “Just don’t do anything. Except listen to me. I only have to make it through three more years.”

Kylo didn’t take the words in fully because they didn’t hurt. They were just real, being thrown out into the open in rapid strikes. They mirrored his own hateful words when he was angry, upset about something that he couldn’t change. “You want to make it better for me and Rey, shouldn’t we do that for you?”

Poe dropped his head onto his arms. He shook lightly, quivering. “I can do it on my own.”

He wanted to fight and argue, to hold him down and scream at him. That’s how he did it in the kids in the beginning. When the kids wouldn’t listen. He’d scream at them to be quiet, to just listen. To become a favourite, like he was. Maybe Snoke just liked the way he tasted on that first day. Maybe Snoke kept him around for so many years so he could do it again. He never did, but the fear permeated every day that he was there. He did so many wrong things to keep it from happening again.

“Can we do it together? Fix me and fix you too?” Kylo planned the words carefully. The bright flowers shone through the patches of dead weeds. “And make sure that Rey doesn’t end up like us?”

The other boy’s head shot up, quirking a grin. “There’s no way I’m as fucked up as you.”

His smile was daring, inviting and teasing all at once. Kylo reached up to cup his face, to brush away the look. “You will be, if you keep hanging out with me.”

“That’s the problem. I want to keep hanging out with you. To stay here all of the time, like you said this morning. I fucking want that to be the truth too. But I’m just in the way everywhere.” Poe’s eyes drifted from mischief back to sadness. “Fuck, you’re going to hate me because of this.”
It was a direct accusation, telling him how to feel. “No I won’t. I told dad what happened to Rey because of you. Because of you, I feel things again. I just don’t want to hurt myself or other people all the time. I can’t say things like this to Rey and I’m so sorry that I just put it on only you. But I did better this morning. I talked to my dad.”

His face felt warm. He was going to cry again. He couldn’t. He pulled his hands away, jamming them into his eyes.

There were too many feelings in the room. Too many thoughts. He couldn’t sort them out.

The last thing he wanted was for Poe to kiss him, but he let it happen. A warm mouth, salty with tears. He latched onto the feelings in his heart, pouring them into Poe. He shifted against him so they were lying beside one another. His need always came from fear. He was afraid that someone would hear them. He was afraid of what would happen. He was afraid that he’d wake up and be half-dead in a basement in California and still be fourteen. But a welcome, yet still confusing, pressure was building in his lower half that he didn’t need that right then. He needed to focus.

“Stop, stop,” he managed to say, still holding on to Poe. “I’m okay.”

Poe dropped his forehead against his, taking a deep breath. He kissed him again, lightly, and then shook his head. He was mumbling to himself again, hushed words in Spanish. He couldn’t catch a single clear one. Poe kissed him again and it was sweet and innocent. “I was about to say something dumb. I go too quick, I go too fast. I’m so fucking stupid.”

“Stop,” Kylo answered. “Let’s just go back to sleep. Unlock the door so Rey can come in. And we’ll figure it out when we wake up.”

Poe smiled, a warm and deep one that hit his heart where it was most sensitive. The morning had worn off the hard parts, the bits that were left. But he knew that they’d grow hard again if anyone went away again. “Yeah, we can do that. I’d love to do that.”

He stood from the bed, leaving Kylo alone. He finally crawled under the quilt on his bed, the one from his grandmother. He heard the door unlock and put his head on the pillow again.

When Poe joined him on the bed, he didn’t care about anyone seeing them when they woke up.

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Over the next week, Rey got to meet with four different therapists. And she picked the one with the prettiest lipstick, the one that understood why sometimes she wanted to play with dolls, but sometimes she didn’t. Why playing pretend sometimes worked, but then sometimes didn’t. She didn’t have to talk about her dreams about Snoke biting her, or go over why she wanted to keep the memories of the other kids in her head.

They just played with dolls, the ones that Ashoka brought with her.

She had put a white circle of paper over their faces, and then asked if they were okay to play with then.

Kylo had been watching from the stairs and met her eyes when she looked up at him. He gave her a smile that was only meant for her.
“I didn’t mean not to reply the other day.” Kylo hated apologizing, especially when he didn’t mean it.

Hux shrugged. He probably saw through the lie. They were still sitting in the library. Kylo had only found the strength to talk to Hux about the text after Rey had found her therapist. And Poe had come to school with new bruises. And it was Friday now. It was almost a week late, but he still apologized. They’d both be proud of him for that.

“It’s okay. We can talk about it now. You’re doing your part. That’s mostly what I care about.” Hux picked up his notes and read through the part that he’d written again. “Have you read the whole thing already? It’s so boring that I can’t get through it.”

Kylo held back from rolling his eyes and crossed his arms instead. “There’s been a lot going on at home. I read so it doesn’t get to be too much.”

That’s all he’d done the last week. Every night, he’d gone through the stupid thick book and tried to make the words make sense. Rey was sleeping in her room and Poe could only text, not come over. He refused to cut himself, stopping himself from finding harmful release. Instead, he looked at the words and then the explanations in the margins. He focused on putting himself in understanding their emotions, their actions. He would write about the book, then about Rey, and then about Poe. And then he’d finally fall asleep at 3 a.m. and have to get up three hours later to take a shower and get ready for school.

Hux let the paper rest on the table. His eyes were sincere when he looked at him. “How’s Rey?”

He bit his lip, letting his leg shake under the table. “She’s got a new therapist. Some things started coming up.”

The bell rang and he expected Hux to bolt from the table. Instead, he sat there and was still looking at him. “That sounds like it sucks.”

“Yeah it does.” He shut his eyes. He was free now. He could go and see Poe then. He needed the weekend. They both did. All three of them did. “I thought that you didn’t have my number anymore.”

Hux was slow in gathering his notes, still leaving half of them spread on the table. Those were the ones meant for him. “I still do. I never deleted it. Can you, um, email me this for us next time? I have most of this on my computer too. My email’s on the class list.”

The other boy met Kylo’s eyes and he forced a nod. “I write them out like this and then type them up and it takes forever. I still suck at the computer.”

“You don’t get better at anything without practice,” Hux said, actually stopping to smile at him. But the look quickly faded. “Hey, I’ll see you on Monday. Say hi to Rey for me.”
Kylo sat back, feeling the headache spread to his nose as Hux disappeared from the library.

Chapter End Notes

Mentions of past rape, child abuse, sexual abuse against a child, and teenage boys kissing.

Bless everyone for continuing to read this. This is heavy shit and I'm doing the best I can to navigate it.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Han and Leia make a decision that threatens the boys' relationship; Rey gets to know her therapist.

Read the tags and Chapter Notes for warnings. There are some spoilery things in the notes as well, since I've updated the tags...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kylo was halfway down the stairs, his thoughts elsewhere as he pulled on his jacket, when he heard his father clear his throat. It was Saturday. They didn’t have any plans as a family and he slowed his pace at the final step. He was supposed to meet Poe in the park so they could laugh at the other boys trying to skateboard and then take a walk. He’d actually put on a white shirt for a change, looking forward to the afternoon of doing nothing. Hux had already sent him three emails correcting certain parts of the assignment and he was determined to ignore them.

“Hey, Kylo, can I talk to you?” He was sitting at the table, looking guilty about something. Kylo could read it in his shoulders.

And by the way that he didn’t call him Ben.

He wanted to frown, but also didn’t want to react. Instead, he looked at him blankly. “I’m going to be late.”

“The park doesn’t close, son. You can text your friend.” His father shifted the chair next to him away from the table, motioning for him to join him. “Sit down.”

His father rarely talked to him like this. It was exactly like Poe had said; they tried to avoid confronting him directly and would rather deescalate everything before it devolved into him screaming at them. He could still do it. He hadn’t done it in so long, but the feeling still loomed in his mind. He’d given them the space that they’d earned and could take it away.

Openly groaning, he slumped down in the chair. “What?”

Han sat back and sighed. “It’s about your friend, Poe.”

He sat up and folded his arms, trying to disguise his posture. His hands were instantly clenched into fists. Staring at his father, his mind went through dozens of possible responses to whatever was coming. His top response at that moment was just to run away if the conversation was going that way. They had kissed, they had made out, but it was all just a part of this type of friendship. They were friends in that way. There wasn’t anything wrong with him, neither of them. Opening the box of sex in front of his father wasn’t on any level nearly as terrifying as being threatened with death, but this was the real world. This was the outside. He’d seen so many bad movies and was trying to steady his reactions around mirroring the characters. He had a friend and he liked to kiss
him. He would just say that.

“We put a call into the police, letting them know what’s going on at his house. This can’t keep going on and we thought…”

He hadn’t been prepared enough. He hadn’t come to this conclusion. He’d been stupid again.

“What!” Kylo stood, knocking the chair back. His mind locked into instant panic, killing the nervous calm that he’d latched onto earlier. “Why did you do that? He told me not to do anything! He’s going to blame me!”

“Take a breath and calm down.” Han was still sitting down, which frustrated Kylo more. He couldn’t be calm about this. This was going to ruin everything. “He’s not going to be in any trouble, but they might be able to help him.”

“The police don’t help anyone.” He ground his teeth together and glared at his father. “You know that.”

Han sighed and shook his head. “Ben, if he’s being abused, you should want to help your friend too. We should have done this a long time ago.”

Rolling his eyes, he tossed up his hands. “Of course I want to help him! But I’m doing it my own way. I don’t need your help with this.”

Taking two long strides, he was at the stairs down to the back entrance. His hand gripped the doorframe as his thoughts caught up with his feet. “Maybe you want to get him in trouble. Maybe you don’t want him to be around me anymore.”

Han finally stood, meeting his eyes. “That’s not what’s happening here. We’re happy that you two are close and can talk about these problems, the feelings that you have. There haven’t been any problems at school the last few months. You’re eating more. You’re talking to us. We want to make sure he doesn’t go away, but also to make sure that he’s safe.”

Narrowing his eyes, Kylo shook his head. His father would have said something more if he had any idea about what was going on. “Go fuck yourself.”

He had never slammed the door harder than he’d done when he left the house. This was why he didn’t say anything to his parents. It just made things worse. They hadn’t changed at all. They were just doing things for their own interest, not his. All they had to do was leave him alone and he’d be fine. They were finally taking care of Rey because of him, not because of anything they’d figured out on their own. Why did he always have to do everything? Frustrated, he ran most of the way to the park.

His head hadn’t cleared by the time he jogged up to the path where they were supposed to meet. Stopping, he clenched his hands and tried to calm his breathing. But he was still gulping down air when he spotted Poe at the top of the children’s jungle gym. He was balancing between two bars, laughing with a younger boy who was hanging below him. He wouldn’t be goofing off if he were upset.

Inhaling heavily, he went over to get his attention.

“Hey, you’re early.” Poe grinned, dropping down to the ground. He stumbled and fell in the dirt. He was still brushing his jeans clean when he quirked his head, still smiling. “Did you run here? Fuck’s sake. What happened?”
He just shook his head. He hadn’t felt this angry in a long time. He’d have flashes of rage and was annoyed a lot of the time, but this sort of anger had been something that he thought he’d shaken.

“Come on.”

Shoving his hands into his jacket pockets, he led the other boy to the bench furthest from the other people in the park. Children were laughing and playing. The distant sounds of skateboards hitting pavement knocked him back to why they were supposed to be there.

“Ky, you’re freaking me out,” Poe said, sitting beside him. “Are you okay? Is it Rey?”

“My parents,” he started and then breathed in again. “They called the cops on your dad.”

Poe was on his feet again in a heartbeat, an awful, hateful heartbeat. Poe’s mood snapped in that vicious moment. “Why did they do that? Did you tell them to do that?”

“No,” he argued back, standing again. “No, I fucking didn’t. My dad just told me and it pissed me off.”

“Yeah, that makes two of us.” Poe squeezed his eyes shut and shifted his weight, his hands rolling into fists. His shoulders quivered for a moment. “Fuck!”

Too many heads turned to look at them.

“What the fuck are you looking at?” Poe yelled again. He’d never really seen him angry like this before. His body twisted from yelling at the others in the park back to him, cheeks red and eyes furious. “Let’s go somewhere I can scream in peace.”

He nodded, too numb to make a response. Leaving the ordered lawn and paths, he heard Poe stomping through the brush surrounding the park and into the real nature that surrounded it. He was cursing the entire time under his breath until they reached a fallen tree and he sat down, crossing his arms over his knees. Kylo loomed over him, trying to decide how to comfort him. His eyes were narrowed at the ground and he was biting the inside of his mouth. He wasn’t crying, but he was about to.

Dropping beside him, he put his arm around him. “I really didn’t tell them to do that.”

Poe shrugged. “Doesn’t matter if you did or didn’t. It’s still going to make things really fucking shitty at home. And I’ll probably get taken away again unless I lie my ass off. And I don’t want to lie for him again.”

“Is that really why you moved before?” He asked, keeping his voice low. All of his hate was at his parents at that point. His arm tightened as a reflex.

“Yeah. Different part of town. Different neighbours. Different cops. Same old dad.” He took a shaky breath and leaned towards him. “I’m so fucking mad at your parents right now and they’re only doing the right thing, what you’re supposed to do.”

Kylo’s frown deepened. “It’s not fair.”

“Yeah, it’s not. But I’m used to it. I’m actually doing okay at school for once. For once, I’m actually happy and not just faking it. I have friends. I have…you. If I have to fucking move again, I’ll just say fuck it all and run away. I’m tired of being a pussy about this. Mom can get herself out.” He bit his lip, hard. Kylo was drawn into the emotion, wondering if he looked the same when he was this mad. “As long as we’re together, I’ll be okay.”
“I don’t want you to leave either.” Kylo found the easiest words to say. “I really didn’t want this to happen.”

Poe shifted away from him to wipe his nose. His silence made Kylo’s arm twitch and he leaned closer to him. Poe finally shook his head and stood. “Maybe it’s not the end of the world. But it’s going to be really annoying as fuck.”

He extended his hands, lifting Kylo to his feet as well. They both silently agreed to turn off their phones and continued through the small grove of trees. The sun was warm and the crunching of brush on the old trail was another welcome distraction, but Kylo couldn’t shake how easily they both had fallen into anger at the thought of being separated. He shouldn’t have become this attached; it made him weak. Hux had betrayed him over lesser things, despite how he was acting now. Still, he swallowed the heavy thought of losing another friend over something his parents had done. He couldn’t hate them; he needed them to help Rey.

Frustrated, he kicked a rotten log, making Poe turn. He smirked and took the two steps toward him to kick it too.

Kylo had been through these woods before.

He had an idea of where they were going.

The trail finally ended at the edge of an outcropping of rocks at the centre of a large hill. The cliffs of stone cut into the hillside, breaking it up the ridge into a jagged escarpment. He remembered his father complaining about how developers wanted to wipe out the small oasis of nature in the town and felt heat warm his face again. He didn’t want to apologize this time.

They spent the rest of the afternoon climbing the large and jutting rocks, slowly reaching the top of the hill. His longer arms and legs made finding the right hand holds easier and he’d reach down to help his friend up to the next level. They didn’t talk, but would laugh when one or the other stumbled. The final climb to the top left them holding hands, looking down at the woods and park in the distance.

“The fun part will be getting down.” Poe stepped away from him, giving him a light grin. He sat down and started to pull at the blades of faded yellow grass off the plateau. “Do you come here a lot?”

Shrugging, Kylo sat down across from him. He didn’t want to talk about memories right then, still so close to anger, but he had to. It had been too quiet for too long. If he didn’t say anything, Poe would think he was mad at him. He wasn’t, but the climb had churned up the past again. Maybe talking about it would make it go away. “Now and again. But I did more when I was a kid. It was harder then.”

“But you still made it to the top?” Poe asked, organizing the blades of grass on the leg of his jeans.

“Not every time.” He smiled, watching Poe’s eyes. He turned away from the reaction, looking at the grass, “But I was a really stubborn kid. Leia would stand at the bottom and yell at me to be careful.”

Licking his lips, he brushed the grass from his jeans. He didn’t want to be thinking about those moments right now, but they still landed in his mind. He knew that if he lifted his head, he’d still see old ghosts there, haunting him.

“You okay?”
“Yeah, just…sometimes things come back to me from before. Maybe that’s why I like hanging out with you so much. You don’t remember who I was before and don’t bother me about it.” He swept his hair back, trying not to sound bitter. “I missed everything for seven years. If I wasn’t able to shut off parts of my mind and just focus, I’d be so much more fucked up right now.”

“And that’s why you have the down days, yeah,” Poe said and his head snapped up to glare at him. “Hey I figured it out. Even though I’m mad at your parents right now, I think that they’re proud of you. And kind of understand why you just shut down sometimes. They’d probably know more if you told them.”

The words prodded at him, making him slip from being neutral. “I have to figure everything out on my own.”

“Ky,” Poe said then tilted his head before continuing. “I’m on your side here. Just trying to do my job of getting you closer to normal at the same time.”

He let himself relax into a sigh, but dark thoughts still swam up his chest. “Do you think you’d have survived if you were there?”

“Me?” Poe laughed. “I would have gotten my ass killed right away. If you think I mouth off now, you should have seen me when I was seven.”

Kylo managed to smirk, then looked back at his jeans. He didn’t know how right he was. But the thought quickly pulled him back down, down the stairs into the basement. How heavy his feet felt. How much his hands hurt. What blood tasted like when it splashed into his mouth. The aching smell of dead leaves that permeated the house. How easily hair fell off a decaying scalp when he pulled on it too hard, trying to move too fast to avoid a beating…

“Hey, don’t go there.” Poe’s hand covered his. “Stay here with me.”

He blinked out of the darkness and nodded. Poe nudged him to lie down on the grass and rested his head on his shoulder.

They stayed that way until dark, talking when they felt like it.

It was the only thing that they could do to avoid going home.

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Ahsoka took her to the mall. The last two weeks they’d mostly just be at the house or the park, but she wanted to go somewhere with a lot of people today. Rey got to miss half a day of school; part of her felt sorry for her teacher, that she wouldn’t be there to help clean up at the end of the day. But another part of her was glad to be on her own with a grown-up.

They got frozen yoghurt and sat on a bench, watching everyone walk by.

“We isn’t everyone at work?” Rey asked. It had been bothering her all afternoon. There were adults and kids, mostly her age. There were even some teenagers. Kylo hated the mall so she didn’t bother looking for him. “Mom and dad go to work during the day. They can’t just go to the mall and do nothing.”
Ahsoka took a long lick from her spoon. She got chocolate. Rey got blackberry. She was still deciding if she liked raspberries better. “Maybe they took a day off to go shopping. There was something important that they needed to buy. Maybe they only work in the mornings or evenings. Everybody has their own story. Want to make up some?”

Rey nodded. “Poe works in the mornings or nights so he can go to school. Kylo doesn’t like it.”

Smiling, Ahsoka put her yoghurt down. “Look at that lady over there. The one with the purple sweater. What do you think her story is?”

Rey followed Ahsoka’s eyes and found the lady who she was talking about. She had a brown purse with a big keychain on it. Rey could see it from far away. It looked like something from a vacation maybe, like the pictures she’d seen from when mom and dad and Kylo had taken trips when he was younger. She wanted to take a vacation like that; dad had promised her that she would swim in the ocean that summer. Rey was holding him to that promise, asking to look up trips on his computer. Shaking her head and trying to focus, Rey looked at the lady again. She looked annoyed, frowning at her watch. She was waiting outside of a shop that sold books and paper. Rey had been in there with Kylo, when he was looking for a new notebook.

“She’s waiting for someone.” Rey sat up straighter to get a better look at her. “He’s probably late. Maybe she’s waiting for her husband and he’s always late?”

Ahsoka nodded. “I think she has a husband too. I don’t have a husband, but that lady does. Look how stressed out she looks: how she’s standing and folding her arms. Where do you think they live?”

“In a nice house. Her clothes are nice so she must have a nice house.” Rey liked imagining where other people lived because it was a real place; it wasn’t like playing pretend when places could be anywhere. Mom had taken her to a few open houses. That’s when people were trying to sell their houses and they looked really nice and clean. But the best house was their house.

“What does she like to do for fun?” Ahsoka was smiling at her, encouraging her to keep thinking more.

Rey lifted her head again, looking at the shopping bags in the lady’s hands. “She just bought a book. She likes to read. Kylo likes to read and he’s doing a good job with helping me learn. I like reading too, but not as much as him.”

“He writes a lot too, right?” Ahsoka took her empty yoghurt cup and put it with her own on the side of the bench. Rey hopped down and put both containers in the trash. “What does he write about?”

She looked at her shoes. “A bunch of stuff. He writes about school and his friends. He writes about me, how he’s feeling. Sometimes he writes happy stuff. He smiles about it so I know he’s feeling better. He also writes about the bad things and gets sad. I’m not allowed to read those.”

“Do you like to write things down? Your memories?”

Ahsoka helped her back onto the bench as Rey thought about the question. “I like drawing better. I don’t always see things when I read or when Kylo reads to me.”

“I like drawing too. I have so many sketchbooks. I just love to fill them up with what’s in my head so I can think about them in a different way, to figure out what they mean. Sometimes my mom will look at them and see something totally different.” She looked up as a young woman hurried up to the lady and hugged her and they walked away. “She comes up with a different story.”
Rey frowned and then shook her head. “My friends get scared of my drawings. Sometimes I have to draw Snoke to make the picture done. But I don’t draw his face. Rose thinks that he’s even scarier without a face.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty scary to some people, especially kids. When I was in college, we learnt all kinds of stuff about how to understand why people are afraid of certain things and what it means. Why do you think Rose is afraid of people without faces?” Ahsoka’s voice was always happy, even when it shouldn’t be. And it wasn’t fake either. She wasn’t like her teacher at school who pretended to be happy to try to make them feel better about having to sit still all day.

“She can’t see who they are and she can’t know them?” Rey was guessing now, but hoped she gave the right answer.

“Yeah, that’s what I was thinking too. Rose likes to know people. She was really friendly when I met her. I like your friend Finn too.”

Rey grinned. It had been fun to play with her friends and have Ahsoka be there to play too. She brought a really neat set of blocks with different types of food on them. She could build a house and plan a meal at the same time. Finn and Rose thought that the blocks were boring, but still helped her.

“They like you,” Rey said, reaching out to take Ahsoka’s hand. This had been last week. They were playing in the living room and Kylo and Poe came downstairs. Poe hadn’t met Ahsoka yet until that day. He had been in trouble with his dad and was finally allowed to come over again, but only one night a week and he could never stay over. They spent almost the entire time in Kylo’s room or the basement, being alone together. “Do you like them?”

“Yes!” Ahsoka squeezed her hand. “It’s good to have friends, right? And you’re not mad at Kylo’s friend anymore either?”

She shook her head. “Kylo talked to me about him, why he’s been sad lately. Mom and dad called the police and they went to his house. But they didn’t find anything and his dad made him lie. And it made Kylo sad for a while. But he can come over again, so I guess it’s fine.”

“Hm. Did that make you worried?”

She looked at Ahsoka’s nails. They were a different colour every time that they met and Rey thought it was pretty cool that she took the time to do something like that. Mom painted her nails too, but it was always the same colour each time. “I don’t like it when Kylo’s upset. It makes my stomach hurt.”

“And then you have the nightmares? The ones about Snoke touching your vagina?”

Rey bit her lip. Ahsoka had explained what Snoke had actually done to her, making sure that the words were the right ones. Kylo was mad that she’d done that, but Rey told him that it felt better to know the truth about her memories. How it wasn’t her fault, and not his fault either. Snoke was an evil man who hurt their bodies and their bodies were special. Rey shouldn’t let anyone hug her if she didn’t want them too. That’s why it was important to make sure that if she wanted to kiss anyone at school again, she had to make sure that the person really wanted it.

“How do I make them go away? The bad thoughts? Maz says it will take time and that I need to talk about them and how they make me feel.”

Ahsoka nodded. “I agree with Maz. But you can also think about the memories as something that
you can’t control. They’re the past. But the future? That’s something you can help make real. And you don’t want those memories to keep following you, right? You’re not going to forget the other children if you remember the happy things over the bad things.”

“I’m in control now? Like when I tell Kylo what to do?”

“Well, he’s having trouble making up his mind. You can help him make a decision, but you shouldn’t really be making decisions for him. He helps you make choices too. You need to be a team and figure out how to make the future better than the past.” Ahsoka tilted her head. “Then again, I can’t tell you what to do either. But I can give you advice since I’m older and have gone to school for a very long time to help kids like you.”

“I like that you help kids, Ahsoka. It’s really nice.” Rey smiled. “I’m glad we’re friends.”

Ahsoka fixed her hair and nodded. “Come on, let’s go figure out what we want for lunch.”

Rey took her hand and led Ahsoka toward the food court. Food would always cheer her up.

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The past two weeks were more annoying than Kylo had expected. Rey met with her therapist every other day. She was always at the house. Poe met her last Friday and she asked how he was doing. He had shrugged and said he was okay and they went back to his room.

Kylo was more angry at his parents for calling the police than he was at Poe for lying. He didn’t tell them to call; they had decided that for him. He was just pissed off that Poe couldn’t spend as much time with him the last two weeks. He really didn’t want to argue with him about it when Rey was there but Poe wouldn’t let it go. Poe had to lie. His mom didn’t have anywhere to go.

That’s when they got into an argument. It only ended when Kylo promised that he’d think about telling his family about their type of friendship. That at least got Poe onto his lap and kissing him again. They were alone and they shouldn’t be arguing the entire time. Poe still thought that they should tell Rey about them and he had to explain that it was a bad idea right then. She had a new therapist and was talking about new things. She’d be even more confused.

Now, this Friday, he didn’t bring it up. He was quiet, but blamed it on being tired. But he still smiled and embraced him tightly in his room. They were going to the movies. He still shouldn’t be driving him around like he did, but he didn’t care. They had more freedom when they could do what they wanted.

Standing in the lobby, Kylo studied how Poe was looking at him before he looked away to roll his eyes. He was starting to know when he really wanted him to quit whatever he was doing, and when he was asking for some sort of stimulation to pull him out of the sights and sounds around him. The movie theatre had too many kids from their school, hanging around and being useless.

He caught a flash of red hair out of the corner of his eyes and saw Hux moving across the complex’s floor. Hux paused to look at him, his eyes level and searching for a reaction.
Kylo offered a light wave, aching for a good sign. He knew that hope was useless, but the last few weeks had been good. Even during their presentation that week, Paige had said that they seemed like friends again. They weren’t, but Hux seemed to want something from him again. Unless he had been completely lied to.

Hux waved back and then disappeared with his father.

Poe stopped to look at where his eyes were. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. I just…got…” he trailed off, losing grip on what he wanted to say. “Yeah. Let’s go.”

Their theatre was empty. The movie was terrible but it gave them extra space to be themselves. Poe rested his head on his shoulder, holding his hand. He was touching him more, probably because they were alone.

“I like you,” Poe whispered when the movie got really boring.

Smirking, Kylo leaned over to kiss him, then turned back to the screen. Poe put his head back down and Kylo sighed. School was finally almost over. If he could convince Poe to quit his job and just take money from him instead, things would be perfect. If the police stayed away, it would be even better. He’d be able to lie and say that he still had his job, but he wouldn’t have to be away from them all of the time. He’d told Poe about the settlement, how it finally came through from the government. He had felt bad at first about it; the other kids didn’t get anything like that and he’d been the one to put them into the ground, into the barrels. And now he and Rey were getting money because of it. Agent Jinn had explained it in his email that it was a chance for him and Rey to have the lives that the other children didn’t get a chance to have. Use it for college. Grow up, buy a house. Dream of a future.

He was going to. But it was a lot of money. He wanted to share it, like his sadness.

The movie ended and he slumped down in his seat. “That really sucked.”

Poe was playing with his phone and only glanced up to grin at him. “That was the point. We can make out without anyone watching.”

“We’re not really making out,” Kylo answered, warmth spreading to his throat. “I hardly touched you.”

“But you wanted to.” Poe was teasing him with his eyes. “At least this part is getting easier, right?”

He nodded, feeling himself blush further. They’d still have to stop all the time; Kylo would withdraw into his own head when things got to be too much. The brief time apart hadn’t helped. He was alone in his bed too often, worried about Rey in the next room. If she had a bad nightmare, she’d still come into talk to him. But he’d wake up alone. There were too many things to feel, too many boxes to go through to find the right ones and where they should go.

Reaching out, he gripped Poe’s knee. The last two weeks hadn’t just been annoying. They had meant too much time spent alone with his thoughts. Poe grinned, leaning over and picking up the phone to take a picture of them together. He really didn’t like getting his picture taken, but he had forced a smile just to see Poe’s get wider. He looked at the picture and could only focus on how the other boy looked. He was happy in the picture. The screen showed them both smiling, their heads resting together.

“We look good together, right?” Poe grinned. Kylo watched as Poe set it as the background of his phone. He wanted to tell him not to, but the joy in his face as he looked at his screen made him
Poe quickly leaned down to kiss him and he lost his objection fully.

“I’m glad we’re friends,” Kylo said when they parted.

Poe quickly looked away, down to his phone, then back to him. “That’s…that’s good. I like you, Kylo. A lot. I…this is a nice picture. I know you don’t like them but it means a lot to me. Things are getting less awful at home now so I like that we’re together when we can be.”

There was a sadness in the other boy’s voice that made Kylo worried that he’d misunderstood something. Kylo reached for his hand and squeezed it. Touching helped.

“I actually like it,” he smiled lightly, looking over, confident he was solving the problem. “The picture.”

Poe was still focused on his phone. “Yeah. Me too. Ky, are you happy more with me than you were before?”

He’d been thinking about this the last nearly three months. It felt good to have different things to think about. Being with Poe, talking to him, and learning how to deal with his own body in private moments were better than being alone and wanting to hurt himself and others. Getting done with the project with Hux had also given him the tiniest hope that he’d be his friend again. The girls were wondering what was going on and he wanted to tell them, but it was easier to keep things in his head for a while longer. They’d have the summer to work through the rest of their friendship. Poe wanted him to tell Rey and he still couldn’t find the right words to describe what they had, but the summer might be time for that. Rey liked Ahsoka; she was sleeping in her own bed more, but it wasn’t to be mean to him. She needed to think about her nightmares first before she told them about how they made her feel.

“I’m happy. Are you?” He didn’t want to ask the question, but the look in Poe’s eyes told him he’d hear the answer anyway. “I think that you’re happy that we’re friends most of the time. That you don’t regret being here for me and Rey.”

“Of course I don’t regret it. I just…yeah, I’m happy. It is tough right now, but yeah…” Poe trailed off, looking back at his phone. His fingers ran up and down the case, stretching out the pause. “Ky, what am I to you?”

Kylo slowly digested the question in the lit and empty theatre. He’d just said that he was his friend. What more was there? “You’re…someone I care about. And I don’t really care about a lot of people. You know that. You’re my best friend and you…mean a lot to me. That’s why I got mad at my parents when I thought that you’d have to go away.”

After licking his lips and nodding, Poe leaned over and kissed his cheek. “Thanks. That means a lot to me.”

Still, when he sat back, he returned his focus on his phone. Kylo eyed his hands and how they traced the edges in slow patterns. Did he need a new one? He could fix that.

Poe finally shrugged and stood. “It’s late.” He sounded tired again as he avoided his eyes, motioning for them to go. “My dad’s going to be pissed if I’m late. The cops came by again this week so he’s been a real asshole about it. I’m not mad about it anymore. He won’t hit me if they keep showing up so, maybe this is a better thing than I thought at first.”

Poe kept his distance from him as they left the theatre, shrugging out of his arm when he tried to
drape it over him. Kylo had never done that before so he understood why, but at the same time it hurt. Kylo hated having to leave Poe with his parents. Hanging out on Friday evenings were fine; he told his dad he was working and his manager covered for him. But he still couldn’t spend the night. Last week, he’d gotten so frustrated that they cut class and went on the roof to be alone, to hold one another and talk and kiss. It turned into deeper kisses until he was forced to stop himself. They sat on the ledge and looked at the parking lot, holding hands.

Leia hadn’t been pleased with the angry phone call from Mr Dameron about how much time his son was spending at the Solo house and had connected the dots that she’d been the one to call the police.

Still, after a noiseless car ride, Kylo left his friend. The drive home made anxiety start to build that Poe wasn’t sharing something that he was worried about. The other boy was keeping things from him after what had happened with Rey and then with his father. They could be quiet around one another, but most of the time when he was silent, it was about things neither of them could control.

Finally at home, Kylo sat on the back porch and waited to go inside. The sky was still and the nights were getting warmer. Once school was over, he’d have too much time to think. He’d have to ask his teachers about which books they’d be reading and what to study before the fall. If it were something that he hadn’t encountered before, it would be hard to do well in. He had to plan.

His phone buzzed. Instead of Poe, it was from Hux.

*Good to see you tonight. Can I talk to you some time this week?*

*About what?*

Had Hux seen something? Their showing had been empty and he’d been across the cinema at a different movie. He had followed him with his eyes to make sure.

*You seem so much better now and I need to talk to you more. I might be moving back to mom’s.*

Frowning, Kylo glared at the bright screen as he texted back. *Ok.*

Ignoring the next message, he texted Poe instead. *I miss you.*

He didn’t get a reply.

He stared at his phone for fifteen minutes and finally gave up to go upstairs to talk to Rey.

She was sitting on her bed, colouring in a new sketchbook. It must have come from her therapist. “Hey,” he said, sitting down next to her.

“Yes,” she looked up at him and grinned. “Do you like it?”

Even the pencil crayons were new. Rey was drawing their house. “Pretty good. Can I add something?”

Rey tilted her head and nodded, her smile broadening. “Yeah.”

He could focus on Rey and doing this rather than the weight of his phone in his pocket. He sketched their mailbox, adding in the perspective of the driveway out front of the house. Rey sat up and watched him draw, sitting back as he took the green crayon to add details to the lawn.

“Do you colour a lot with your new therapist?” he asked, reaching for something outside of himself
again. Every time he moved, he thought his phone buzzed. But they were just ghost thoughts and wishful thinking.

“Yeah. We draw, but we also make up stories about people. And we talk about the names for parts of bodies and why some touches make us feel bad and makes us upset,” Rey said, lying down to add tiny swirls of flowers along side the front of the house. “Ahsoka thinks that you made me forget what happened when we were there.”

He winced, squeezing the pencil. He kept his hand steady though, adding in more lines to the driveway to distract himself. “That was when I thought that we would never get out of there. I didn’t want you to hurt all of the time. I couldn’t stop it and it was killing me. You were so little and so special to me and Snoke did those things to you to hurt you, but also to hurt me. I’m sorry I made up stories and lied to you. And I’m sorry I waited so long to say something. But it’s… important that we talk about these things so we can help your nightmares. And so your stomach stops hurting.”

She had to get better. She had to grow up, but not as quickly as she wanted. She was happier when she didn’t remember but that only created more hurt and pain for the future version of her that he could see in his mind. Her face would be leaner, but her cheeks would still be full. Her hair would hang loosely on her shoulders. She would never frown and would love the sunshine.

Rey bit her lip, grabbing a different colour to draw a sun shining in the corner of the picture. “He was raping the older girls. But just touching and biting me. I feel bad about that.”

He squeezed his eyes shut and put the pencil down. “Because they hurt more?”

“And then they died before it got better.” She reached for his hand. “Why are we the only ones allowed to get better?”

Studying the new nail polish on Rey’s fingertips, he frowned. “We’re the only ones that got out because I wasn’t strong enough to save everyone. I hate the things I had to do and everything that happened to us. I hate it so much that I wear people out by talking about it. And I want you to get better and be stronger so I don’t wear you out too. You get so sad when I’m upset so I’m trying to get better. Trying to move on.”

“You talk to Poe about this,” Rey said after a long silence. He could hear the furnace kick in as rain started to pelt the window. “Are you afraid you wore him out?”

The distant confession in the hotel room, followed by the warmth of the other boy’s mouth on his, flashed in his mind and he nodded. He looked at Rey and opened his mouth to tell her everything: how they kissed and hugged and how they had gone further, almost to the point where he thought he’d never get again. How this type of friendship was important to him too, but how he was petrified of losing them both if he told Rey and she was hurt by it. And now Poe’s sudden distance was pressing on him too. How he was less angry having someone to talk to who was his own age: someone who wanted him around, until he started causing so much trouble for him. How all of this was so confusing that he couldn’t sleep, especially with her taking space away from him too. But he shut his mouth and just nodded. “Yeah. He’s worried about Han and Leia calling the cops on his dad. I talk to him a lot and he’s my best friend. But I talk more to Maz now too. And it felt… good to talk to dad. When I apologized to him finally this time.”

He had come from the hike after dark. He’d walked Poe to his block, looking distantly at his house. They embraced on the street and Kylo had to make the long walk back to his house alone. He could have taken the bus but he punished himself instead. Cold and empty, he had come inside, glared at his family on the couch and went upstairs to take a shower. He was just getting dressed
when his father had asked to come in. Sitting on his bed in his boxers and a t-shirt, he waited for ten minutes before he finally gave up and let him in. Kylo knew that he was pouting throughout most of the conversation, still lingering in the thought of being betrayed. But Han assured him that they were really just doing the right thing. And Kylo felt like he had to tell him what Poe had said to him that afternoon: how they were both afraid. Han gripped his shoulder, saying that it would be okay. Even if he had to move somewhere else, they’d still be friends and he’d make sure that they’d be able to see one another. He had numbly nodded, not wanting to argue. But when the tears came, he leaned against his father. He couldn’t lose him. Not now.

Han spotted one of the worst scars on his thigh and took a long, deep breath. It was a jagged and harsh scar that was deep and wouldn’t fade like the smaller ones. He told him how it was easy for them to forget what he’d been through; and he was sorry for letting that get away from them. The world was always moving so fast and they sometimes needed to stop and remember how far he’d come.

Han said he was proud of him. Kylo didn’t believe it.

Rey looked at him for a long time, reading the sadness that was clearly on his face. “But you’re supposed to call the police if someone is being hurt.”

Still back in his bedroom only a couple of weeks ago, he shook his head. “He told me about how he was taken away from his family before, when he was little, for a year or something, and how it didn’t get better. He just went back and then his dad showed up again and it was all a lie. His mom did everything for his dad, but not for him. He always feels in the way.”

“I’m not mad at him anymore. He doesn’t get in the way here.”

Yes he does, between you and me, Kylo thought darkly, especially if I don’t tell you everything. “But you like it when he’s here? When we spend time with you?” In the back of his mind was the thought with me?

Rey nodded quickly. “Yeah, he made you play the game. It was really fun and I want to do it again the next time we’re together.”

“I think he’d like that.”

He went to bed after hugging Rey after making sure that she knew she could still come to him if she had a nightmare.

Saturday came and he hadn’t heard from him. Nothing. No reply.

Then Sunday came and there was still no reply to his texts.

Then Poe wasn’t at school on Monday.

And Kylo finally felt the familiar pull towards self-destruction.
Standard warnings: past abuse, mentions of rape and death, boys kissing.

I've updated the tags to extend the Poe/Kylo chapters mostly because as I've been reworking them, Rey got too little space. Adding more of what she's going through ended up making one chapter totally unmanageable and I needed to split it into two. Chapter 25 needed to be entirely Rey and what had been the end of that needed to be its own chapter, since the old Chapter 26 (now 27) is when things go boom and the second half can begin.

Sorry to anyone that wanted this arc over sooner, but rest assured that I've got the chapters mostly finished and Chapters 28 and 29 are mostly done too. Chapter 29 is where we start circling into the outskirts of Reylo territory with Ben and Rey being 23 and 13 so there's not much that can happen then, except plant some seeds that will grow as Rey gets older. I'm not going to update with the amount of chapters there will be to this, but we're probably looking at 60 to 65.

Thanks for reading this very, very strange thing that I've created. I know that the relationship between the boys remains an issue here, especially with how it will get mopped up in Chapter 28. There will be spillover, but I'm trying to make believable after the end of a relationship.
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Kylo confronts Poe, but gets more than he bargained for.

Read chapter notes for warnings!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had taken the entire day to get Poe alone when Kylo finally spotted him in the hallway on Tuesday. A black eye swallowed up part of his face and he didn’t seem to care that everyone was staring at it, while also casting suspicious eyes in Kylo’s direction and then avoiding him when he caught his attention at last. Every time he started to approach him, he’d fled with his head down and shoulders tense. He hadn’t answered any of his texts all weekend. He hadn’t looked at him in class. So he skipped last period and sat outside of his locker, waiting. Any teacher that walked by, he’d just glare at them. Let them send him to fucking Holdo. Everyone could go to fucking hell and burn with Snoke for as much as he cared.

Finally, finally, he caught him. He couldn’t escape him now. He had to get into his locker.

“What’s wrong?” Kylo asked, standing instantly when he caught Poe’s eyes. It was the end of the day. Everyone was streaming around them, pretending not to look. Kylo rubbed his hand over his satchel, trying to calm himself down. He had prepared for the confrontation. He just had to stay focused and find out what had happened and why he was being ignored.

“I don’t want to talk about it.” The black eye looked even worse when Poe neared him to open his locker. It was half-swollen shut, redness tingeing his eyelid. “It’ll be fine, Kylo. I just need to be… alone. To think. Okay? You get to think all the time.”

Poe’s phone clattered to the floor out of his pocket and he swore, loudly, getting the attention of a group of seniors across from them on the steps to the music room. Their snickers stopped when he turned to glare at them. Kylo reached for the phone before Poe could grab it, instantly panicked by the broken screen.

“It’s okay. It was already busted. It still works. I just can’t…call anyone. Or text back. Look, it got fucking broken because I’m a fucking idiot. If that’s what you’re looking for,” Poe mumbled as he slipped on his jacket and winced. He grabbed his bag and turned to leave when Kylo reached to touch his shoulder.

He was filled with panic about who had hurt him. He wanted to know if it was anyone at school. If they had, they wouldn’t get away with it. He was going through the list in his head, staring off into Poe’s face when he saw him yelling at the seniors over his shoulder. He turned and scowled at them and only saw them laughing. Was it them? He wanted it be them and not be his father. He didn’t want this to be about what his parents had set in motion.
“I’ll take you home, come on,” he finally said. “Please.”

Poe’s face was flushed with anger, the same redness from the park blushed his cheeks. He looked from the others, then back to him, then up at the ceiling. “Whatever makes you happy.”

He was taller than Poe, but somehow the other boy was faster. He had to quicken his pace to keep up and reach the parking lot. The buses were still pulling out and the chaos of after school, which usually overwhelmed him, faded into nothing. They waited in silence; Kylo was both afraid to speak and waiting for Poe to tell him what was going on. He always did. Even though he was breathing deeply and searching for calm, there was still silence. Poe slowly put his head in his hands as the last school bus pulled away. He finally stood and took two steps down before his shoulders stiffened. There were still other cars there and Poe hesitated, standing at the front entrance to the school as he eyed the boys from before.

Sitting down with all his meagre weight on the front step, Poe gripped his backpack. “Can we just wait here? Until they go. Unless you have anything to say to them? Or me?”

The question only increased his anxiety. They must have been the ones. He looked up at glared at them, telling them with his eyes that they’d understand how black eyes felt the next day. Glancing at the license plates as they drove away, trailing after the distant school buses, he put them into his mind for the next morning.

“Guess we’re waiting here all night.”

They were almost alone by the time Poe spoke. Kylo had been intently watching him, waiting for an answer. He could get him a new phone. His parents would do anything for him and he would just ask them to take money from the stupid victim’s fund. They also liked Poe and thought it was good that they were friends. He could make everything right. He had to. This was his friend.

He reached for Poe’s hand and he pulled away, stalking off for Kylo’s car.

“You want to go home? Then let’s just go home!” Poe shouted. “Go back to your fucking perfect home!” He grabbed at the car door and swore when it was still locked. Kylo hit the button on the key fob and Poe, his face still angrier than he’d ever seen before, got inside.

“Please, tell me what happened? I think I know but…” Kylo started, leaning towards the passenger seat and trying to reach for him.

Poe just looked at his hands after pulling away.

He didn’t want to start the car without knowing who had hurt him. But his silence did not give him any answers. Instead, Poe turned to glare at him and left the car.

He scrambled after Poe as he stomped away, back towards the building. The parking lot was nearly empty, taking on a foreignness he wasn’t accustomed to.

He called out but Poe didn’t stop. His shoulders were stiff as he went straight towards the gym with determined feet.

Finally catching up in the boy’s locker room, Kylo tried to touch him as he stepped by him. The neon lights buzzed to life and hissed at him from the ceiling. Poe’s gaze was equally cold. He slammed the door to the empty locker room shut and turned, his face flushed red with dawning tears. The sickly green-black skin that framed his eye glistened. Looking at the bruise, Kylo knew where to place his anger, but he couldn’t back down from the conflict. He just needed an answer.
But it was Poe who spat out a question instead. “What’s your problem?”

Raising his head, Kylo set his shoulders straight at the other boy, glaring down at him. Nothing had brought this on, other than asking about where he’d been and who’d hit him. Revenge was something easy for Kylo to crave and he needed to know who to direct that passion towards. Whatever the others had said had just bled through his mind, mixing into lies and rumours. He really wanted to ask Poe the same question but his mouth was numb. He stood where he was, watching Poe stalk across the room.

“Come on, answer me!” He slammed his hand down on the bench.

“I really don’t understand,” he answered. “Tell me what’s wrong. Why can’t we just go home?”

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong?! I mean come on! You didn’t even stand up to them just now. What’s happened to you?” Poe’s face reddened further as he spoke, drawing to a bright crimson. His shouts filled the room, echoing against the tiled walls. The lonely drip from the shower was finally overtaken by the yelling.

Blinking, he shook his head. “I didn’t really hear…”

“Because you didn’t want to hear! God!” He threw up his hands and groaned before sitting down heavily on the bench. He wiped at his eyes, tears starting to spill down his cheeks. “The last few days have been hell for me and you’re just making excuses.”

Unsure of how to move or feel, Kylo tried to reach out to touch Poe’s t-shirt. Touching helped. If he could hug him then he’d tell him what was wrong. His hand was swatted away and he was met with a dark glare. He silently withdrew his hand—his awkward hand—and took a long step back, settling against the lockers.

“Tell me what to do,” Kylo managed to say. “Please. Who hit you.”

“My fucking dad did, you asshole. You know that, don’t play dumb. You fucking knew that yesterday when I wasn’t here. Do you know where I was? Hiding in the bathroom because he was going to fucking end me and I had nowhere to go. First, you get your parents to call the cops and mess up my life even more. Then my dad stops giving a shit about that because I’m just a worthless little queer. He broke my phone and beat the shit out of me and called me a fucking faggot and now, now I get the same shit at school and you don’t even say anything. You won’t tell Rey, you won’t tell your parents, and I have to be so careful around you and them and now my life is even worse and you…you…” The younger teenager’s face was firm for a second and then melted into a sob. “I just want a boyfriend who realizes that he’s my boyfriend! If I get the crap kicked out of me because I love someone, I just want him to admit that he loves me back! Or at least acknowledges that he’s dating me.”

The shout sucked the air out of the empty room. There was a brief meeting of eyes before Poe turned quickly fled. The flimsy door clicked shut and Kylo was alone.

Shifting dumbly from foot to foot, Kylo could only sit down and blink through his blurred vision. When he finally touched his face, he realized that tears were falling from his own eyes too. A boyfriend. A boyfriend? None of it made sense. They were just friends that made each other feel good, taking off the edge and… he loved him? The picture behind Poe’s broken phone screen flashed in his eyes and he could only stare at the empty background picture of his phone. He’d taken it out of his pocket to call Poe, to get him to come back. But even then, he didn’t know what to say.
As the lie he had been telling himself the last few months melted away into the dingy locker room, he heard the door open again. He quickly stood, ready to pull Poe into his arms and apologize, ready to try something or anything not to lose him.

Instead, Hux emerged from the darkened hallway.

Kylo froze, his mouth sagging open.

“I, um, heard everything,” his former friend said. “What just happened?”

The corners of Kylo’s eyes blurred red and then blackness darkened his vision until all he could focus on was Hux’s face. He was just making things normal between them again. The small waves and secret texts, and the fact that he might be moving back with his mom meant they could have been friends again.

Not after this.

Not if he had heard all of that.

The awkward tension of the locker room twisted in his chest. They had stood there, frozen for seconds that felt like endless and tormenting hours. Until Hux quickly turned and locked the door to the room. Kylo stood his ground, preparing for the beating that was clearly coming.

He lunged at Hux first, when he stepped out of the hallway but instead of hitting him, Hux just shook his head and pushed him away, spitting out a rapid apology.

“Kylo, Kylo, it’s okay. I’m not…I’m not going to hit you or anything. It’s okay. It’s really okay.” Hux shook his head, putting up his hands to stop him from getting closer again.

His eyes still locked on the other boy, Kylo blinked in shock. “What’s okay?”

“That you’re…that you and Poe are…whatever. Together.” Hux looked at his feet for a brief second, struggling with the phrase. “Everyone else might give you shit, but I won’t. Look, I came here to talk to you about what we talked about the other day. I didn’t mean to spy on you. I had to stay late and didn’t realize you were still here until I saw you guys run in and then he…I was about to come in when I heard all of the shouting. I’m really sorry, if that means anything.”

Kylo sat down hard on the bench, still trying to settle his breathing. “I can’t even begin to tell you. I can’t tell anyone.”

He always clung to those words. They were safe. They couldn’t hurt anyone but himself.

Weakly, he fumbled for his satchel. He pulled out the notebook in which he’d written careful details about his feelings for Poe. Most of them only felt right on paper, but were things he could never put into open, real words. He lifted it up, offering it to Hux. The other boy nodded, took the book, and opened it to the first page. Flipping through the neat lines of writing, his eyes widened at parts, and then he grinned lightly at others. He didn’t read it all, Kylo could tell, but his hand slowed on one of the last entries. Kylo’s ears burned hot with embarrassment as Hux closed the book and gave it back to him.

“Um, wow.”

“Yeah.”

“Wow, um,” Hux paused, turning from the lockers to meet his eyes. “If you can write all that
down, why can’t you tell him?”

Kylo let his head drop down. “Maybe if I tell him, it will be real. And I’ll end up hurting him, because I mess everything up. I’ve hurt him so much already and my dumb feelings will just make it worse. My parents called the cops because of me. His dad kicked the shit out of him because of me. He, I…we took a picture together. He had it on his phone. I guess he saw it.”

“You don’t want to lose him?”

“I didn’t want to lose you either,” Kylo’s voice was bitter as he spoke. “And I still did.”

“Not…not now. Not anymore.” Hux said, firmly. “I’m done with my dad pushing me around. I’ve been talking with my mom. We’ve, um, cried a lot. About me coming home. But that’s not the point. Maybe…maybe we should just go home so we can talk. You’re not okay right now.”

They quietly left the empty gym, catching glares from the custodians outside in the hallway. He heard the voices of other students staying late and felt a pang in his chest, wondering if Poe was with them. The bus stop wasn’t far, but it was still far enough to make him worry. Hux guided him outside, shaking his head. When they got to his car and Kylo spotted Poe’s backpack, resting in the backseat, new tears singed his eyes.

But the bud of revenge blossomed in his chest as he looked up and met Hux’s eyes. “His father can’t do that to him and get away with it. And the cops aren’t doing anything. Get in.”

Hux was shaking his head the entire time, but still got in the car. He scrambled to do up his seatbelt as Kylo was already pulling away from the school.

“Kylo, no. You can’t just go beat the shit out of his dad. The cops will stop you. Someone always calls the cops.” Hux looked terrified as Kylo pushed the speed in his car. The words were being spoken, but he didn’t feel their meaning. Nothing meant anything anymore; Poe couldn’t love him. It was the stupidest thing he could do.

“The cops forgot about me for seven years too,” he spat back. Anger settled around him, bringing him comfort. “And I want to kill him. I’ve done it before, and now I’m even stronger. I can kill him with my bare hands.”

Hux didn’t have a reply. He just locked his eyes forward and fingered the seatbelt.

“And then what?” Came the delayed response.

“They…” he quickly went back to the plan that he always clung to. “We get Poe and Rey and leave town. Fuck this place. Our parents aren’t even helping us anymore. We’ll be better off alone.”

“I want to believe you.” Hux had forced his voice to be calm but Kylo could see his hands shaking. His own hands would have been too if they weren’t gripping the steering wheel.

For all of Kylo’s devices and bravado, the second he parked outside of Poe’s house, it was only fear and panic that filled his mind. Stepping out of the car, Poe’s bag in his hand, he gave Hux one last look. It was the same one that they had shared in childhood—one that told both of them that they had to have one another’s backs. Together, they strode up the walkway.

The car’s engine had already drawn attention and the door flew open. Kylo paused in his step as an infuriated man set his eyes on him. Meeting the gaze, Kylo lifted the backpack.
“My boyfriend forgot this in my car.”

“You little shit, I knew it was your fucking family. You get the fuck out of here.” Mr Dameron stood on the front step, blocking Kylo’s line of sight into the house.

“Make me.” Kylo’s voice dropped and he sized up the portly man before him. He wasn’t hardened and gnarly like Snoke. The twisted hands of that vicious man didn’t sit in the weak arms he was looking at now. But he didn’t claw his way through hell to watch someone else get hurt because of him. “Or can you only beat up fifteen year olds?”

The older man sneered and snatched something out of the front room before he stepped out of the doorway, taking the two steps down to the lawn. Kylo rolled his eyes at the baseball bat. He took a brief look at Hux, pretending to lower his guard.

That was all it took. Mr Dameron came at him, the bat raised, and he easily ducked away. Swinging his elbow, he connected with the back of the man’s head. Stumbling, Dameron came at him again. This time he smashed hard against his arm. But there was no pain, not with how his blood was flowing. He lashed out, hitting him with his opposite hand, directly under his attacker’s chin. The blow landed, the other man stumbled. And Kylo tackled him to the ground.

No one could understand that fighting brought him peace, a peace he desperately wanted to find elsewhere. Landing punches on the man’s face and chest, he felt a familiar calm take hold of his heart. The other man was still struggling, clawing at him and trying to press on his wounded arm. Screaming, he thrust forward, aiming to get his hands around the man’s neck. A dull tingling started to pass through his left hand and he couldn’t get a grip. Snoke’s face filled his vision, calling him a failure, and he paused in horror.

Arms were grabbing at him.

Two pairs of arms.

He weakly let them pull him off, staggering a few steps away from the groaning man on the ground.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Poe’s voice was in his ear. He couldn’t answer. He could only shake his head and dash towards his car, their way out.

Two slamming car doors followed his.

But his hands were shaking too much to turn the key.

He desperately looked over at Hux. His face was frozen in shock but he still nodded and Kylo struggled into the backseat. Once Hux slid into the driver’s side, the car started and they pulled away, into the tones of sunset shifting into evening.

“Fuck, Kylo, just…fuck.” Despite what Poe was saying, he was still stroking his hair. Kylo still couldn’t speak.

Tattered gasps left his mouth and he could only look up at him. “I love you.”

Poe, his face wet with tears, only frowned. “Funny way of showing it.”

“Hey, um, guys, where am I going?” Hux asked, looking back for a moment. “Kylo, I just have my learners. I can’t drive like you. I shouldn’t even be driving at night.”
Sitting up, he finally felt the sharp and burning pain in his arm. Cradling it against his chest, he took a long breath. “My house.”

“Why there?” Poe asked. “The cops are going to be coming after us. Fuck, Kylo. That was some brave shit but it was so fucking stupid.”

“We’re getting Rey and we’re going…wherever.” He kept his eyes forward, feeling a slight sting in one start to spread across his forehead. Shaking it off, he gave Poe a quick look before climbing into the front seat again. He snapped his seatbelt on and nodded to himself. “He should have never fucked with you. He shouldn’t have been fucking with you the entire time. And fuck the cops for doing nothing.”

Finally, finally, his house came into view. Hux wasn’t driving like his life depended on it.

“Get back in your seat. You drive like shit.” Shrugging on his jacket, placing his arm under one sleeve, he took off before the car had rolled to a stop.

Rey was sitting on the sofa, colouring. She was humming to herself when he slammed the front door open.

They rarely used the front door.

She’d know what it meant. She had to.

He took one look at her and she reacted without hesitation. Snatching up her shoes by the door, she followed him out of the house in a mad dash. Hopping into the driver’s seat, he waited only until her door was closed.

This was all of the plan that he had.

He’d have to make up the rest of it as they drove.

“What happened, Kylo?” Rey asked, doing up her seatbelt. She was frowning, but still focused on him. “Are we finally leaving?”

“This is so fucked.” Hux let out a long and defeated sigh. “This is so fuckin’ed.”

“Kylo, did you hurt someone?” Rey asked. Her voice wasn’t panicked, but she needed to know what was happening.

“Yeah, I did. Now we need to figure out what to do.” He felt relief as they left his neighbourhood. It wasn’t that far to the highway. He’d never driven that far before, but he knew every turn and corner to leave their shitty city and get anywhere.

“Was it your dad?” Rey had turned her questions to Poe.

“Yeah, sweet pea. He…Kylo did what he thought had to be done. I’m not that mad anymore, but the police are going to be pissed.”

He heard Rey sigh again and then she reached out her hand. “Can I have Kylo’s phone?”

Hux had to reach over and pull it out of his pocket. Kylo grimaced as he shifted, his arm only resting on the steering wheel. He had no strength in it. It was broken; he knew that feeling.

Rey unlocked his phone and was dialling a familiar number before he could protest. His attention was more on the road than the hot breathing in the car.
“Hi Agent Jinn, it’s Rey,” she paused. “We’re in trouble.”

There was a very long break before Rey spoke again.

“Okay. He can’t talk right now. We’re driving.”

He could hear both Hux and Poe suck in breaths, waiting to hear what the FBI agent was about to say.

“He says pull over and tell him what’s happening.” Rey repeated the words. “Pull over right now.”

As quickly as he could, with one working arm, he found an empty shoulder of the road and pulled off. The car settled to a stop, but his heart kept racing.

“He said whatever you did, he’s not mad and will try to fix it,” Rey said, firmly. “As long as you didn’t kill anyone.”

“He wanted to,” Hux mumbled. “What if we get stopped before anyone can help us? Fuck, just let me out. My dad is…”

“No one is leaving the car!” He shouted. “Give me the phone.”

“Kylo, what happened?” Agent Jinn’s voice was intense, but he could still hear the edges of sleep in it. He was also moving around. “I need you to tell me everything.”

“Why did you think I killed someone?” He asked, his voice breaking as he spoke.

Jinn sighed. “I’m good at my job. You and Rey were in a car. You were in trouble, but you never run from a problem that you can solve. There were others in the car. Kylo, tell me what happened. Follow the steps. Trace the events.”

He jerked his arm and felt a jolt of pain; it was spreading, deepening as it latched on to him. Groaning, he shifted and bit back tears. “My… the temptation to say friend lingered, but he pushed it down, “my boyfriend’s father hit him. Because my parents called the police about him but they didn’t do anything. When I asked him about it at school, other people saw us and started calling us names, I guess. I was just focused on him and he got angry. It was all my fault. I couldn’t get out of my head. I couldn’t hurt them, but I could hurt him. We went to his house and he saw me and came at me. I hit him. I hurt him. And then I ran away.”

There was a long sigh on the other end of the phone. “And you didn’t think to tell the cops that another boy had been hurt? Let them talk to the father?”

“We already did and they didn’t do anything. And if they did do anything, it wouldn’t have been like we wanted. The cops don’t care. Just like they didn’t care about us. The FBI is better than the police.” The more he rested his arm, the more it burned. He tried to move it and it only made him suck in a pained breath. “You would have stopped him, but you’re not here.”

Another long pause. “Kylo, are you hurt?”

“He broke my arm,” he answered, the familiar sting burning up his shoulder still. “Agent Jinn, I wanted to kill him. What’s wrong with me?”

“Listen to me, okay? And don’t interrupt me or go into your own head. Be here, with me and listen. Kylo, for every year of trauma, you have more than a year of recovery. The severity of trauma that you and Rey endured will take more than that average. It’s only been two years. Other
than talking to me, you’ve been avoiding real therapy, real *talk*. Your letters show progress and I
can see it, but do others? Do you feel yourself getting better?” The words went straight at his heart
and Kylo could only shake his head.

Glancing back at Poe and Rey, and then turning to Hux, he managed a light nod. “Tonight has been
the first time in a long time that I wanted to hurt someone. I don’t…it’s gotten easier not to hurt
myself. Agent Jinn, I fucked up.”

“Take a deep breath now. If you’re hurt, you need to call your parents. They need to come and get
you and take you to the hospital. I…I can’t come to you. You know I would if I was there. I never
wanted you to take all this on when you feel so alone.” Jinn’s voice dropped and he heard him sit
down. He heard another voice in the background, asking what was happening. “If this is the same
boy that you’ve been writing to me about, I’m guessing he decided to lie or you made him lie. Lies
don’t help anyone, Kylo.”

“I know and I’m not alone. I…but I hurt someone.” His mouth could hardly make the words
anymore. He was tired and the pain from his arm made him realize that he couldn’t drive anymore.
“What will happen?”

“Did your friend see the other man try to hit you?”

“Yes.” *Did he?*

“I can’t step in here. I can’t do much more than tell you to tell the truth now. And if something like
this happens again, remember the consequences of revenge and lying to get what you want. Our
world is filled with evil, Kylo. I’m trying to stop it from spreading but you see it in the faces of
anyone who hurts or threatens others, even if it isn’t obvious to others. You can’t touch darkness
and forget how it feels, what it tastes like. Remember what we talked about: you can’t go there and
not end up hurting yourself or others. If you want to work with me, to stop these awful people, you
can’t do things like this. Now, please, call your parents. And make sure everyone in the car knows
that they have to tell the truth to the police. No more plans. And no lies,” Jinn said. Every word
should have made him want to argue, but the promise of being as kind and intelligent as the other
man made him agree with him.

“I will. I promise. I’m sorry for waking you up with this…bullshit.” He rested his head against the
steering wheel and sighed into the phone. Too many thoughts were fighting for a place in his head.
He had to get out of the car. He couldn’t breathe.

“It’s not bullshit. Text me when you can. I’ll answer you.”

“Bye.” Kylo said shortly and then ended the call. He let the phone drop onto his lap and left his
head against the wheel, taking slow and even breaths. Rey had been in the car. She’d heard
everything that he said. He didn’t care about the police anymore. He wanted to figure out what to
say to her.

The silence came on quickly, but was broken when Poe leaned forward to extend his hand to Hux.

“Hey, you know who I am and I know who you are, but I wanted to thank you for backing him
up.” Poe was eyeing Kylo as he spoke, but he just kept his head down, only catching the look from
under his arm.

“I didn’t have a choice, but I still wanted to be there,” Hux answered. “What your dad did to you…
I’ve been there too.”
Poe leaned back and the leather of his jacket creaked. “Kylo told me. If we get out of this, we can compare notes. See whose dad sucks more.”

“I don’t have a dad,” Rey piped up. “Snokes murdered him, I think.”

If he could reach back into the car, he would have hugged Rey. Instead, his phone buzzed to life. Leia.

He fumbled with the phone and finally answered. “Hey.”

“Where are you? Ben, the police are looking for you. What did you do? Where’s Rey? I don’t want to be mad but I’m…Where are you?”

Her words echoed into a dull void. His head was feeling lighter with every second that he sat there. Was she really talking to him? Was she in the car? He didn’t know anymore. Everything was blurring into everything else, a never-ending, overlapping series of shapes.

He glanced up, looking for a sign. He couldn’t find one. Beside him, Hux had the place where they were parked up on his phone. Hux was talking, but he couldn’t hear him. Even when he told his mother where they were, he didn’t hear his own voice. He couldn’t be there anymore; he was gone. He couldn’t breathe in that car; he didn’t think that his lungs would ever work again. Somehow, he ended the call. His head sagged back and he screamed, but he couldn’t hear it. Finally finding whatever strength he had left, he tossed himself out of the car and onto the pavement and stalked off, still shrieking at himself and what he had let happen.

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The door slammed shut and Rey let the words that Kylo had said grow in her mind as his shouts finally stopped. As his pained cries died in her ears, what he had said before expanded into larger and larger bubbles of anxious questions. She already knew the answers, but the amount of lying that had been going on made her heart hurt. He had sounded so broken, so hurt, but her head was being selfish in that moment. Her stomach ached at the thought. Turning to Poe, she quirked her head, hoping to feel something else. He gave her a careful, tight smile until she finally smiled back. It broke the stream of emotions coursing through her into a tighter stream. She had to stop and put things into pieces that she could sort through. There was another story here and she needed to figure it out. Poe’s bruised face was suddenly cast into darkness as the dome light went out. He had been hurt; she shouldn’t be mad at him. He shouldn’t have had to lie for Kylo.

But how could she hate Kylo?

It was Hux who finally ended the silence. He tapped the dashboard and sighed. She heard his jacket crinkle as he folded his arms. “Should we go after him?”

Poe shook his head and said exactly what she wanted to say. “He wants us to. But he also needs to get it all out, you know? There’s nothing else out here but a field, look. He’ll be back once he…once he hates himself enough. It tears me up inside when he does it. No one should feel like he does all the time. I shouldn't have said all the things that I said to him but I didn't think that he'd do something like this.”

Hux sighed. “I just wanted to tell him I was moving back home. I…yeah, I hate myself too. For ditching him.”
Kylo talked a lot about hate. It was always wrapped up in how others treated him and dealt with everyone around them. He would talk about love only on the good days, but there had been more of them the last three months. To him, there wasn’t enough love in the world to balance the hate. That’s why she had to do nothing but love and not be like him and only hate. She wanted to keep the promise that she had made to him, but wished that he could keep the same one to her. Rey unclicked her seatbelt and moved easily to sit next to Poe in the cooling car. She forgot her jacket and she needed someone to hold. He dropped his arm around her shoulder and she felt safe enough to speak.

“We missed you. Kylo wrote you a letter but he wouldn’t send it,” she kept her voice strong as Poe stroked her hair. But she had seen him wince as she put her head against him. No wonder Kylo was so angry. But he could have found another way. That’s what he was supposed to do. But Hux needed her now. Kylo was busy hating himself. “I told him to and he said he did. He lies when he’s afraid.”

Hux sat up and straightened his shoulders. Kylo always did that when he was realizing something, both good and bad. “I wrote and deleted so many texts to him. My dad kept telling me that he was a pervert or a psycho. He has pages in that stupid book highlighted and I see him look up Kylo all the time online. He wanted me to tell him everything that I knew about him and I did at first but then it just felt wrong. He’d make me comment on this one blog about what I knew. It felt good at first. Like, when I thought he stole Liza from me. I put so much shit out there that he shouldn’t forgive me for, no matter how much I want him to. I just wanted my dad to love me again. I was stupid to lose my best friend. So fucking stupid.”

“You never lost him.” Poe leaned forward, shifting Rey slightly, to put his hand on Hux’s shoulder. “He liked working with you on the project, believe it or not. We talked about you a bunch. I was kind of jealous.”

Hux looked at him with heavy eyes. “I guess I missed a lot of stuff.”

“Yeah, you did.”

Rey tried to keep quiet as Poe sat back. The questions wanted to burst out of her chest, but she kept her mouth shut. The car was off and cold so she leaned closer to Poe. When he was gone, she’d missed him, really. It had been strange not to see him as much lately. It was frustrating being so small; time never made sense and she didn’t know how long he’d been gone for. Ahsoka talked about how friends brought out good things and bad things in people. Despite her anger at him from before, despite how much it sucked to have to talk about feelings all of the time, she did get a new friend. And Kylo wasn’t as soft as he used to be to cuddle with. His arms would sometimes hold her too tight. But Poe was soft and she liked his laugh; she felt awful for being angry at him for something that was Kylo’s fault. But what Kylo hadn’t told her was starting to scratch the walls of her mind until they were bloody. Their bond could never be broken, but he had made tiny steps away from her. At first, she was happy that he was feeling better and that their time apart meant they could live without breathing the same air all of the time. Maz always told her that they’d be in each other’s lives forever, but that would also mean time spent being separated. Kylo would go to college one day. She had to be ready. But the little lies, those she couldn’t understand. And now it was the biggest lie ever. She shivered and Poe hugged her closer, but she felt his hands start to bunch against her.

“We’re fugitives, all of us,” Poe finally said and Rey rolled her eyes with his nervous talking, burrowing her head in his lap. At least he still smelled like Kylo. “Is this…kidnapping? Did you guys kidnap me and her?”
“I don’t think it’s kidnapping,” Hux answered, shaking his head. He caught Rey’s eyes and smirked. It was so dark and all she could see were the pale whites of his eyes. He looked so much older now. They were all growing up, getting away from her. “We didn’t get that far. Hopefully Kylo’s parents get here before the cops. Maybe no one saw the plates.”

“Everybody heard Ky screaming. Somebody saw it. I got off the bus and I heard it and ran all the way home. Everyone’s lights were on.” Poe shifted and pulled her up, against his chest. He knew that she was cold and shifted off his jacket, draping it over her and then pulling her close again.

Kylo was still not coming back. Rey shifted, her unease making it hard to sit and wait. She hugged Poe’s coat closer and tried to decide if she wanted Kylo to come back or not.

“Isn’t your dad a lawyer? Do you think I’ll get deported?”

Hux sat up and looked into the back of the darkened car. “Why would you get deported? Weren’t you born here?”

Poe nodded. Rey just closed her eyes.

“And were your parents born here?”

Again, Poe nodded. She felt him moving and let her head slump against him.

“So?”

“But my grandparents came here. It was legally, but now they live in Mexico. If the police come, they’ll put me into one of those camps on the news. Won’t they? Hey, call your dad. Ask him if I’m going to get deported.” Poe’s mouth wouldn’t stop. Rey rested her head on his lap as she shifted down again and let her mind try to untangle everything that was happening.

Hux was arguing that his dad was just a corporate lawyer and he fucking hated him so why would he call him to ask such a stupid question. Both of them were avoiding thinking about what Kylo was doing. Staying in the car was getting harder and harder.

“There’s a car coming,” she said, hearing the distant rumbling of tires.

“Fuck,” Hux’s voice was filled with panic as he sat up and looked in the rear-view mirror. Forcing herself up, Rey looked out the back window.

A familiar pair of headlights pulled up beside them.

Rey lurched away from Poe and opened the door. “Dad!”

Han stepped out of his car and looked from the empty driver’s seat to her. “Hey, baby girl. Where is he?”

She could hear Kylo’s footsteps before he emerged into the light from the car. He was dirty and bleeding. The light washed out his black clothes, shifting them into grey. But she could see where they were ripped and torn. Rey clenched her hand around dad’s coat, not wanting to run to him. His eyes told her not to and the anger that spread in her chest made it easier to listen to him.

Leia stepped out of the passenger side of the car and reached for her son. With slow and heavy steps, he leaned into her arms. Rey finally broke from where she stood and wrapped her arms around both of them. She wasn’t supposed to be angry; it just made it harder to love. Kylo’s hand fell on her shoulder and he squeezed it hard.
“What happened?” Leia asked, gasping. “Where were you going?”

Kylo just bit his lip and stepped away, shaking his head. He took Rey with him and she willingly followed. She heard the other boys step out of the car. But other than that, everything was quiet. Even the humming of the engine couldn’t take over the silence that filled her ears.

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They were three exhausted kids, jammed into the back of Kylo’s car, headed back into town. Hux was in his father’s car, probably telling him everything that had happened, pausing and *umming* every other sentence. Off the highway, he had told them all everything again, adding in Agent Jinn’s warnings. His parents looked stone faced at the story, but he saw his father wince when he was describing how he beat Poe’s father for him. He knew that his father was calling the police as they drove to the hospital. Despite his mind being in the other car, his heart was in his: the two people nestled against him were his world and he had denied one of them for three months full access, while the other he’d hurt almost beyond the point of forgiveness. Still, his mother was grumbling over her phone’s GPS. She couldn’t even look into the rear-view mirror to meet his eyes. Rey was tucked beside him. He was in the middle, too stubborn to sit anywhere else.

Poe leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Did you mean it?”

“Mean what?” He asked, squinting through his tiredness.

Poe’s eyes shone. And he nodded.

With Rey snoozing on his lap, her hand in an angry fist, Poe rested against his good shoulder.

The next time he tried something like this, he’d have a better plan.

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Rey listened to the police speak with Kylo from her spot on the sofa. They all got to miss school and it was really weird. She pretended to be colouring, but really she was trying to figure out if he was in real trouble or not. Part of her wanted him to be and it made it hard to hold her pens. It was easier to focus on him that the storm of questions in her mind. After she paused for a few moments, her pen hanging above the paper, Hux tapped the page.

“He’ll tell us. Don’t worry.”

The hospital had made her ache and she only had boys to talk to. They had fixed Kylo’s arm and Poe had hugged her as they waited. Someone asked about his bruises and he had only shook his head and laughed it off. When they took him away, she saw the first uniform. And then there were more and more. Kylo wouldn’t lie; he couldn’t lie this time. The police were there. Agent Jinn had told him not to lie. But he was getting better at lying and it made it hard to breathe.

She only realized that she’d forgotten her shoes in the car when they got home at 2 a.m. She didn’t understand why Hux and Poe were still with them but was too tired to ask. And the only person
that she wanted to ask had sat in silence since the hospital.

But she still couldn’t sleep. She had heard Leia and Han arguing as all four of them slept in Kylo’s room that night. Hux had looked confused as he sat on a sleeping bag on the floor at the three of them in the bed. Kylo didn’t say anything. He pulled her close and she knew that he didn’t sleep that night.

Nobody left that night. Nobody took them all away. She just kept imagining a group of adults, storming the house, and taking everyone away and she’d be left alone in an empty house. She knew where the food was, but if no one had left her money, she couldn’t do it alone. Maybe they’d take Rose and Finn too, since they were her friends and didn’t know the truth either. Everyone was going to be gone again and she wouldn’t have Kylo to protect her.

But the police arrived during breakfast. She kept expecting Hux to leave because that’s what he did, he ran away.

But he was still there. And so was Poe. He was asleep across the living room in Han’s chair, Lumpy licking at his hand. He’d been quiet, avoiding everyone’s eyes all morning. The jokes were gone as reality seemed to set in. She’d heard him talking to his mom early that morning and he was crying. No one else was awake. She’d felt him leave the bed early to sleep on the couch. She thought he’d be cold too and had followed and ended up sleeping next to him under the warm quilt. He still got up before her, and was trying to talk quietly in the corner. She sat up and looked at him and his shoulders just looked limp. He told her that he didn’t know what was happening. But he couldn’t go home. He cried more and Rey held his hand. Nothing made sense. No one was telling her anything. Was she really this small?

“Has anyone asked you how you feel about this?” Hux whispered, settling down on the floor beside the couch. “He and him.”

Rey put her pen down and tried to sort out her thoughts about it. The last few months had been good; Kylo had been really happy, despite his deception. She’d laughed with Poe and liked having two people around her so much of the time who liked her and liked one another. When she had figured out her own heart and where to put it, she realized where her place was and that jealousy was worse than hate. Ahsoka and Maz had talked about being envious about what other kids had, or jealous about other things. She wanted Kylo to be happy and not stop loving her. The more that she thought about it, when she couldn’t sleep that night because Kylo’s breathing was too strange, she decided that this would have to be like everything else. She had to be stronger than Kylo. She figured it out without anyone telling her. She could love mom and dad and still think about her real parents, the dead ones; Kylo had to learn how to share his heart too. She sucked on her bottom lip and looked at Hux.

“I saw them kiss a long time ago. Kylo didn’t notice. Kylo…he can like boys. But I’m the only girl he loves.” She returned to her colouring, determined to fill in the final corner. It wasn’t perfect yet. She hated wasting any inch of a book. Every part needed to be filled. She noticed Hux watching her and he picked up a pen. He started working on the still unfilled border and she smiled at him. “He missed you too.”

“I know he did. It was shitty, what I did.”

Rey kept colouring, forcing the pen closer to the page. “It’s your dad’s fault. Just like Poe’s dad. Maybe my real dad would have hit me too.”

Hux set his pen down and hugged her. She leaned against his arm and snuggled against his shirt. She had missed the way that he smelled. It was different from the other boys and even dad. She
could share Kylo with Hux and Poe. Those things felt right. The love that Kylo had for her wouldn’t be broken by them, by stupid boys. Tucked into the safety of Hux’s arms, she let her mind drift into the dark place, the place that her therapists told her not to go to unless she felt safe. She had to figure it out and cut it up, into small pieces, and organize in her own head. Like colouring in the last corner of a picture, everything had to make sense.

In her imagination, she thought about what would have happened if these other two boys, ones that Kylo also loved, had been there. They would have fought so hard, together. She had been too small to fight, even though she wanted to. The other boys had been too afraid. Hux and Poe weren’t afraid.

She didn’t want to cry. Blinking hard, she pushed closer to Hux.

“I wish you’d been there.”

Hux sat up and quirked his head. “Where?”

“There.”

“Oh.”

In the distance, the police kept talking. And Rey just wanted to go to sleep again.

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The day finally ended with an empty dinner of delivery Chinese food. Kylo only ate to stop his head from feeling so clouded.

His parents had been there with him throughout all of the questioning. It had dragged on and on for hours. Eventually, the others took the dog for a walk and he had only been able to give them an empty look, hoping that they would come back. Some woman had sat with the two male cops, asking him questions, writing down everything that he said and asking him more and more intrusive things. She was just like the doctors and nurses from before: he didn’t care about her name or what she was doing there. He just told the truth this time, though. He had to listen to Agent Jinn. He was too tired to hide his tears and wept throughout most of the interviews. Why hadn’t they taken them all to the station? He was going to jail for this. He’d let his need take him in the wrong direction.

But then, after talking to the others, nothing happened.

*He’s not pressing charges.*

His parents couldn’t look at him as he moved his food around his plate, staring at it blankly. Poe nudged him and he finally picked up another piece of beef and ate it. It tasted like nothing.

“There’s a lot we need to talk about. After this. *All* of us. The schools have been calling all day and I didn’t have an answer for them so I want a real one soon.” Han looked around the table. Kylo would have laughed if he could have been outside of his body and seen the sad group of people around the table from the perspective of anyone just peaking in through the window.

Hux, who was afraid to go home and worried that he still had said something wrong to the police.
His eyes were always darting around the table, wearing the discomfort on his face and by how he had shredded three napkins in his lap.

Rey, who wouldn’t let go of his hand and wouldn’t stop telling him that she loved him with her eyes, but had more to say to him later when he would have to talk. She had still managed to eat all of the eggrolls in between her decided glares.

Leia had a glass of wine in her hand and her hair was long and unbraided; it had been all day and last night. But her face was emotionless, like it had been as he had sat with the police. He still remembered the smell of her hair as it filled his nose when he had embraced her last night. It smelt safe; it smelt like the home that he had been denying was truly his for too long. But her eyes were now empty and without feelings that he could understand under the cloud that filled his head. The only emotion that he could catch was when she actually looked at him and it made his head sink lower. The progress from the last few months was stalled in one flash of sadness.

Han, unlike his wife, wore his unwillingness to have the conversation, which he had just threatened, on his face. He had been his biggest defender in the meeting, but his eyes too held the haunting look of betrayal. He had been the one to tell the police and the strange woman about how hard he’d been working the last two years. Now, Kylo didn’t believe those words. He’d made too many mistakes.

And Poe, whose big brown eyes revealed the dozens of things that he was thankful for but also hundreds of other things that were left unknown. His father was in the hospital, seething but afraid. The cops knew more than Poe had. Kylo had lurked close enough in the living room to overhear the interview before Rey had grabbed his hand to drag him away. His mother had left, staying with friends two hours away. They were getting away. But that meant Poe would have to go with her.

“I’ve had a lot of strange dinners, but this one…if my hair wasn’t already turning grey, you kids would ruin every hair on my head. You all missed school because of something I’m still trying to wrap my mind around. How do we even have this talk? You’re all so broken…” Han finally mumbled as he stood from the table. “You’re all just pretending to eat. Go sit in the living room, now.”

Except for him and his mother, everyone sat up and moved to stand. He weakly followed, drawn by Poe’s hand. Lumpy followed Rey as they all found places both close to Han, but also far away enough away to avoid getting directly yelled at. Their plates were still sitting on the table. He could see Rey straining her head, wondering if she should gather them up or not. He shook his head no and she finally relaxed against him. The four of them were crammed onto the couch. Rey sat between him and Hux. Poe was pressed against his side; he wanted nothing more than to lean his head against him. No one had showered; everyone was so dirty. It should have made him disgusted, but the smell was comforting. He was used to panicking when everything sat like it did just then. His mother sat in the chair across from them, sipping the last of her wine and frowning. He turned away, looking first at Hux and Rey, and then Poe.

Couldn’t this just be over?

He heard his father move a chair from the kitchen to the living room. He set it down hard and sat down.

“Ben,” Han’s voice was loud and made all of them jolt up. “And I’m calling you that right now because that’s what would have been in the charges. The fucking charges. All you talk about wanting to be in the FBI and then you do something like this. Because of…because of a boy. I never wanted to talk to you like this, to punish you. We avoided it. We avoid talking like this because that’s what everyone says is best but you always say how you hate the doctors. So, you
know what, fuck the doctors. I’m sick of them too.”

He lifted his head and met his father’s angry eyes. He quickly looked away. Poe took his hand and squeezed it. He couldn’t go away into his head right then; but it was still tempting.

“I…” he started and then cleared his throat. “Do you think I should have gone to jail?”

Han exhaled, hard. He could almost feel the warm breath on his face. “I don’t know, son. It wouldn’t have helped you.”

He watched his father’s face break for a moment before he put his head down. It hurt too much to keep looking at him.

“Armitage,” Leia’s calm voice broke in. “You could have gone home hours ago. Let’s hear what you have to say. Your mother wants you to call her. She’s not mad that you skipped school to be here for Ben but she’s very, very worried.”

Hux sat up and nodded. His shoulders straightened and he was desperately trying to look serious. Kylo saw the echoes of his father in those motions and tried to push the images away. He was different now, or at least said that he was. Kylo still wasn’t sure if he’d proven himself last night or not. He wasn’t sure what he remembered or not. “I wanted to say I’m sorry to everyone. I’m really, really sorry. I should have made him not let Rey get into the car. When I was living with my dad, I wanted to think like him. I never meant to hurt anyone. Especially Kylo. And Rey. I went with him to Mr Dameron’s house because I had to have his back. I, we, stopped him from hurting him more.”

Hux’s nervous eyes swept the room. Meeting the look, Kylo finally nodded. With a reluctant sigh, he left the sofa and went into the other room. They waited, everyone pretending not to listen to the muffled call.

When he came back into the living room, Hux looked directly at Leia and his posture fell. “I can’t stay tonight again, can I?”

Leia stood and gently hugged the redhead. Kylo could hear his friend sob into his mother’s arms. She whispered something to him and he nodded before stepping away. After quickly pressing a kiss to Rey’s forehead, and resting a hand against his shoulder, he left. He went home, the house next door and not the one across town. Or at least that’s what Kylo chose to believe.

Now, it was only them.

Kylo deeply wanted his parents to send Rey to bed before what he knew what was coming.

Leia sat down on her chair again and looked down at his angel. “Are you tired, Rey?”

Rey shrugged. She was filled with food so she should be happy. But instead her eyes were avoiding his. “I...yes. But I want to be here.”

“Then you can be here,” Leia said.

Han just shook his head. “Boys. You can decide who talks first.”

Kylo was used to talking to police, but seeing the same look of determination from his father sent him rigid. He didn’t feel anything from the three other people around him. He could only see his father’s hazel eyes and swallowed his fear.
But no words came out when he tried to speak.

Poe spoke for him “We’ve been more than, um, road roommates for like three months. I think.”

“What does that mean?” His father’s voice was ice, daring Poe to lie to him. “We heard what he told the police. Now I want to hear how you see it.”

And Poe didn’t back down. “Mr Solo, I don’t want you not to like me anymore, if you ever liked me. This really is all my fault, but please don’t hate me. I really, really appreciate you guys trying to help me and I’m sorry for lying to the cops before. I didn’t want to lose my mom and now I don’t know what to do. So please don’t hate me and keep helping me.”

He paused and looked at them pleadingly. His parents didn’t respond so Poe nodded to himself and kept talking.

“At first, I just thought I liked him because he needed a friend and I was lonely too. And it just, boom, hit me hard. The way he talks, the way he acts, the way he, um, looks. I…me and Kylo, we started talking about things that he didn’t want to tell anyone else. He still thinks he can’t tell anyone, but I know it’s just because he’s got a wall in his head that won’t come down. I like him. Me and Kylo, we just pick up on each other’s sadness. And we’re less sad when we’re together. My dad knew I was different and thought he could beat it out of me, like something like that could change a person.” Kylo needed to touch him; Poe’s voice was wavering and he could see his eyes start to shimmer. He took Poe’s hand and could feel his parents’ eyes burning at the sight. If he could speak to him like he did with Rey, he’d tell him that he could stop talking.

But he kept going. “We kiss and touch each other. There hasn’t been anything really serious, um, physically because I respect him and what he’s been through. He’s actually freaking out less when we…” he paused finally looking up, and then quickly down again. “Yeah, um, okay. Not going to talk about that. But it’s been getting better. And after what he’s been through, and what Rey has been through, it makes me feel like an asshole for fucking everything up. I kept telling him to tell you, but he was so scared. I really, really care about him. I’ve never had anything like this before and I love him. He thinks he’s all fucked up and until the last few days, I thought I was helping him. I wanted to tell you a month ago, but then everything happened with Rey and…I love Rey and…I love him. Please don’t make me go home right now. I don’t know where home is right now and I don’t know what to do.”

Han sat back and Kylo dropped his eyes. Poe’s hand firm in his.

“Boys,” it was Leia who spoke up. “Before this happened, we knew you were close. And we knew that Ben was happy. But he needs stability. If things escalate like this again, we can’t let you two be together, mostly because Ben will always make Rey a part of it. But if you’re both serious, and you both can accept that we can’t let you ever put her in danger again, then we can be behind this. But this…relationship won’t be easy. You two know that.”

“We know that,” Kylo found his courage and said. “I wouldn’t have done what I did if I didn’t know that.”

He felt Leia leaning over to touch Rey, reminding him that she was still there and the horror in his mind was reawakened. “Sweetheart, do you understand what we’re saying?”

He held his breath and kept his eyes focused on the coffee table.

Rey huffed loudly and stood from the sofa. She looked at everyone in the room, narrowing her gaze on him. He only lifted his head for her.
She didn’t look betrayed. She just looked tired of all the talking. He winked at her and she nodded, but her expression didn’t change.

“I love you, mom and dad. But I love them too. They’re my family. Poe is my friend too and his father was a terrible person for hurting him. You’re not supposed to hurt kids. The police didn’t need to come after us, they should have gone after him. I was mad at Poe for a while, but now I’m not. I’m tired of mean people. I would follow Kylo anywhere to be with him and help him. But I can’t help him enough. It made me sad at first, but then I figured it out without anyone telling me. And I know what a boyfriend is. I’m not stupid. Can I go to bed now?” Rey swished her head from him to Han and Leia. They had the decency to look surprised before both of them nodded and she dashed off for his room. Lumpy followed, happily wagging his tail. She knew that the real conversation would come later.

His cast itched as he looked at his father again. “Can we go to bed too?”

“You’re not getting out of this that easy, son. Listen to me right now, okay? Both of you. You do not put that little girl in danger again. If you haven’t heard anything else that I’ve said tonight, then I don’t care.” Han paused and Poe’s hand tensed in his. “But you do not take her anywhere. Ben, you love her so much but you put her in danger. Why did you do that? You took her right back to what you got her out of, back into not knowing what was going on and being in danger. With a broken arm? Really? This is why I’m so angry right now. Just so you understand, both of you, don’t you ever do that again. The rest of it, I’m still trying to understand. I knew something was going on and just ignored it. But we’re here for you, don’t get me wrong. We love you, the both of you. But if you take her out of this house again and try to run…”

“I won’t do that,” Kylo forced himself to say. “I wasn’t thinking. I’m sorry, dad.”

Han sat back and folded his arms. “I know you weren’t. That’s what makes us afraid. We’ve all worked hard for almost two years to make this a home, a family. When you,” Han sucked in a long and reluctant breath, “Poe, came into all of this, some of the harder parts got easier. I guess we know why now. But we got to know so much more and he opened up. It’s just by a crack, but we’ll take it. And if you two want to be together…we can help that happen. Just keep Rey out of danger. Christ, I need a drink.”

His father left his chair, but stopped to lean against the kitchen island when his mother glared at him. Han met her sharp gaze and shook his head. Kylo looked into Poe’s eyes as they listened to his father pouring himself a glass of wine in the kitchen. Poe wanted to smile, he could see the way the corner of his good eye quirked, and Kylo shook his head not to. They couldn’t laugh right then.

Han finally returned, gruffly sitting down. “Give me a break. I had to sit with the police the entire day and then interrogate a bunch of traumatized teenage boys. Can you both stop smirking and respect me for one second here: do not take Rey from this house again.”

Their eyes turned in tandem to his father and nodded before dropping again. Poe moved closer to him and he accepted it. He just wanted to go to bed.

“We know,” Poe finally said. “He doesn’t want to talk right now but…we know. It was stupid. And I guess it’s stupid to say that it’s all my fault?”

“There’s no fault here anymore.” His mother didn’t look at them as she spoke. “We’re here for you. Both of you. But there’s another person here who you both have hurt. Rey is still a child, but if she can see these things and we can’t, then you need to tell her what you’re doing. She’s smart but she’ll be hurt by this, Ben. With the new therapist, this is even more important now. You know that. And just…” His mother leaned forward and pressed her hand to a point on her eyebrows. “We
will talk about this in the morning. I can’t have the sex talk right now. Keep the door open tonight. Because even if we tell you not to sleep in the same room, you’ll just do it anyway.”

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Rey was sitting on his bed, glaring at the door when they entered.

“You didn’t tell me. We don’t keep secrets from each other. Especially this long.”

Her calm from before had been swept into a whirlwind of anger, directed only at him. Kylo stood in the doorway, blinking an apology. Rey just rolled her eyes and flopped down on the bed, covering her face with her hands.

“Should I um, go sleep downstairs?” Poe asked, still behind him. “Have another awkward conversation with your parents as they plot how they want me to go die in a ditch?”

Rey sighed loudly from the bed. “I’m not mad at you this time. And I hate being mad at him. And I hate hating.”

“Yeah, me too.” Poe nudged by him and sat on the bed. Rey shifted to put her head on his lap. Kylo stared at them from the doorway. What she had said before was still stuck in his ears. They’re her family. The last few months had meant keeping things from her. He’d been selfish. The other night, he’d made decisions that could have hurt far more people than just one. Driving with a fractured arm had been stupid. He hadn’t stopped to think, to breathe, and to look around at what was real.

He’d been feeling better. Poe hadn’t just taken him closer to normal. He almost had him there. But he was letting Rey fall behind, caught up in…

…falling in love.

He wiped at his eyes, feeling tears break through his stubbornness.

He had spent three years, desperate for numbness and not to feel hope. Someone would come, someone he’d connect with: a boy with sandy hair or a girl with blue eyes, desperate to hold his hand and hear his voice in a world of chaos. At first, he’d fight to protect them. And then he’d be beaten and cursed at, thrown into a closet and starved for days. Then Snoke would pull him out, force him to listen to his words about why humanity was doomed and why anything that felt good would only be a temptation and not a resolution. He would write until his hands were numb and his eyes were dry. He was losing himself and what made him Ben. Then, he died. He was Kylo Ren. And then a baby was put in his arms and he needed to be something else too, not just an empty shell that helped a killer. Having Rey meant that there would be an end. Hers would be happy. His was just an end.

Now, after being in the real world for over two years, he wanted to have more than just darkness and the constant memory of death.

He still didn’t know how to balance the two.

He had realized that when he’d left the car and the three people who he cared about. He screamed
and cried and bashed his broken arm against the ground, willing his body to feel more pain. Pain was something that would never leave him.

Poe and Rey were looking at him and he shifted from side to side.

There used to be nothing inside of him. There were only dark basements and bloody hands. Those were things that he didn’t want to remember but they were always lurking in the quiet moments when he smelt any distant tinge of burning flesh. He had hated the kitchen, the cafeteria… anywhere with food. It had been harder to avoid those places now. And he felt fine being there. He had missed how easy it had become just to eat.

But Rey hadn’t been with him at school. She hadn’t been there when Poe stole his fries until he was forced to eat them. She wasn’t there at the movie theatre. She’d been at home, waiting for him, for them.

“I’m sorry, Rey.”

His voice made them both frown and Rey shook her head. He had sounded too pathetic, too empty and weak.

*You could have told me because I already knew.*

He held her eyes and felt new tears. He sucked in his cheeks and bit hard.

*He wanted me to tell you. I didn’t know what he meant. He also told me what I should have known.*

Rey reached out her hand. “Come, please. I love you.”

His feet wouldn’t move. He wanted both of them.

Would he have saved Poe if he had been thrown in with them, when they were there? He would have been filled with back talk and constant energy. There wouldn’t have been a quiet moment to hold his hand. To let him hug him when he felt lost and empty. To feel his kiss when the void threatened to take him.

“Ky?” Poe asked, tilting his head and trying to distract him and bring him back to where he was supposed to be. “We’re not going anywhere, but we kind of want you to come sit with us.”

“How can I do both? How can I…” he started and then stopped. His legs were still heavy, preventing him from going to what he wanted most. “I don’t want to fuck this up again.”

Rey sat up, her large brown eyes cutting through him. She leaned her head against her shoulder. “Again?”

She knew how to frustrate him. She knew how to look at him to make him move. He finally took the few strides to the bed and sat beside her. With one of her small and soft hands, she reached for his. She still didn’t look at him with her usual joy; this was as far as punishment got with Rey. She loved him too much to be truly angry with him. At least this time, he thought with spite.

Then Rey reached for Poe’s hand and a small smile grew into a grin on her face when the three of them were sitting there, connected. In the back of his mind, it felt stupid. It felt embarrassing. Poe finally laughed and leaned into Rey.

“Thanks for forgiving us, Rey. I don’t understand why, but thanks.” Poe’s voice was light. He was only talking to Rey. “But, um, you sounded cool downstairs. Was that for show? Because I, we,
have to know. Kylo and me…yeah, we’re together in a different way. You figure things out quickly, but this is confusing for even…everyone. What me and Ky do, it doesn’t mean he loves you any less. We don’t think that you’re too little for this but…sometimes Ky thinks that you’re trying to grow up too fast. And I guess I agree with him.”

Rey slowly pulled away from both of them and quietly moved up the bed. Already in her pyjamas, she looked more tired than she should. It was still early. It was just after dinner. But both Poe and Rey were exhausted. He’d put them both through that. He was still making problems for both of them with how he felt and who he was.

“I saw you two kiss a while ago. It feels like a million years ago, but also yesterday at the same time, so I don’t know anymore,” Rey mumbled. “I was watching, when you were in the basement. Kylo was kissing you and I wanted it to be me until I figured out that there’s space for me too there, since I’m still so small. I need to love more people and so does Kylo. I guess I’m sorry too. I didn’t tell you before. But things have been so much better now. I feel better and Kylo is happy, or he was. I didn’t want to say anything and ruin it.”

“Why would you ruin it?” Kylo asked, forcing himself to turn towards her. He felt Poe shifting closer and his heart matched the movements, getting faster even though the motions were slow.

Rey was watching them. He could never underestimate her again when it came to things like this. Rey was strong and had her own thoughts and mind, but the link that they shared would never be broken. “Can I be…a silly kid for a bit?”

Poe grinned; it was a welcome break and he could drift off into nothing. “Go at it.”

“What if…what if when you guys are big and grown ups? And you’re happy and have a house and I was there too,” Rey paused and licked her lips. “We could have our own family. I love mom and dad. But we’d have our own.”

Poe turned towards him and the look in his eyes made him never want to turn away again. Rey wanted them both. This could be the end to the dark road. Go to college. Join the FBI. Have Poe and Rey at home, at his own home. They’d watch movies and make dinner. Rey would grow up surrounded by a love that would give her strength. She was going to be so beautiful.

He felt Rey taking his hand and he snapped out of his desired future. Poe’s head was in his hands and he sucked in a breath.

“Stop. It’s going to be okay.” He dropped to his knees without hesitation and reached out with his awkward cast. He needed to say what everyone wanted to hear until he believed it himself. “I…I want it too.”
He said the words but they were unsteady in his mouth. He wanted them to mean more, but they didn’t. He was too tired to feel more. Still, he leaned into Poe and tried to find the feeling again.

“But it’s too far away,” Poe said, his voice broken, his face still bruised and hurting. “Kylo, this is… I don’t even know where I’m living right now. I can only fake being okay for so long. I can’t fucking go home and I don’t know if I can stay here. Will your parents even let me stay here? I’m not mad at you, but think about me right now. I love you. I really do and right now, I don’t have any clothes or anything. I have nothing but you, okay? My mom’s not answering anymore when I try to call on my broken phone. I need my mom too. I can’t just be like you and pick and choose what I feel and when I feel it. What if I go away for too long and you forget about me?”

“I won’t.” For once, he didn’t hesitate with his words; he couldn’t at that moment. He needed to be another person, a better one. Maybe he could try being undead for a while. “I’ll get you a new phone. We’ll talk all of the time, when things get figured out. When I get my car back, I’ll see you all the time. It won’t be the same but I can deal with that. We’ll have the three of us. And Hux, if he doesn’t change his mind.”

Poe leaned forward to kiss him and he leaned into the soft caress of his lips. Rey was watching and he still let himself go in that instant and he just wanted to be somewhere else. Still, when Poe pulled away, he wasn’t smiling. The younger boy with the swollen eye looked at him with a raw seriousness that he rarely saw. “I wish you’d killed my dad.”

“Don’t think like me,” he warned. “I would have killed him if you hadn’t stopped me. And I wouldn’t have regretted it.” He turned to Rey and saw the same fear and tears in her eyes. “Never stop loving me, even when I do bad and stupid things.”

“I won’t,” she said. She swallowed and he saw the monster that he was in her face. But she could look beyond it. They both could. But Rey still firmed her lips. “So don’t lie anymore.”

He nodded then looked at Poe again. He didn’t want to say anything. He just wanted to look at him. He wanted to trace the side of his face that wasn’t hurt; he wanted to remember the part of him that he hadn’t broken.

Kylo had started to believe that he would wake up the next day and he would be taken away. He wouldn’t be able to protect anyone anymore. The police were liars and he’d done something really and truly wrong.

Still Poe leaned his head to meet his forehead. It was delicate and warm. Was this what being in love felt like?

“Do you think your dad hates me? Because I’m not a girl?” Poe’s voice sounded distant, like an old memory that he couldn’t forget even though he wanted to.

Rey sat up and shoved him, breaking them both out of the cycle that they had been drawn into. “He doesn’t care about that part. He’s more mad because you took me but really, I went because I had to. When he figures it out, he’ll be okay. He loves us too much to be mad about boyfriends.”

Sighing, Kylo lowered his voice. “We should go for a drive with him tomorrow. Make it up to him.”

The words and feelings had finally taken the last of his energy. Getting ready for bed was mostly spent in silence. Poe had guided him to the washroom, his hand warm in his. Rey was holding both of their hands, still in her fantasy. She didn’t know how much he wanted it to be his too, but he didn’t know how to make it happen. Rey looked at both of them and then broke away and left for
his parents’ room. He waited in the washroom with Poe, brushing their teeth without effort, and watching their reflection in the mirror to avoid hearing what they were saying. All he could look at was how Poe’s face was half gone because of him.

Rey finally came back with more than annoyance in her eyes.

She pushed by them and pulled the shower curtain away from the bathtub. The water started to run and she looked at the stream with a growing tension in her small shoulders.

“I’m taking a bath. You guys can’t be here.”

He looked at Poe and the other boy tried to shrug off the confusion in his eyes. “It’s fine, sweet pea. Take your space. See you later.”

The steps back to his room were spent with him trying to untangle the words that he heard spoken before. It was finally stopped when Poe put his hands on his hips.

“It’s nothing to go overthinking. Don’t go making it into anything bigger.” Poe was looking up at him and his focus was drawn to the dark bruise on his face. He reached up to touch the mark, tracing the edges that spread to his temple. That wound had burst the world open, forcing the light that had only peaked through the gaps into a blast of full sunshine. “I’m sorry what I said before, about my dad. I’m just…I’m still angry, I guess. Angry and sad.”

He didn’t care that the door was open. He leaned down and kissed Poe again, gripping his back and felt the last few hours drain away into the need for the physical contact and release. But Poe gently pushed away and took a deep breath, his head hanging for a second before he started speaking in a low voice.

“We should really talk about this soon before you get out of your head and I…” Poe trailed off after turning out of the kiss. “I’m sorry I was mad before, Kylo, but you put a lot out there and I want to be able to handle it. So give me a little more space in your head too. It was awful to be that angry with you and I never want to feel that way again.”

He rarely made promises to anyone but Rey. Agent Jinn was another exception, along with Paige on good days. It would take a while to count Hux in that small group again. But he’d thought he’d already given Poe that power over him. The last few months, their conversations hadn’t just been about him, they couldn’t have been. He had only distant memories and the details were overwhelmed by emotions. So many of them were connected with the physical side, the aspect that he was desperately trying to unravel. Poe’s angry outburst from before lingered in the back of his mind, reminding him that the things he missed were often the thoughts of others as he fought against himself.

“I can tell you when to stop touching me,” he started, “you should be able to tell me when I’m not listening.”

“Yeah, it’s only fairness. Black and white, no grey here. I’m not going to feel one-hundred percent for a while, and I feel like garbage for yelling at you and causing all of this mess. You think it’s your fault but I just felt so jerked around and hurt and…” Poe met his eyes. “Can you forgive me?”

Kylo swallowed the lump in his throat. “I think so.”

A light smile crossed Poe’s face and leaned closer to him, resting his head on his shoulder. “I’m really not okay right now.”

“I know.” He shook his head and pulled him into a hug. “I’m sorry for who I am.”
“I’m sorry for getting mad and yelling at you rather than talking to you.” Poe’s voice shook as he whispered into his shoulder. “I’m sorry I was so selfish.”

Kylo shook his head and leaned down to kiss him. He needed to chase away both of their sadness. The physical side would help that go away. It had to. He wanted to force his worries away and let a different feeling take over. He’d thought he be alone the rest of his life, but now he’d been forced to realize the truth. Someone loved him not because he was forced to, but because he thought he was worth saving.

The bed squeaked when Poe sat down, pulling him towards him. His arm was still there, broken and clumsy, but he still moved to straddle him. Careful kisses pulled them together, back into sweetness and out of pain. He could feel Poe’s erection directly against his and he moaned into the kiss. They’d have to stop, but if the door weren’t open, he wouldn’t have.

Pressing Poe down against the mattress, he reached for his shirt. The cast stopped him and he sat up and swore. With careful hands, Poe pulled it off, trailing his hands down his chest as he laid back down.

“We need to stop,” Poe said, settling their hands together and the frowning. He looked so tired and must have felt as dirty as he did. “You know I don’t want to but…fuck. We’re not going to be allowed to be alone for a long time. And I just want to be alone with you and forget all of this. I want to blow you so bad that it hurts.”

He could only nod and slowly moved away, letting the distance in his mind grow as well. “We have a lot to talk about. I’m sorry I was stubborn about what was upsetting you. And that I didn’t realize we were…dating.” The word still felt awkward on his lips and in his mind but he had to get over it somehow.

Poe sat up on his elbows and shrugged. “I’m not asking you to prom or to hold hands with me in the hallway at school. But yeah, maybe it was easier for you to think of it as a friendship and it was mean of me to yell at you like I did, to make you see what I saw by being a dumb ass in the worst possible way. I still can’t believe you let me kiss you. The stuff after, the good stuff and the shitty stuff, I’m not saying that it was all easy. But I really meant what I said. I love you. You make me happy. You frustrate me too, but talking to you makes things seem better. Even if things will probably be shitty for a while, I want to be with you.”

Kylo leaned over to kiss him again, the block in his chest shifting again. But he was quiet.

“You’re still figuring all this out still, huh?” Poe asked when he sat back. “The whole having a boyfriend and not a girlfriend?”

“I guess I’m so used to being a huge asshole that…” Kylo started Poe shoved him lightly. He returned the gesture with a slight grin. “Fine. I think I’d hurt a girl, or she wouldn’t understand. This whole time, that’s how I had it in my head. I imagined doing what we do, what we talk about, but with a girl and it’s something that scares me. But I also think I want to be with you because of who you are. I can get scared and you put up with that. I’m sorry for pushing you so hard and hurting you. I never wanted to hurt you.”

Poe reached for his hand and he was willingly pulled down onto the bed again. He rested at his side, running his hand down his chest to rest on his hip. He was attracted to him and it wasn’t embarrassing; it was more confusing than anything else. How far did he want this relationship to go? That question was something he couldn’t deal with in that moment.

“I do think that I love you,” Kylo said. The word still felt weird in his mouth when he thought
about what it represented both for them and for himself. He never thought he would be able to love anyone but Rey and still didn’t know how the sensation really felt. But Poe needed to know that too. “I’m just trying to figure out what that means.”

“Want a hint?” Poe asked, tilting his head. He nodded, waiting for him to continue. “It’s something that my mom told me, when I told her that I liked boys more than girls. I was eleven or twelve or something and really couldn’t stop crying everyday. This was years after the time I was put in foster care and she thought I was still upset about that. But I was hurting myself and my dad was doing twice as much damage. It just kept feeling worse and worse. The world was empty, until I told my mom. Dad had gone to do something and we had a weekend of just her and me. And I straight-up told her. I told her how much I hated myself, how much I thought everyone at school hated me because I thought that they knew…

“So I finally said, hey mom, sorry that you’re Catholic. Sorry that your God and the Pope will hate it, but your son is gay. And she didn’t freak out. She held my hand and let me cry. She said that she loved me and love was a feeling that lets us accept someone for who they are, as long as it isn’t hurting anyone. How you feel better when they come home from wherever just because you’re happy that they’re home. Bad day, good day, nothing day — you’re just like, wow, you’re here. It’s something like, how you’d follow them down the darkest road so they wouldn’t have to be alone. And it’s even better if they’d follow you too,” Poe’s voice had dropped, and he finally looked up once he was done talking. “I’m not asking for forever, or telling you how to think. But no matter what you tell me, no matter how badly you were hurt or what he did to you, I still want to try to make it better.”

Kylo needed to lean over and kiss him, to try to taste the kind words. When he leaned back afterwards, he still shook his head. “I went to your house and beat the shit out of your dad.”

“Yeah,” Poe said then managed to chuckle, even as tears formed in his eyes. “Yeah, you kind of did. Maybe don’t do that again. Maybe just, I don’t know, let me hold your hand at dinner sometime.”

“I think I can do that.” He leaned over and kissed him again. “I’m going to check on Rey. Get changed for bed.”

“You can’t tell me what to do.”

He ignored the remark and quickly stood off the bed. Slipping into the hallway, he softly knocked at the washroom door.

“Come in, Kylo.”

Only Rey’s face was above the water of the tub. She looked over at him and sat up, shaking her wet hair.

“What were you mad about before?” he asked, closing the door. “Not…not a while ago. But when you talked to Han and Leia.”

Rey brought up her hands, breaking the surface of the water. He sat on the edge of the tub, submerging his uncasted hand under the lukewarm water. She was watching him stare at her and was making him wait.

“I asked when I could have a boyfriend,” she answered, finally. “They said that I had to wait until I found a person who liked me that way back. A person who I like talking to and pays attention to how I feel. Like we talk about in therapy.”
He sighed, still touching the water. “Yeah, I guess I think so too. I want you to wait too, Rey. I didn’t really want a boyfriend either. I still don’t think I’m ready to have one.”

Rey narrowed her eyes. “So, when I’m sixteen, maybe I’ll know if I want a boyfriend or not?”

Sitting back, he wiped his hand on his jeans. He didn’t know what to tell her. It had been so much easier before, when they were smaller and were in the dark place, so understand and explain everything that was going on. He had held Rey after she’d cried after Snoke had touched her, hating himself for not being able to stop it. One day, he was able to, but that didn’t make up for the fact that he couldn’t stop it from happening. Now, they were sitting in a safe house, surrounded by people who cared about them and they were the only two people in the world who knew what it was like to hate every second of every day.

“Yeah, but before that, we’ll talk more about what it’s like to have a boyfriend.” He snorted. “It’s actually really hard.” Especially if you don’t realize that you have one.

Rey looked up at him and shook her head. “I already know that you have to kiss him and drive him around in your car. And he gets to sleep in your bed, but only if mom and dad say that it’s okay. And even if they say it’s not okay if you’re both really sad.”

Kylo stood, smoothing his hair. “I know that you’re thinking about other things.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. “Of course I am. But I want to go to bed.”

“Did you wash your hair?”

She pouted and then shook her head.

As he was helping her rub the shampoo into her hair and then rinsing her under the faucet, she suddenly stopped to look up at him.

“Will you be my boyfriend when I’m older, Kylo?” she asked. “You already let me kiss you, and then drive me in your car. And I sleep in your bed.”

He looked at her, dripping wet and naked in the off-white bathtub. When he was six, there were too many toys in the bathtub. She had none.

“Only if you still want me to, when you’re older,” he finally said. “Maybe you won’t want me then.”

“Of course I will,” she said firmly.

He closed the washroom door on his way out and screamed internally. He couldn’t punch a wall without making too much noise. He couldn’t do anything to hurt himself without drawing attention to himself. He was trapped between three rooms.

“Go to bed, Ben,” came his father’s voice from their bedroom.

He grunted and left the hallway, escaping to the person who was the least angry at him at this point.

Shaking his head, he left the door half closed and took off his jeans. It was almost summer, he didn’t need pyjamas. He frowned and picked up the rest of Poe’s clothes off the floor to drop into the laundry basket. Finally, he was able to crawl into bed and hug the boyfriend who had caused all of these problems for him.
“You didn’t really,” Kylo said aloud, completing his own thought.

“I didn’t what?” Poe asked, sleepily kissing his hairline.

“Nothing.”

They were both yawning when Rey came back. She was wearing new pyjamas and he didn’t know where they came from.

“I’m going to sleep in my room tonight, okay?” She was shifting her weight from side to side. “I’m really tired and need to think.”

She was pouting, still hurt about this. Even though he didn’t want to, he nodded. “It’s okay. I’m fine now and want you to feel that way too.”

Breaking out into a smile, she nodded. “Goodnight. I love you.”

She left the door half-closed and he exhaled, tightening his arms around Poe.

He still didn’t know how to feel and where his heart was. It was beating, steadily, in his chest, but it was also somewhere else too, beyond him. Their relationship should have never been a secret. He shouldn’t have pushed Poe to a breaking point, forcing him to confront him. It was good that he’d been angry with him, he decided; that meant he didn’t want to lose him either. He loved him, he wanted to be with him. He still couldn’t figure out why, though. He had missed how he really felt for too long. Poe deserved someone better.

“Stop thinking and go to sleep.” Poe whispered. “Just be here with me for a while.”

He could do that.

The future was terrifying, but he could be there with him right then and avoid dealing with it for a while.

Chapter End Notes

Standard warnings: mentions of past rape and murder, acts of violence, teenage boys sharing feelings.

I'm still not satisfied with this chapter but I've reworked it like 20 times and it's not getting any better so might as well put it up there (an original draft had them meeting up with Jinn but it just felt weird and I redid it). I've tried to iron out how inconsistent Poe feels in this chapter and still don't think I'm there but meh. The next chapter is all Rey and includes the time jump into adulthood for the boys and Agent Jinn becoming more or less a main character for the rest of the story (hint hint at Kylo's future). There will be a lot of hurt feelings in Chapter 26 (sorry in advance for some of the angst there) and then Chapter 27 really sets in the next part of the story. Chapter 28 is taking shape but I'm struggling with how it flows...gah.
Thanks so much for reading!
Rey always wondered when time would start speeding up. She couldn’t sleep enough to make time start to feel faster and every day was too long.

It was exciting to be done with school, but also made her worry. Summers were always so long with too much to do; the other kids said that summer was the best time because they didn’t have to go to school and were free to have fun. She was supposed to go to camp that year, if she was ready. It would be fun to be at camp with Rose and Finn and have new stories to tell Kylo.

Being at home still made her confused and left her with an overwhelming feeling of hurt, but not for only herself. She talked about that with Ahsoka, telling her how Kylo had a boyfriend and he wasn’t a secret boyfriend anymore. And he was going to live with them one day, because that’s what Kylo said would happen. Ahsoka had asked her if she had been frightened when they were in the car, driving to an unknown place. Rey said she wasn’t scared; Kylo would never hurt her and was trying to protect them all from bad people. She told Ahsoka how Poe’s mom came by the house a few days after school ended and Rey had listened from upstairs as they talked. There were a few bags by the front door and she wanted to tell Kylo that it was happening then; he was staying forever.

Dad had made Kylo leave the house for the conversation. Mom didn’t want her listening, but she did it for him.

Poe’s mom was going to move back to Florida and he had to come with her; Rey’s heart was instantly in her throat for Kylo. He wouldn’t be able to handle having him far away. It’s what their parents had tried to warn them about: things weren’t going to be easy. Above all, Kylo wouldn’t think it was fair.

She said that they were getting a divorce. And that Poe’s father didn’t want to see him ever again.

There were a lot of tears. Rey’s heart hurt more every time Poe hugged his mom. Kylo was making him choose between him and his mom and that wasn’t fair either. He’d have to be gone for the first few months of summer, living somewhere far away, in a state that she’d never been to.

That night, after Mrs Dameron left to finish packing, Kylo showed her on a map and she shook her head, not believing that the world was so big. Kylo had held her hand and Poe had frowned; he didn’t want to go back there, even if it was just for the summer. And he didn’t like how everyone was still mad at him. He pointed out where his family was on the map and it meant nothing to Rey
except that it was far away and there were too many alligators there. She’d never even seen a real alligator before, just cartoon ones on kids’ shows.

She didn’t have to ask Kylo how he was feeling. His face was just blank; that’s when he was the most angry. They had snuck back to Poe’s house right after the thing with the police, but before his mom got back in touch. She really didn’t want them to get in trouble, but it was even worse if they were in danger. Poe had stayed with them since then, trying to study but mostly looking sad. He would look at Han and Leia like they would kick him out at any minute. Kylo took his side in any argument and was really mean to mom and dad until he realized that he wouldn’t get what he wanted if he didn’t act more mature. Rey didn’t want Kylo to be that way because if he was, then he’d be grown up too fast.

But Poe’s mom had made a promise: if he wanted, he could come back. If mom and dad said yes. If it was what he really wanted. If it’s what they both wanted. There were too many ifs and Rey had trouble getting to sleep with all of the possible things that could happen. Would he choose Kylo or his family?

The boys spent that night in the basement and promised to leave the door open. Rey slept in mom and dad’s bed and asked them what a divorce was. She thought she knew, but needed someone to tell her. When they explained it to her, Rey realized that she knew it the entire time.

The next morning, Poe had to go and she was waiting for Kylo to turn silent, be angry, and argue with everyone again.

But he didn’t.

They sat for a long time on the porch the first night, looking at the stars. He told her that the stars would look a little different in Florida. She said that they had already learnt that in school. And he smiled at her, telling her that he was proud that she liked school and asked if she still wanted to go back in September. She nodded, telling him that she liked school more now that her stomach didn’t hurt so often anymore, and that her underwear felt better since she knew why it was hurting before. Then she asked if he was sad that Poe wouldn’t be there for a while. He smiled again—and it wasn’t a fake smile—and shook his head; it meant more time for him and her. And then he told her that they’d made a promise and it wouldn’t be broken. He had to be patient for once, be more mature.

The beginning of summer was just them; Kylo wouldn’t hide his sadness from her and tell her what he was thinking about. She knew that he was keeping some things private, but he was allowed to because he was sharing enough. No more lying. He would read and write more and she could read some of his journals, but only some parts. Ahsoka would come by a lot, taking her wherever she wanted to go; they went to the zoo so she could see an alligator. But Kylo was there too, waiting for her at home. He’d go for walks or be in the basement with his weight set. The first few weeks were like that. Time felt better then; it was less rippled.

When he wasn’t eating, she would take food from his plate until he smiled and ate more. But he would still drift off when he thought she wouldn’t notice. His eyes sometimes told her confused he was about his feelings.

He taught her how to ride a bike before she left for camp. It was harder than she thought. Balancing shouldn’t be that hard. She didn’t like not being good at things. She fell and skinned her knee on the first try doing it alone, when Kylo let go. His eyes were panicked, wide and filled with regret, when he ran to her. But he calmed down and knelt next to her. His face cleared and she felt her heart flutter; he was getting better and so was she. He covered her torn skin with his hand and told her that it was okay to cry. It would always be okay to cry. When he was helping her put on a
band aid, after cleaning out the gravel, he dried her tears and she hugged him to smell his hair.

In that moment, she realized that she was starting to forget what it was like to be there. This would be a new scar, but from something good.

There were still nightmares and times when she got so frustrated that she would scream. That’s when time would slow down and be mean to her. Kylo would hold her when she let out her monsters; she knew that he would take long walks in the woods and do the same thing.

She’d hear him talking to Poe at night. They’d talk for hours sometimes. She’d fall asleep listening to Kylo just talk about nothing, or sit there quietly as he listened. He listened more than he talked, but that’s who he was normally too. She’d wake up next to him and he would have already been awake, studying or reading. Agent Jinn would send him emails that he would read to her. He was on his computer more, but his stacks of journals still got bigger. There were always too many thoughts in his head.

Rey had started decorating his room with her drawings. She’d tape up the pictures and ask him what he thought that they meant. He was right every time.

Camp wasn’t as fun as she thought it would be. Rose was afraid of swimming in the lake because it might have a monster in it—Paige had told her that—and Finn just wanted to hang out with other kids he said were “cooler” than them. Before she left, Kylo had told her that she could come home whenever she wanted. It wasn’t anything to be worried about. She’d call him from camp and have to wait if the phone was busy. But when they talked, the hurt went away. She was getting better with talking on the phone. It was easier to see his face in her mind now. She was finally starting to grow up.

But she lasted the entire two weeks. She decided that if she was starting to grow up, then she would have to deal with things that frustrated her and be more mature too: how the other kids would ask about her scars when she went swimming, how an older girl decided that she didn’t like her and locked her out of her cabin, how Rose thought that monsters were real even though she didn’t have to live with one for four years. She would try to do what Ahsoka said she should do. She would put her angry thoughts into her pictures. But instead of keeping them, she’d rip them up. Kylo kept all of his memories in his books but she didn’t want hers anymore. The only thing she wished she remembered were her parents; she’d always have Kylo’s kindness so she could start to lose who they were in that house.

When she got home, she only had happy memories and happy pictures. The bad ones were little pieces of paper in the garbage. She learned how to sew and showed Kylo what she’d made instead of talking about the bad things.

Kylo would spend every day hanging out with Hux after that, at least for a few hours. They’d go for walks, or have Paige and Liza come over. And then, just Paige was coming over. And then one night, she saw Hux and Paige kissing on the porch when she went out to ask if they wanted ice cream after dinner.

Summer still felt too long. She’d go to the library with Kylo and instead of sitting with the other kids, she’d help him find the right books for next year at school. That lasted about a week until he asked if she’d have more fun at the story circle. She got embarrassed; he’d seen that she thought what he was doing was boring.

They spent July Fourth at home. Lumpy was scared of the fireworks and she didn’t want him to be alone. But they could still see the fireworks on television.
By the end of July, she could ride her bike to Rose’s house. Kylo said that she was doing it alone, but she knew that he followed her to keep her safe.

The last week of August, Poe came home. Home to Kylo. Mom and dad had argued with Kylo all summer about how this wasn’t a good idea, but if they had thought long and hard enough about the future, then they would still support them. Kylo wouldn’t let them say no; he showed them some plan he had written out about the next few years. He included when he wanted Rey to come and live with them after college and Han said that he needed to think about that part of the plan the most.

She thought about how long the two had hugged at the airport, standing next to Poe’s one suitcase. Kylo finally turned and she could hug them both too. Poe’s hair was shorter and his skin was tanned. He was also taller and a bit thinner; but he bought her a stuffed dolphin and thanked her for taking care of Kylo the entire summer.

So when school started again, she told her new teacher that her not-brother’s boyfriend was living with them and maybe he was also a sort of not-brother to her. That was her summary of the summer. The other kids had all talked about stories about going to camp or watching the fireworks on July Fourth. But she wanted her story to be about how her heart now had another person living in it.

Her teacher looked at her like Han and Leia did to the boys over dinner, when they started whispering to one another and grinning. Or when Han had yelled at them to stop kissing in the kitchen when they thought that no one else was home, but they had just gone to the store for fifteen minutes. How Leia would make sure they’d let Rey play whatever game they were playing or not to sit so close on the couch when they were watching television. And how they couldn’t spend all the damned time in the basement doing whatever.

One time, Leia got really mad and Rey wasn’t allowed to listen when she talked to them. They both looked really embarrassed when they left Kylo’s room. When she asked mom what she’d said to them, Leia looked her right in the eye and said it was about sex and what they needed to know about it. Mom told her how sex between two boys was different than sex with between a boy and a girl, not the emotional parts but with how their bodies worked. She didn’t want to tell mom that Ahsoka had already told her all of these things. Kylo and Poe sat on opposite sides of the table for a while after that and Leia’s eyes were hard at their ‘protest’—or at least that’s what Han had called it when he was tucking her into bed that night.

But the looks got softer as time kept going. Maybe time got faster when she loved more people. They got sick, they got better. They went to the doctor and the dentist. Kylo still hated the dentist. And Poe was embarrassed that someone else was paying for him. He’d get quiet when ever things like that happened. He’d try not to get sick and then Kylo would get angry; he wanted to keep him safe. He wanted them all to be okay.

Poe took her trick or treating for Halloween, trying to make sure that she still liked him. He was more relaxed by then. He talked more and would sit on the kitchen island and eat cereal at night. She wanted to try trick or treating that year because Poe told her it was a chance for them to make memories together. But she also guessed that it was because he wanted to dress up and get candy too. She gave him the candy that she didn’t want when they came home. Kylo told her all about the other costumes he’d seen on the kids that night and said that their costumes were the best. Poe had rolled his eyes and tossed a chocolate bar at him.

Grandma came for Thanksgiving and just patted Kylo’s hand when he was trying to explain who and what Poe was. Grandma asked Poe if he missed his family and Poe looked sad for a while.
before saying that he missed his real family, but his new family loved him more.

Then it was Christmas and she got to buy her own presents for everyone. She got an allowance now to do too many chores to make sure the boys cared about the house too. Uncle Luke shook his head for a long time when he came and talked to mom and dad before dinner. He looked tired at first, but by the end of Christmas Eve, he was joking with Poe and it was Kylo’s turn to look embarrassed.

But Christmas meant another new year. Finally, the time was running out and she was almost seven.

Kylo got her a blank cookbook; it was one in which they could write their own recipes. All three of them would make different things in the kitchen together: they needed to remember when it worked, but even more when it didn’t. The pizza they made once was so bad that even dad wouldn’t eat it.

The boys were more careful after the talk with mom. The downstairs room was Poe’s now but the door always had to be open at night. Same with Kylo’s door. Poe didn’t want to take anything that Han and Leia gave him, and Kylo and Rey had to convince him that it was okay. He was just happy to have a bed and not have to have a job, he’d said; he didn’t need new clothes or other things. On nights when she’d had a bad day or the shadow people had been following her, Kylo slept in his own room, with her cuddled against him until it felt better. Ahsoka tried to teach her how to understand the shadow people and what they wanted; mom and dad told her to ignore them but Ahsoka said it was important to recognize when and where the shadow people were. And then maybe they could figure out why they were there and how they could make them go away.

At least the people didn’t have Snoke’s face anymore.

Poe would come with them to therapy with Maz. The first few times, he sat and waited. Then, Kylo said that Maz wanted him to come in when he did. They all needed help. After the first session, the first time, he looked so angry. He didn’t talk much that night.

Rey quit gymnastics and only took dance instead. It had been a hard decision; she sat with Poe and Kylo on Kylo’s bed, talking about what she liked best about both. Ahsoka had told her that it was okay to dislike things. By her birthday in the spring, her teacher told her that she would be in advanced group the next year if she wanted to. Rey said that she had to think about it. She didn’t want to leave Rose behind. Maybe she could help her get better if they spent more time together.

And then school ended and it was summer again.

Kylo and Poe went down to Florida by themselves for a month because Poe’s mom was getting married and was going to have a new baby. Rey wanted to come, but then thought about it more. She needed to have some time on her own now that she was seven. She didn’t want to go to camp that year; she wanted something different. She and Ahsoka had made a checklist of everything that she wanted to do; going to Florida wasn’t on her mind yet. Kylo kept asking her to come in the weeks leading up to him leaving, that he’d buy her the ticket and take care of her. No, she said. She wanted mom and dad to take her on different trips. They went and stayed in a cabin by a beautiful lake that smelled so clean. Han taught her how to fish and she got to be in a boat for the first time. She never got to be in a boat at camp because Rose had been too afraid. Then they went out to the coast so Rey could swim in the same ocean as the boys.

When they came home, the boys were quiet for a week, avoiding one another. It was strange to think of them as a collective idea; Rey slowly started to realize how influenced she was by Han and Leia. Rey wanted to ask what happened, but could see something else in the looks that they shared
They were both getting taller and bigger. Kylo how she knew him was almost totally gone, replaced with an almost adult. She wasn’t growing fast enough. Time was always messing with her, tricking her when it wanted to.

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Rey held Agent Jinn’s hand on the back porch and she asked him if he was proud of Kylo.

“Of course I am. Sometimes I think it’s strange that it’s been four years, but I’m very proud of you both.” He squeezed her hand lightly and his eyes crinkled as he smiled. “How did you feel today?”

Rey shrugged. The months leading up to Kylo’s graduation had been hard. He had been studying more for every exam and working harder on every project. His frustration made it hard to relax in the house and he knew that and just ignored them. He’d slam his door in both of her and Poe’s faces, afraid that he wouldn’t get a good grade. Poe would just shrug and they’d play a game or read a book in his room. He’d show her pictures of his baby twin brothers on his phone and said he was so glad that they looked like their dad and not his dad. She liked looking at pictures of babies and thinking about what they’d look like when they’d grow up. Babies had so much time.

The big exam, whatever it was called, Kylo had done in the fall. Dad told her that he’d done exceptional and they went to a nice restaurant to celebrate. It was really fancy and didn’t have a kids’ menu. That made her feel more mature.

But Kylo didn’t look happy about it and he’d told them that he wanted to wait a year to go to college. He needed more work experience, whatever that meant, but also wanted to wait for Poe. That didn’t mean he could be lazy, he’d said. He still needed good grades now, but a year off would be good.

Even Poe didn’t know that Kylo wanted to wait until that day after the exam results.

Now, the house was filled with people who they were close to and she had asked Agent Jinn if they could go somewhere to be alone and away from the family party. And Rey didn’t really want to celebrate the fact that he’d be going away in a year. The thought of him going away at any point was carving a deep hole in her heart and she didn’t know who to talk to about it. Poe didn’t want Kylo to wait a year either. He didn’t want him to be bored. Rey felt the same confliction, but part of her wanted Kylo to stay home longer too. It would be hard with him gone, but it was even harder to have the reminder that his leaving was coming whether she liked it or not.

“Not good,” she finally answered Agent Jinn. “I don’t like thinking about Kylo going away.”

“Well, he’s going to wait a year.”

She bit her lip. She’d almost chewed it raw that day. “Me and Poe think it’s our fault. He wants to

at dinners that week; they were short exchanges with quick eyes. Could Poe speak their language now? But that was just theirs. Han got frustrated by Wednesday and asked what the hell was wrong and they both said nothing in equally morose ways. She didn’t believe them, but didn’t say anything. But by Sunday, they were fine again. She caught them making out on the couch when she thought that they were watching a movie. She tossed a pillow and laughed at them when they realized that she was there and scrambled apart. Poe hit her softly with a pillow in return but Kylo just blushed.
wait for both of us.”

Jinn sighed and guided her to the swing dad had put in that spring for her birthday. She’d helped him paint it while the boys tossed a baseball on the lawn, not doing anything useful. She heard them joking in Spanish to one another. The look on Poe’s face whenever Kylo spoke to him in that language leached happiness to her; Kylo was working really hard to make sure everyone was happy on good days.

Until he started thinking about the future on bad days and got nervous and angry and started hiding away again from them.

“Well, maybe I’m a bit to blame here too,” Agent Jinn admitted and she frowned at him. “I think that college will be a big adjustment for him. Depending how far away he is from his support, his family, he might stumble at first and get frustrated. I know that he doesn’t like to give up, but being alone isn’t something that I think is good for him.”

“He’s not very good at making friends,” Rey said, knowing that she was just repeating something that dad said all of the time. “Do you think he can really be an FBI agent?”

His blue eyes met hers and she knew that he was going to tell her the truth. Grinning, he looked up at the sky and she followed his gaze. “He’s very good at knowing how to analyze crimes. I’ve tried to get him away from murder, into things like robbery or arson or computer crime, but he only wants one thing. He just wants to know why people hurt one another in the worst way.”

She swallowed. All of Kylo’s wants were what made him come back to feeling better: he wanted her to be happy, he wanted to see Poe smile at him, and he wanted mom and dad to not look at him and frown all of the time. But the thing he wanted most was to work with Agent Jinn. Kylo had put a checklist on the fridge and everyone had to look at it everyday. Han tried covering it up with a newspaper article about clowns and Kylo just tore it down, telling him not to touch his things. She finally put one of her drawings over it so he would know not to tear it off.

“How long does that take?” she asked, still thinking about the list.

Agent Jinn just exhaled. “A lot longer than he thinks. But if he waits a year, he’ll be more mature and maybe, just maybe, he’ll find something at college that he wants to study more.”

They both heard the stumbling footsteps behind the back door and then muffled laughter. Rey was used to Kylo knowing where to look when she heard something strange, so it was nice to have another adult register the sounds. Because Kylo was an adult now. He was eighteen. He didn’t have to stay there if he really didn’t want to.

The backdoor opened and Poe and Kylo stumbled out of it, arms wrapped around one another, kissing in a way that she was rarely allowed to see for too long. They were also looking for somewhere private.

Kylo pulled away first, blinking and wiping at his mouth. He tried to stand up straighter and fixed his shirt. Rey could see how his hands balled into fists for a moment as he looked at them. “Um. Hi George.”

Poe’s face was bright red and he stepped behind Kylo. She could hear him swearing to himself, resting his head on Kylo’s shoulder to hide his eyes.

“It looks like you two got bored,” Agent Jinn asked, his tone teasing them. “Or were you looking for me?”
Clearing his throat, Kylo glanced at Poe and then back at them. Poe had been nervous all day about seeing Agent Jinn again. At the ceremony, he tried to sit as far away from him as he could, but Agent Jinn seemed to see what he was trying to do and sat next to him anyway. Poe kept looking at her with wide eyes throughout the ceremony whenever the agent tried to talk to him in hushed tones in the auditorium. I want to die, he’d mouthed, please kill me now. Rey giggled and he looked even more afraid when he had to talk to him again.

“I was looking for you and then we got distracted,” Kylo said, then he swallowed. “I wanted to thank you again for coming, with how busy you are. It meant a lot to me.” Poe nudged Kylo and he looked at him sharply before he looked back and nodded. “And for all of your help over the years. Thanks for...everything.”

Jinn stood and she followed, crossing the porch. “I couldn’t miss this, Kylo. This was a very important day for you, so it means a great deal to me too.”

Smiling, Kylo embraced him. Poe’s hand looked lonely so Rey took it and he draped his arms over her shoulders, swaying for side to side. She could still feel his apprehension; maybe the kissing that they just witnessed was the first time since this morning that he had been close to the object of their affection. But they were both focused on how the younger man parted from the greying agent. Kylo was taller than dad now, but not as tall as Agent Jinn. It was almost strange to see someone taller in the house. When they stepped apart, Rey watched Kylo try to look taller again, like he’d done the entire day.

“We’ve talked about coming to the ceremony next year,” Poe found his voice with his arms around her and she leaned into him. Despite how tall Kylo was, Poe still felt perfect. He was soft and warm and she understood why Kylo liked hugging him. “Do you think it would make everyone mad if we showed up there too? Would people get pissed or something?”

Rey had heard them talking when the anniversary had rolled by them that spring. Next year would be five years. And she really wanted to go to California for it. Kylo did too. And whatever Kylo did, Poe would want to do it with him.

“We’d like you to be there. Many of the families have been asking about how the survivors are doing. Maybe this time we can give them actually faces and facts and not just rumours that can be picked apart by vultures. It might be healing as well to come there before starting the next chapter of your life.” Jinn turned from them to Kylo who nodded quickly. “But that’s almost a year away. Let’s go inside now. We can talk more about that another day.”

Kylo closely followed Agent Jinn and Rey kept her hand in Poe’s as they went back inside. Mom and dad were sitting at the table, talking with grandma and Mrs Hux. It wasn’t a big party. Mom and dad’s friends had been there earlier; Kylo said that they could only come if they left early. He didn’t even care about the presents that they brought for him. He said that they could use the money to do something fun together, whatever Rey and Poe wanted. She hoped that it would be a trip to a hotel with a waterpark or maybe even a real waterpark. She could hear music still playing in the living room. Kylo didn’t invite many friends from school; it made mom worried but Poe said that it was okay. They mostly hung out as a small group anyway. But she knew who was fooling around—again, dad’s words—with the music. It kept changing after a song started playing for a few seconds to another, then another. Hux must have been playing with the music and she could just see Paige’s face in her mind, frowning but still hiding happiness in her eyes.

She should have told Agent Jinn how good she was at imagining now but she had forgot. She could tell him later.

Guiding Poe away from the kitchen, she left the others and made him come too. He kept leaning
against her, steadied by her hand. It made her glow from the inside out. Kylo started talking with mom and dad and she let his voice fade from her ears. He didn’t want to say that he was happy about today, but he was.

Luke was drinking a beer on the couch and watching Paige and Hux argue about the music. Mr and Mrs Tico walked by them, rolling their eyes at their daughter and her boyfriend. She knew that Mr Tico didn’t like Hux that much. Kylo had said that Rose and Finn could come tonight for her but she didn’t want them to. She wanted to be there in case Poe got lonely. Rose had told her how much her father yelled at Paige about it all; Hux wasn’t good enough. But they looked happy and cute together. Just like Kylo and Poe. People in love should be together.

The idea that Poe loved Kylo was easy to understand. She knew that by how he looked at him. He would be tired from studying, sitting at the kitchen table, and Kylo would finally come down from his room and Poe’s face would change. He’d go from frustrated to happy as fast as she could blink. Kylo would stop and tilt his head, eyeing him, before grinning and the hours apart seemed to be forgiven. Rey had started doing her homework together with Poe just to see the looks. And to see Kylo bend down to kiss Poe before grabbing something from the fridge and leaving to do something else, teasing Poe to follow after him.

Kylo’s feelings for Poe were more hidden to her. Since they were always around her, she didn’t get to talk to Kylo about how he felt about him that much anymore. They would talk about other things: how school was going, how dance was going, how she felt after therapy. If she’d seen the shadow people again. If there was a boy in her class that she had a crush on. Kylo would still be sad and angry; there were still days when he didn’t want to talk to anyone and pushed everyone away. But working together, Poe and Rey made him smile again. And she’d make sure that Poe wasn’t sad either. And they’d both help each other if Kylo was having a down day. But the days that Kylo felt the most for Poe made it easier not to be sad. Those were the days when she’d see them sitting on the couch, just looking at one another. Kylo said so much more by how he acted when he was calm than in anything that he said.

She sat on Poe’s lap as they invaded Luke’s space. She wanted to tell her uncle to not put his feet on the coffee table, especially without socks.

“Oh good, my favourite girl and my nephew-in-law. Come to save me from this messed up musical chairs?” Luke gestured with his hand to Paige and Hux. “Just pick a song! It all sounds like garbage.”

Rey giggled and she heard Paige groan and snatch Hux’s phone from his hands. Finally, the same song played longer than twenty seconds. And Paige and Hux moved away from them and into a corner to talk. His hand brushed hers so she guessed that they were done arguing.

Luke looked over at them and sighed. “I think I was that young once. But I can’t remember. Poe, go get me a beer. Get one for yourself too.”

Shaking his head, Poe still shifted her from his lap to sit next to Luke. “No, I think it’s fine. I mean, I don’t want to…Han and Leia, I mean…”

“Just tell them I said that it was okay.” And then Luke winked.

Rey watched Poe back out of the living room. He mouthed again: kill me now. She laughed because she didn’t know what else to do.

“A drink will loosen him up,” Luke sighed. “I thought Ben was the one that didn’t like people.”
Studying Uncle Luke, Rey shrugged. She had slowly got to know him and it was a journey that had taken longer than with other people. She liked weekends at grandma’s and sleepovers at the Tico household; the food would be different, the rooms were shaped differently, and something had always changed. Grandma was showing her how to crochet and taught her how to poach an egg. Mrs Hux would help her walk the dog on some evenings, and would watch him when they were away. Hux had been worried about graduating too and she would tell her about that. But Luke seemed to move all the time and she couldn’t even send him a letter and know that it would get to him. She wanted to ask what he liked to do; what she wanted to know was why he was always moving.

“Poe is trying to not embarrass Kylo. He thinks he embarrasses him by being younger and how he talks too much and does weird things,” Rey answered, sticking out her legs. She was getting stronger. She could see it in her calves. Dancing was so much better than gymnastics. “They had a big argument this morning because Kylo says that he’s not embarrassed.”

It had started right after breakfast, when they were going to be late to the ceremony. Kylo’s door was shut and she heard them shouting at one another, followed by silence. She rolled her eyes and left her spy mission when the bed springs creaked. They weren’t even that late and Kylo’s hair still looked perfect.

“But they don’t argue around you, right?” Luke asked.

“They always close the door, since it’s daytime. Poe doesn’t want Kylo to wait to go to college. But I think he feels bad that he’ll still be staying here without him.” Rey reached for the pop that she put down earlier. Her cup, the pink one, still sat on the coffee table beside Luke’s gross feet. She didn’t like how diet soda tasted but knew that the regular stuff was bad for her. “I know he feels bad. He told me.”

They both sat up as they heard Poe’s laugh getting closer. He did show up with two beers and Rey watched him hand Luke one before sitting on the floor and sipping his own.

“It’s okay, sweet pea. I cleared it with the higher ups.” He winked and nudged her with his elbow. It would be fine if he had just one, she decided. “So, now you guys can stop talking about me and we can start talking about how Ky looked like a dork in that stupid hat.”

“Next year that will be you, dork,” Luke teased. “Just take the money, Poe.”

Biting his bottom lip for a moment, Poe looked down and then took a long drink from his bottle. At Christmas, Kylo had given Poe a blank cheque for a Christmas gift. Rey didn’t understand what it meant until Han and Leia cleared their throats and said that his college would be paid for too, when he wanted it. Poe had just stared at them and the cheque. Rey didn’t understand why she heard Kylo arguing with him afterwards. It didn’t ruin Christmas, but it was something that wasn’t really brought up again.

“I’m starting to think that maybe college isn’t for me,” Poe finally said. “But maybe in a year I’ll change my mind. I don’t know. I just know that I can’t leave him alone. He’ll go all meltdown and probably think that the dean is planning to kill him or something the first time that he gets a bad grade.”

Rey narrowed her eyes, trying to look beyond what he said for what he felt. “Why would you do something that you wouldn’t want to do?”

Poe sat up, the beer bottle against his lips. He swallowed slowly and then glanced over his shoulder and Rey could see him looking at Kylo.
“Because you love someone. That’s why.”

They attended the five-year anniversary in California. Rey was excited to go on a plane now that she was nine. But Han and Leia didn’t come. They said that they never wanted to go there again and it was important for the three of them to be there by themselves. And Agent Jinn had promised to look after them, or have someone from his team make sure they didn’t get into trouble. For Rey, it was to see where she had been born. For Kylo, it was to see where he had died. And for Poe, it was to understand the part of their lives and realize how far they had come.

So many of the other families were there and Rey recognized them through the memories that still surfaced when she let them. Their faces were like many of the children, but older and sadder and more alive.

Her wall wasn’t as good as Kylo’s yet. She had wanted to throw out her drawings of the other children but couldn’t let that part go yet.

Kylo had started pinning up pictures and things from newspapers and the computer on his wall about Snoke. It became a project that made her and Poe worry. They would sit and try to do homework on Kylo’s bed as he mapped out connections and locations. That’s kind of creepy, Ky, Poe would say, but keep doing it if it makes you feel better.

The six weeks that he had spent in Virginia after Christmas had only narrowed his focus.

Agent Jinn had arranged for a special internship for him. Kylo had spent the summer and the fall working at the police station, doing clerk duties and keeping his mouth shut. He did the same filing work part-time at mom’s office. He would still come home and complain how stupid their local police were, how most of the cops there hadn’t seen as much death in all of their careers as he had in one year. Poe would shrug at him, saying that he had to study. Kylo would let his shoulders drop and kiss him on the cheek as he sat next to him. He helped him study and Rey would bring them the cookies that she had baked that afternoon. They would eat cookies and she would listen to Kylo correct Poe’s language on an essay, or some formula that he didn’t understand in chemistry. She could feel the stress coming off of Poe’s body in waves. And he wouldn’t calm down until Kylo did too, pushing the books aside and hugging him. He would push him, but never too far.

But the internship meant six weeks of just Rey and Poe. Kylo left for Virginia and Rey had to stand in the airport with Poe, watching him go.

Even though he hated studying, Poe worked even harder after that. She started sleeping in his bed a few nights a week to make sure that he wasn’t alone.

Kylo could only text or call in the evenings, telling them that he could talk then. They’d talk with him on the computer, sharing headphones, and Rey liked seeing the guestroom of Agent Jinn’s house. He’d sometimes sit with Kylo, making him talk about anything else other than what he’d done that day. She’d say goodnight and Poe would close the door to talk to Kylo alone. Sometimes, she would hear tears in Poe’s muted voice as he told Kylo how much he missed him. She wouldn’t be able to Kylo’s responses and hoped that he was being kind.

And Kylo came home obsessed with how to solve a case that had been solved for five years.
because he’d killed the man that had raped, tortured, and murdered children.

But standing in the California sun for the first time in all of those years, Rey couldn’t help but understand why he wanted to explore that part again.

The old house had been demolished years ago. It was a park now; rows and rows of trees filled the lot. The development of the city had started to stretch out into the rural area, but the neighbours knew and had to remember their story. The trees were neat and ordered; they represented life and not death. Death was never anything that could be put into a clean row, Kylo had said. Still, Rey wished that she had been allowed to see the house one last time, to see if it matched how it looked in her mind. She could still feel the grit on the stairs when she was forced down them with bare and torn feet. The last time, when her broken arm ached as Snoke grabbed at her underwear and pushed her against a wall, the texture of it had scratched her face. That was before Kylo killed him and saved her. Would it have felt the same?

Instead, she just smelt trees, life, everything new.

Once the crowd had broken up, and Kylo was left talking to reporters, she’d snuck away to find someone else to talk to.

And she found him, also staring at the trees.

“Hello, Rey.” Agent Jinn smiled at her, kneeling down. “What did you think of the ceremony?”

“It was nice,” she said. “They said everybody’s names. It took a really long time.”

He nodded. “We know them all now.”

They’d planted two new trees for the two last names. The total was forty-three. Not all of them died there. But all of the trees were there. Kylo had told her about how the other sites, in Colorado and Connecticut, had become places where people obsessed with their case liked to go and do weird things. It was still weird to Rey that it was about a case and not about the people. California had to be where the memories should stand. They could be protected there.

It’s also where her family was.

She hadn’t told Kylo why she really wanted to come to the ceremony. She’d said it was to see him give his speech; it was short and he hadn’t looked as nervous as she knew that he would feel. He just wanted to say something, anything. He wanted to look the reporters and families in the eyes and say that he was a survivor and wished he had been stronger, but all of the other kids had been brave too. They had never forgotten their families and the families had to keep those memories going on into the future. When he sat down, between Poe and Rey, they both took his hands. She leaned against him and saw him quiver. He’d held something back: how he’d helped kill them and had to be cold to them at times in order to survive.

She heard shouting over her shoulder and was knocked out of the memory and her own head. She felt like Kylo when he spaced out and missed something: the instant anger and not always being able to listen made her heart quicken.

“I’ll be right back.” Agent Jinn was already striding towards the small crowd of people that had gathered on the other side of the rows of white chairs that lined the park. It was a strange order to chaos that was no longer there. She trailed after, spotting Kylo shoving a man in a brown suit. Poe was trying to get between them and that made her quicken her pace, creasing the grass with her pink flats.
“What’s happening here?” Agent Jinn’s voice never sounded like that when he spoke with her. His voice was always kind and calm; now, it was angry and commanding. “Where’s your pass?”

His eyes were on the strange man, locked and angry. But the other man was open mouthed and gesturing wildly. “He must have knocked it off of me.”

“No I didn’t,” Kylo argued, still held by Poe’s steady hands. “He’s not supposed to be here without a pass! He is just pretending to be with the families. He’s the reporter who…”

Agent Jinn’s eyes snapped towards Kylo and he shut up in an instant. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes were still enraged even as he took a step back to drop his head. She moved to stand closer to him. His hand rested on her shoulder, but she also saw how his other hand was gripped tightly in Poe’s.

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to leave. This event is only open to members of the public who have been cleared with security. Without a pass, I can’t allow you to harass this man.” Agent Jinn was already leading the red-faced man away by the arm, gripping him hard. He shouted to some other officers and the man disappeared into the crowd.

She spotted some of the parents looking at them and wanted to disappear.

“What did he say?” Her voice felt small as she asked the question.

“He’s the one that wrote that stupid book,” Poe spoke for Kylo. He was his voice now and Rey was starting to find it less comfortable than it had been before. He didn’t see how she was chewing on the inside of her cheek and kept talking. “He still wants Ky to admit the things that the did, like he wasn’t fucking forced to do them. That stupid shit, Rey, you know? He has some stupid blog now and just keeps making things up. He doesn’t fucking understand.”

“You should have let me hit him,” Kylo mumbled. “He won’t let it go away. All I wanted to do was come here and make it all go away.”

Shaking her head, she leaned back against them. She slowly turned and hugged their waists. “I love you both.”

“Love you too,” Kylo said weakly. “We should go back to the hotel so no one can bother us anymore.”

Their car was waiting. They could go back at any time.

“Can I stay and talk to Agent Jinn for a bit?” She looked up and tried not to sound too sad. “He’ll bring me back.”

Kylo looked tired. He also looked like he wanted to say something to her. Are you sure? They'll ask you questions too.

She shrugged. It’s important to me.

He exhaled and looked at Poe. “As long as you’re sure, sweet pea. Get him to call us when you’re on your way back, okay?”

The led her to a chair and each hugged her before taking the long walk across the grass. She spotted the brown-suited man arguing with Agent Jinn but noticed another familiar face that she’d missed during the ceremony. Detective Phasma caught her eyes, and how her boys were leaving and looking dejected, and came to keep her company.
“I got here a little late,” Phasma said, filling the chair beside her. She didn’t look as tall as before, but she still looked imposing to Rey. “How was it?”

Rey looked distantly at the trees again, imagining children there instead. “It was long and sad. But Kylo did a good job. He practiced what he was going to say at the hotel a lot before we came. That got a little annoying. Am I going to be on television too?”

Rey knew the answer but wanted to make sure that Agent Jinn had told her the truth too. He’d said that she’d be on television, but they wouldn’t say who she was. If anyone asked, she was just Kylo’s sister. She hated that part the most, but knew it was for the best.

“Only as part of the crowd. People will figure it out, but we won’t say anything. When you’re eighteen you can decide that part for yourself.” Phasma seemed to look a bit angry at the whole thing and Rey quirked her head, asking why. “I disagreed with George on letting you be here. There are still too many people looking into this. George…sometimes he lets his feelings for you two confuse him about what’s important.”

“Do you talk about us a lot?” The words made Rey feel both good and worried. “About the case? Kylo talks about it a lot.”

Scratching her eyebrow, Phasma leaned towards her. “I took a step back from your lives for a reason. George…he worked longer on the case and took every death personally. Seeing you two grow up is a chance for him to not live all of those deaths everyday. We talk about that, whenever we run into each other at one of these things. And I really disagree with him letting Kylo still live in the fantasy world that he’ll be able to join the FBI.”

Rey swallowed and nodded. But Kylo could do anything that he put his mind to. He was going to do it; he had to do it. “But he really wants to.”

Phasma shook her head. “Then he should focus on not arguing with anyone who gets under his skin.”

That part Rey could agree with. Rey asked a few more questions about California, trying to put Kylo out of her mind. She asked Phasma about working for the police for so long and how many kids she had saved. Phasma seemed to get kinder with every question, but probably knew that Rey was just pretending.

Finally, Agent Jinn stood next to her and she looked up and smiled.

“Can we finish that conversation that we started?” He was calm and soft again, taking her hand.

She asked if Kylo was going to be in trouble and he shook his head. She asked who the man in brown was and he said that he was going to find out. The police were going to ask him a few questions and make sure he wouldn’t bother Kylo again.

“That would probably be good,” Rey said and nodded. She let her pause stretch out before looking up again. “Agent Jinn?”

“Yes Rey?”

“Can you show me where my parents are. My real ones? Where they’re buried?”

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It was a big cemetery, but Agent Jinn knew the way. She thought it was strange that he would know the path so well.

Still, there they were. Two headstones, with her real last name on them both.

“When we dug deeper, we found out more and more about them,” he said, putting his hands on her shoulders. She couldn’t figure out why she wasn’t crying. She should be more sad. But she wasn’t. She needed to know the story; maybe that would help her imagine. “It looks like he was looking around homeless shelters for pregnant couples. He looked like he belonged there and always checked in under a different name. Then he found them. They were young, only eighteen and nineteen with nowhere to go and no one to turn to.

“He paid for you to be born in a hospital. That’s how we found the records. But he didn’t pay for a long enough stay and knew they would come back to him, looking for money. It wasn’t easy to figure out who they were, but we had a woman who had just given birth who was dead, along with her partner. I’m very sorry that you never got to know them, Rey. I’m very sorry that you were brought into the world through something like this.” Agent Jinn’s hands tightened on her shoulders.

But all she could think about were that her parents died at the same age that Kylo and Poe were right then. They would argue about silly things, but would also talk about them afterwards. They went out, but never got into trouble. They had a nice house to live in and they didn’t have a kid of their own, but they had her.

That thought made her lip tremble. “Who put up the gravestones?”

She’d seen where grandpa was buried and remembered Leia talking to grandma about how much it cost.

“I paid for them because I knew that one day, you’d like to see them. And know their story.” Agent Jinn touched the top of her head and she nodded. Maybe Phasma was right and he was taking on too much of their world.

“But why? I thought you liked Kylo more?”

He shook his head. “There’s space for the both of you in my heart. I may talk to him more, but seeing you grow up means more to me. He’s going to have many more troubles in the future. You’re going to have to be strong for him, but also remember that you have your own life and story to write. It started here, but didn’t end here. As long as you don’t forget about yourself, I think you can love Kylo and have your own life. And I’ll be there to help you both as long as I can.”

She managed to nod and then quietly asked to go back to the hotel. The boys were probably hungry.

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Rey liked their apartment. It was perfect for them and she had her own room. She was excited to decorate it as all of the boxes were being brought it. She spun, looking up at the ceiling. The person that used to live there had put up stars for her. She’d always have light when she was
staying there.

Dad knocked on the frame of her door and she turned and grinned, watching him put down a box that was labelled kitchen in Kylo’s angry writing. “There are glow-in-the dark stars here! I won’t need a nightlight!”

Han leaned against the door and gave her a long look, smiling at her joy. “So you’ve already decided that you get this room? You didn’t talk to the boys?”

She shook her head. “I got to pick it when we looked at it last month, dad.”

Crossing his arms, Han stepped into the empty room. The furniture delivery would be there in a few hours. But it was late and Kylo was outside yelling at them on his phone. “Well, if I remember correctly, I wasn’t allowed to come and look at apartments. Even though I’ll be paying for it.”

“But this one is really close to campus. They didn’t want to stay in the dorms like Hux. Kylo says that there are too many parties there and it always smells.” She left out the part how Hux had warned Kylo that not too many people would be happy having a couple like Poe and Kylo living there.

Kylo was beginning to understand all of the pressure he was putting on everyone. Poe’s grades weren’t as good as his and he felt awful about that, worried that they wouldn’t get into the same school and felt that he disappointed Kylo by not being smart enough. Kylo said that he’d never feel that way about him, about anything; he was good at enough subjects that he could make a career out of. Mom and dad were also concerned that they’d have to send Rey on a plane to somewhere far away. That’s when she was reminded of what Agent Jinn had said and knew that they were more worried about him being too far away from them. It would be hard to get to him if something happened if he was on the other side of the country. Hux said that where he went was good enough for what Kylo wanted to study and that he also wanted to spend more time with him, since Paige went to a dance academy on the other side of the state. So Kylo compromised with everyone. And now he was at a university only three hours away with his best friend, his boyfriend, and she had a room in their apartment.

“Before you go losing yourself in the stars, we need to talk again about what we talked about before.” Dad wasn’t letting it go and Rey pouted.

Letting her shoulders shake, she tried not to stomp her foot. All summer they’d been telling her the same thing. She guessed it was her turn to compromise. “I can’t stay here the first month. So they can get settled in. And then just once a month, until they’re settled in. What does settled in even mean, dad?”

He sighed and walked over to the windowsill, sitting down and tapping on it for her to join him. She was still frowning as she went to sit beside him.

“It means that they’re not in high school anymore and won’t be living at our house with closed doors anymore. College is something different and can really be challenging.” He was looking out the window, at the other buildings around them. They were on the first floor. Kylo wanted something up higher, so no one could climb onto the balcony, but this was closest to campus with the best rent. “And I’m not just talking about school.”

Dad hadn’t missed their arguments, but he usually didn’t see how they acted afterwards. How Poe would explain why he had been angry and Kylo would do the same. She heard familiar words, words from Maz, in their conversations. Maz probably hadn’t told them how to smile or hold one another afterwards until they fell asleep, though.
"But they’ve been together for three years? How’s that going to be hard?”

Dad shrugged. “People change when they grow up. We love them both and it would be nice that they stayed together, but sometimes we don’t always get what we want.”

Rey rolled her eyes. “They’re in love, Han.”

He looked at her with a frown. “Don’t you start calling me that.”

She stuck her tongue at him.

They spent the rest of the day unpacking. And Kylo had calmed down enough by the time the furniture got there that it was actually not as stressful as they had all thought.

And the first thing that Kylo put up on the fridge, with a magnet from the FBI headquarters, was his checklist.

Chapter End Notes

Usual warnings: mentions of past rape, murder and abuse, post-trauma, and boys kissing.

This chapter could have included more things but it's long enough and only a little disjointed. Thanks to everyone still reading and commenting. The next chapter is nearly done too so it will probably be up sometime over the weekend. I might wait with Chapter 27 because I'd like to make a better dent in Chapter 28 (or change it entirely).

Much love to you all!
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

The troubles in the boys’ relationship come to an unexpected head; Rey turns eleven and feels like the world is ending.

The second-last Poe/Kylo chapter.

See the Chapter notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So, are we going to talk about it?”

Kylo could only look at his feet in the basement, letting his unshed tears thicken in his chest. “How I fucked up your life?”

Poe’s frown deepened as he shifted on the bed he’d been using the last few weeks of school. He’d hardly moved anything in, other than a duffle bag of clothes. It was like he was aching to leave, to be rid of him. He’d still smile and kiss him, hug him and say that he loved him, but his eyes were sad when he didn’t think that anyone was looking. “Yeah.”

Staring off into nothing, Kylo didn’t know what to say. An uncomfortable distance had started to grow between them since Kylo did what he thought he had to do. Kylo had hated every second of it and they’d avoided the conversation in favour of not knowing. Now it was decided: Poe had to go to Florida and might not be coming back. His arm had healed but the ghost break remained.

“I don’t know what to say.” His eyes flicked up as Poe folded his arms. “You were mad and I didn’t know why. Then I freaked out about what you said. I fucked up a lot that night.”

Sighing, Poe flopped down on the bed. He rubbed his eyes. “Okay, okay. We’ve already established that it’s all my fault. About the only people that don’t think that are your parents and they hate me.”

“They don’t hate you,” he answered quickly, taking a cautious step towards the bed. “And if I were normal, you wouldn’t have had a reason to be mad.”

Poe was quiet but didn’t pull away when Kylo reached to take his hand. He slowly moved closer, trying to see his face. The bruise was gone but, like his arm, he still felt the echo. But Poe just stared up at the ceiling.

“Do you even want to come back?” The question had been pressing on him all evening. Maybe it was better not to know that either.

Finally sitting up, Poe took both of his hands. Kylo willed himself not to feel hope. He was steadying himself to go numb, retreat back into his head and never feel anything close to hope
“Yeah, but…” Poe paused and shook his head. “We have to promise to talk about these things more. Not just me talking, but you talking too. I can’t go around being afraid of you, what you can do when you get that angry. If I come back, I’ll only have you.”

He’d let him burrow under his skin to a point that there was no going back. It hurt more to think about losing him than to restrain himself from fracturing in the future. He needed to think more, to be smarter with his rage even though it was the hardest emotion to control.

He had to make this promise and keep it.

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“So, are we going to talk about it?”

Kylo lifted his head to snap at him. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

They were on the plane home from Florida. It had been a confusing and long, long month that should have made them stronger and had up until last night. He’d been able to make it through the entire visit not starting or getting into any real fights, even though he really wanted to. He took many long walks, coming back to Poe’s mother’s guesthouse and unleashing his frustrations on Poe. But that got them talking about what it meant to be together, forcing Kylo to again deal with things that he was being ignorant about. They liked each other, loved each other, but could disagree about things. Kylo didn’t want to think about that; he just wanted Poe to listen to him and not make him think about the other side of things. But he had to. That’s what normal people did.

“Ky, come on.” Poe touched his hand and he flinched away, looking out the window and hoping that they took off soon so he could go home and hide. “You didn’t hurt me last night. It’ll be better next time when we’re both ready. When you’re ready.”

He was right and the thought made Kylo’s hands tense. After weeks of teasing from various cousins and relatives, who had no idea who he was or how he felt about sex, Kylo had asked Poe if they could have sex, real sex. Intercourse. Not just handjobs or blowjobs, but penetration. Poe had made a face at Kylo’s very unromantic phrasing and then asked if he was really ready. It had been a thought that had twisted in Kylo’s chest for the last half a year as their physical relationship deepened. But after the hundredth time of being asked by grating strangers about how often they fucked, he wanted to tie them together permanently.

And he couldn’t do it.

He had made a decision not out of love, but out of frustration. His hatred of himself surfaced again at the thought. When they had prepared and had Kylo had thought his head was clear enough, after tender kisses and careful touches, he met Poe’s eyes and tried to enter him. But the moment Poe gasped, as he was hardly inside him, he was torn back to his own assault and how it still tormented him. He was seven years old, being raped and losing his innocence on a disgusting couch to a specter of death. He wasn’t on a plush bed in Florida with his boyfriend, who loved him no matter how hard he fucked up, naked and begging for him. He was always back there and never being present snuck up on him like the ghosts that haunted him constantly. He froze and couldn’t breathe, his heart demanding to be let out of his chest through his throat. It took hours to calm again.
down and he wept until he couldn’t speak. They were both exhausted by the time they fell asleep and had to fly the next morning.

“What if I do hurt you next time?” Kylo asked, rubbing his knuckle against the cool glass beside him.

“You won’t. We’ll make sure you won’t. Or make sure that it hurts less than it should. The first time will always hurt a little and I’m okay with that because I fucking love you.” Poe again reached for his other hand and Kylo didn’t pull away this time. “We’ve got to talk about this, okay?”

He pulled his sweater over his mouth and shook his head.

“Fine, whatever,” Poe mumbled, turning away from him. “I still love you but if you want me to ignore you, I can do that too.”

Kylo didn’t even last a week before he apologized and needed to spill his feelings to him, feeling like he lost a limb in his silence.

It took them another four months to get to that point again. And that time, Kylo didn’t panic.

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“So, are we going to talk about it?”

Poe’s voice was still dejected, his eyes down. He’d been crying for a half an hour almost and it made Kylo ache, being so far away. He’d been fine before, when Rey was there. They’d told him about going skiing the previous weekend. But then, when Rey went to bed after blowing him a dozen kisses, Poe just broke down. It started as a dull whimper and then he just had to sit there and watch him dissolve into tears. A cruel yet invisible knife edged its way into his gut as his younger boyfriend lost himself in the gap between them because he ultimately didn’t understand what was wrong. He’d only been gone for three weeks; they were halfway done being apart, being separate people. He just had to make it three more weeks.

Sitting up on Agent Jinn’s guest bed, Kylo frowned at the computer screen. “You’re allowed to miss me. You know that.”

“Yeah, but you’re just so far away. I’m getting so much shit at school because everyone knows that you’re out of town. Whoever keeps writing ‘homo’ on my locker needs to learn more insults.” At least he smirked at the last part, wiping at his moist eyes. “But yeah, I’ve made up my mind. If we get into the same school, I’m going with you to college. I’ll go nuts if we’re this far apart for so long.”

Kylo didn’t understand why such simple words could bring him so much joy. “That’s…that’s fantastic.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I need you too.” Kylo meant it. Some days he doubted his feelings but the plan in his head included Poe and Rey. When they were older and proved to Leia that they could take care of Rey long term, she’d move in with them and not just stay there when she was able to. “We’ll talk about it more when I get home. Just…don’t be too sad. Did Rey really like skiing?”

He changed the subject to get away from his own pain in his boyfriend’s eyes. The first week in
Virginia had been rough. Agent Jinn said he had full run of the house, but Kylo mostly kept to the guest-room. When they ate dinner, Kylo didn’t know what to talk about. The house was big and nicely decorated; there were antique weapons and spears on the walls, African masks, and Asian statues. But Agent Jinn was alone there. Kylo finally got the courage to ask about his wife and Agent Jinn explained how his wife had left him a year ago. When Kylo did the math, he asked why he didn’t tell him before. **Well, you didn’t ask**, Jinn had said before winking at him and taking a drink. That was the lesson for that night. And there were many more lessons after that: how to talk to people and make sure that they’re comfortable so that they’ll answer your questions, how to analyze long reports and formulate them the proper way. Kylo really wanted to do the weapons training but that wouldn’t be until week five, but only if he could complete a safety exam. Even then, it was only to do test shooting.

“Oh yeah, she fucking loved it. You can see it in the pictures I sent you.” Poe was grinning and launched into a story about how many times he had fallen and how he was covered in bruises because of something fun rather than punishment. How Rey hadn’t fallen once and then on the drive home told him exactly how many times he’d hit the snow. “I just gave up. I’m not good at rich, white people sports. Han told me about some rowing club he used to belong to and I was like ‘you row boats for fun? No, you row boats to get away from fucking gators.’ And he laughed so hard that he knocked over his glass. It was a mess and Rey’s eyes were about to bug out of her head.”

“Get him to show you the pictures of it.” Kylo smiled, lulled by the good things from the past. “They kicked him off after a week.”

“What, really?”

“Yeah.” Kylo thought again about the lessons from Agent Jinn. “What’s another dumb, white-people thing you haven’t done?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never ridden a horse for no reason around a fancy yard in tight pants, which I would look great in by the way. I’ve never gone to Italy just to wander around in white shorts and complain about how no one speaks English.” Poe shifted to rest on his elbows, fixing his hair and sighing. He was in his room and not the basement. It should have annoyed Kylo but it didn’t. It just made him feel warm instead. At the same time, he hated that he missed him. It had been three weeks without love and sex. Physically, he felt stronger but at the same time empty. He craved the smell of the sweat on his neck. But Poe was still talking as he readjusted himself. “It’s actually really weird living here without you. Mom and dad asked again if I wanted a car so I didn’t have to keep borrowing yours and I was like ‘nah, it’s fine.’ And mom still left the used car guide on my bed with a couple of cars circled.”

“They’re just trying to be nice. They do shit like this. They think they know what you want and don’t really think.” Kylo answered, shaking his head. Think of anything else other than fucking him. Forget how he smelled and tasted for once. Forget how hard he came the other morning for the first time in too long without help. His name had been on his lips in the shower. His cheeks burnt at the memory.

Poe nodded, either missing how he was moving or ignoring it. “Yeah, my mom is worried that I’m going to forget what it’s like to have nothing. Like, yeah mom, I’m going to forget sleeping in a car for half a year because someone else is going to pay for my college. Her new husband is loaded so I don’t know why she needs to bitch at me.”

Kylo had managed to get to some of the real problems; it wasn’t just that Poe missed him, but there were other people pressuring him. And Kylo knew that he was one of him. Until Poe had snapped
at him a couple of weeks ago, he wasn’t really aware of how critical he was being of his schoolwork. He had to go to college with him. He needed better SAT scores when he retook the exam soon. Sex was hard but great when it worked. But at the end of the day, the future mattered more.

Nodding, Kylo checked the time on his phone. He’d put a picture of Poe and Rey at the ski hill as his background.

“I should go to bed. I have to be there at 6 a.m. tomorrow and it takes forever to get there.” It was just after ten but it would take him at least an hour to fall asleep. Probably longer. “Tell Rey I love her again for me and tell her how much I miss her too.”

Poe kissed the palm of his hand and held it up to the camera. “Will do. We’ll talk tomorrow and I’ll try not to cry the entire time. Love you.”

The words always felt real coming from Poe but whenever he said them in reply, he knew that his feelings were still coming together. “Love you too.”

He clicked off the call and closed his laptop, resting against his head against the case. He wished that Agent Jinn was there, but he was away for the week. The agent that Kylo was working with while he was away had far less patience with him. He’d lost some important document and had spent the afternoon trying to find it. When he did, he was only reminded of how he’d messed up rather than how he’d managed to succeed despite his own stupidity.

Grumbling, he went downstairs to make sure that he’d cleaned up the kitchen correctly. He wouldn’t be able to sleep if he thought he’d left a mess in that house and Rey wasn’t there to clean up after him. And sleeping in an empty bed riled him up more than he wanted to admit.

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“So, are we going to talk about it?”

Kylo opened his eyes as he caught the anger in Poe’s tone. He sat up on the couch, their couch, and shrugged. “Talk about what?”

Poe’s eyes were filled with rage, a dark emotion that he was growing more and more accustomed to. His mouth slacked open, gaping at him, before it snapped shut. “How you were following me and my friends when I was out tonight!”

He wore his guilt on his face no matter how hard he tried to stay blank. He knew it because Poe tossed up his hands and started pacing around the living room. It was 1 a.m. Poe had said he’d be home at eleven. Kylo had went to find him at quarter after, not trusting him to text. He’d managed to get back before him, but just barely.

“You can’t fucking stalk me when I’m not in the apartment! Holy fuck, what is wrong with you!”

“I was just looking for you.” He kept his voice level, not getting drawn into another argument. In the six months that they’d been living together, this had been the first time that he’d been caught. But they fought about other things. He couldn’t figure out why.

“Then why didn’t you just come up and say ‘Oh, hi, I’m his dumbass boyfriend who refuses to
meet you and keeps cancelling every time we try to hang out?’ Or ‘Gee, I’m really sorry for following you around campus last month?’” Poe’s voice descended further into the anger that he was feeling. He could see it on his arms. “Yeah, Kylo, they saw you. You can’t stalk my labmates.”

“I was…” he trailed off when he realized his chest was tightening. “I want to make sure that they’re safe for you.”

Poe wiped at his eyes and stopped pacing. “Can you just stop with that? Or at least talk about why you think people are following us? Or out to get us? If you met my friends rather than going all covert ops, then you’d know that they were safe. This is high school all over again. I can have my own friends!”

“I’m not jealous,” he blurted out. “I just want to make sure that they’re safe.”

“Did I say that you were jealous? Don’t put words in my mouth.” Poe glared and then exhaled. He ran his hand through his hair and Kylo wanted to kiss his fingers, to suck on them to make this not his fault anymore. But Poe’s shoulders dropped and there was a flash of kindness in his eyes. “It’s so hard to be mad at you when I know that there’s something going on in your head and a good reason for it. Please talk about that the next time we’re in therapy and then we can keep figuring it out. Or at least talk to me. I fucking love you but I need time too, Ky. Time by myself.”

Despite his stubbornness, Kylo nodded. He just wanted to keep them safe and didn’t understand why he was mad on one level, but beneath that he knew how horrible it was to feel the endless pain of being followed.

Standing, Kylo reached for him. And like he wanted him to, Poe folded into his arms.

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“So, are we going to talk about it?”

Kylo forced himself to wake up at the tone of Poe’s voice and the sound of meowing near his chest.

“What?” He squinted, shaking his head. “I got you a cat. You always wanted a cat.”

Poe sat up, scooping the tiny orange kitten from where it had been sleeping between them to rest it on his chest. It meowed, squirming in his hands. If he didn’t have a world of guilt cascading onto him, he’d have the perfect life in that moment. But he didn’t. Poe was still rolling his eyes and shifting away from him. “Yeah, yeah I did. But why you got me a cat, can we talk about that?”

He just wanted to sleep again and put his head down. “I forget.”

“Ky? Come on. We had a fight and you left. It scared the shit out of me. You left for hours and I couldn’t find you. I was scared. You scared me. You really did. And this cat is cute as fuck but don’t ever do that to me again.” Poe was shirtless, in their bed, and angry with him.

And he deserved to be. At the height of his fury the previous night, when they had been fighting about how Kylo didn’t want to go home that weekend and Poe did, Kylo had just left. He was at a breaking point and just needed to breathe, to not talk about feelings anymore.
He didn’t think he was gone that long, but found a tiny, cold, wet, and lost kitten in the gutter. He searched for the mother in a panic, up and down the alleys and streets until the sun was starting to come up. It was only then that he realized that he’d left his phone at home and had to come back.

“We can go to the pet store today, get him what he needs. He can’t just have milk,” he mumbled, sitting up too. He was still cold. Poe had been in the bed but hadn’t held him that night. He needed to touch him. It would make it right. “Take him to the vet too.”

“You’re changing the subject. Don’t leave an argument, we promised that. Kylo. Please. Please don’t do that to me again.” His eyes were so pleading in that moment and Kylo dared to reach out his hand, to brush down his chest. It was firm and smooth and reminded him of why he came back.

“I won’t run again. I’ll talk more. Please stay with me.” His hand drifted up, cupping his face. “No matter how many times I fuck up, please stay.”

Poe’s eyes were firm but still shifted as he leaned into his hand. This love, his love, would keep him going as the world fell to pieces around him. Poe still smiled, or at least there was the hint of one on his face. “Just don’t bring home any more stray cats. Okay?”

Kylo reached out to try to pet the kitten and it bit him hard on the finger. He deserved it.

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“So, are we going to talk about it?”

They were both fixing their pants, sweaty and unsteady in the private washroom of Han’s new office.

“What?” Kylo asked, moving to wash his hands again.

“Ky,” Poe started, leaning against him, still a wealth of heat. They both smelt like sex. Good sex. “That was amazing.”

Kylo could actually meet his own eyes in the mirror as he grinned. “It actually was.”

Spring break that year had meant time off, celebrating his twentieth birthday and Rey’s tenth; but it also meant being forced to go to Han’s boss’s retirement party. His father would be president of the firm now, ‘hanging on’ for a few more years before he retired. Kylo felt terrified at the thought of his father even admitting getting too old to keep working and couldn’t say it to anyone. The contemplation had been on his mind the entire night as the office building was overwhelmed with cooperate slime and glitz. A terrible band was playing. Rey was at a sleepover at Finn’s and he was glad that she wasn’t there. He’d had a sip of champagne and then handed his glass to Poe who grinned wildly, overjoyed at just being there.

As the speeches wore on, he saw how Poe was sitting. He was leaning back in his chair, arms resting behind his head; there was none of the usual tension in his shoulders. He appeared more comfortable around his parents, more at ease than he’d ever looked before. Even with the odd looks from the others at the table, he was there and enjoying himself.
He hadn’t bothered with a tie, but the shirt was new. The black button-up shirt hugged his body in a way that had made Kylo uncomfortable.

When he leaned over to whisper something to him, during another dull speech about Han’s dumb boss, he finally smelled him. Whatever cologne he was wearing that night spiked a type of arousal that Kylo hadn’t felt before, or had denied himself from realizing. He was used to waking up with an erection at this point and being brought to excitement through touching, but the way Poe looked and smelled that night twisted something within him. His hair hung perfectly and the festive, flashing lighting showed off the angles of his face. Then he grinned at him and grabbed his leg.

Kylo wasn’t good at being turned on in public.

So they slipped away, using the key that Han had given him earlier because you don’t want to be here, I don’t want to be here. If it gets too boring, just go sit in there for a while and don’t make an ass of yourselves. There’s whisky in the bottom drawer.

They’d had intercourse before, but not like this. Sneaking away and making out would have been fine but the hairs on the back of his neck told him that he wanted more. He was shaking in a different way when they locked the door to the washroom. He had been too keyed up by how Poe looked and smelled, how he moved and how he looked at him. His wild eyes fed into his need. He hadn’t even stopped to care about why Poe had lube in his back pocket. He knew he’d get some wild story later.

The normal discomfort that he usually felt as they whispered endearments and made sure that they both were ready faded into a white noise of getting there.

And when he was, when he was inside him, on the counter of his father’s office washroom, he broke another thing inside of him that he thought was already in shambles.

“Hey,” he said, gripping Poe by the hips to rest his forehead against his. He couldn’t speak for a moment, still absorbed in what was happening to his shaking emotions. “I love you.”

For the first time in four years, the words held true meaning. He’d finally figured it out. The arguing, the love-making, his constant panic about being followed or left alone, it was all tied into not truly understanding how he really felt. It shone around them in a glistening light that he couldn’t blink away. His heart was tied to this man and he didn’t know how to disentangle it. And the thought of that made him quiver and tears stung his eyes as his head dropped onto Poe’s shoulder.

“Hey, Ky, it’s okay. I love you too. I love you so much.” Poe lifted his head, kissing him and then holding his face in place. “Thanks for…catching up with me on that.”

He licked his lips and nodded. “We should…probably get back out there.”

Poe dried the last of the tears from his eyes, wiping at them with shaking hands, and then he nodded too.

He could still smell Poe’s cologne on his skin as they sat down at the head table.

“That took a while,” Leia leaned over and said, raising her eyebrows as they both tried and failed to discreetly fix their hair. “Boys, the bottle is all yours. We’ve got the car booked tonight.”

Kylo saw how full both of their glasses were. The wine was expensive, but his mind flicked to another source of love. Someone would need to pick up Rey the next morning. She couldn’t take a fucking car back to her house like some rich idiot; that’s how she’d get teased even more. So he
slid the bottle over to Poe who grinned and leaned over to openly kiss him in front of his parents and the other board members at the table. And Kylo leaned into it, letting the feeling from before take hold again. He wanted it to burrow into his heart and kill the rest of the darkness. Had he really been lying the last four years every time that he said he loved him? Why was he only feeling it now?

The car home arrived at 1 a.m. and he was half-carrying Poe out to it. He was mostly passed out, giving him sloppy kisses. Han and Leia were both stumbling and he finally told them that he would get Rey the next morning. He could go and get her right then, but it was too late to wake her up and take her.

Poe was asleep against his arm almost instantly when they climbed into the back seat. His father was drunkenly telling the driver how to get home and his mother was on the other side of him, humming something to herself. But he was so happy in that moment that he couldn’t let any of that bring him down. He could stretch out his long legs and enjoy his own glow for once.

“Is he okay?” Leia leaned over and whispered, too loudly to be quiet.

He shrugged. He fixed Poe’s hair and sighed. “He’ll get some water and I’ll make sure that this doesn’t happen again. We don’t get drunk that often, mom.”

“I know, sweetheart. You’re both more responsible than that.”

There had only been a few occasions when they’d stumbled home from a party that Poe had dragged him to. But at least now Kylo knew who his friends were and only followed them now and again.

He pressed a kiss against Poe’s sweaty forehead and smiled at the dull sound that he made in the back of his throat. His mother caught the look and reached for his other hand. Still not down from his high, he squeezed it in response. He was also exhausted and rested his head against Poe’s shoulder, hoping to sleep for the forty-five minute drive home. It would probably take an hour. Maybe he could sleep in that time. He closed his eyes and lingered in the warm waves of pleasure that mixed with the absence of hurt.

“I love you, Ben.”

“Love you too, mom,” he mumbled, starting to drift off to sleep.

And it was only when he was at home in their house, forcing Poe to drink more water and not get sick and to stop singing some song that he suddenly found hilarious, that he realized it was the first time in probably thirteen years that he said those words to his mother and meant it.

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They were running late.

Mostly because Kylo didn’t want to go.

He was re-reading his B+ essay—really Professor Ackbar just a B+?—while also partly watching Poe get ready. He’d changed his shirt from one that Kylo disliked to another, better one. It set off his arms; it was a v-neck rather than the previous turtleneck. He gave him one last annoyed look
and Kylo pretended that he hadn’t been watching him move around the kitchen, gathering up what they were taking with them. But Poe had caught him and Kylo focused his eyes again on why he’d only got a B+ on his anthropology essay.

“Ky, come on.” Poe came up and nudged him with his foot. “It’s your twenty-first birthday. We can’t just stay here and get drunk. And Paige will be there. Come on.”

He dragged out the last syllable until Kylo finally smiled. It was his birthday and the start of spring break. “What could go wrong?”

Poe flopped down next to him on the couch, gripping his knee. He ran his hand up his thigh and smiled, brightly, knowing that it would draw Kylo in to kiss him. It felt like it always felt when their lips met; all of the other problems were washed away and they both were home in their bubble.

But that bubble had been close to bursting many times the last nearly five years.

At least they were honest with each other about their weakest moments.

He leaned forward, deepening the kiss at the thought of all of his mistakes in his relationship. He really took all of the arguments on as his own. Working through the physical issues hadn’t been easy either; hell, those were the hardest. Words he could figure out and back them up with facts; how he reacted in intimate situations had only slowly become more consistent. He was always fighting against himself with those feelings. Being bigger and stronger didn’t mean that he still didn’t feel like a sixteen year old, fumbling on his bed. But he was at least more comfortable with almost everything that they did now. Almost everything.

There were always other things that got in the way. He was too focused on school and Poe blew off too many classes.

Pushing back, Poe shook his head. “Save that energy for later okay? Let’s go hang out. We never just hang out with people. I’ve already fed the cat. Just put on your coat and let’s go.”

He rolled his eyes. Fine. It was his birthday, after all.

Poe was happily holding his hand on the walk over, trying to get him out of his dull mood. March was still March, no matter where in the state he was. Hux had moved off campus a year ago, getting an apartment not far from them. It was mostly college students in their area, but Kylo still eyed anyone that gave them a dirty look whenever they went out openly in their relationship. He was also looking for anyone lurking that might be familiar; he’d made notes of anyone who might be following them. There was someone, despite how Poe would say that he was just inventing struggles because of stress. Even if he never saw the face of who he knew was following them, it was the people he actually saw that upset him more.

It was something that Poe pinned to his identity, but the fact that he didn’t want to make who he was in a relationship with part of his existence was a problem for everyone but them. They’d had long talks about it; he hated any term that anyone tried to paint him with. His psych course in first year had been beyond frustrating when it came to that. There was always someone on campus that would spot them having a private moment, either in the library or on quad when they were both pretending that they were alone, and ask them one of two things: join our group or stop what they were doing because it was wrong. Poe understood him and wanted to be with him; Kylo had comprehended that since he was sixteen and accidentally got a boyfriend who loved him more than he deserved. Whatever their sex life looked like was really their own and no one else’s.
Even Rey, almost eleven, got it, aside from the physical details of it; the emotional parts she knew but intercourse was something he spared from her. The physical things could just be his, right? But the emotional side, he couldn’t deny her that. And even though she was getting increasingly frustrated, he hoped that she still understood. She had to; she loved them. She had to know that when they came home for a weekend and just wanted to sleep, it was because the previous week had been another period of understanding how far they could push themselves until Kylo couldn’t draw the line between pleasure and hurt and lost himself. How going quiet from over communicating was something that they needed.

That was a hard lesson that they learnt during their aborted first time in Florida. No one got off that night because no one talked. It had been too much teenage anxiety and not being able to admit that he wasn’t ready to fully confront his pain. Seventeen-year-old Kylo wasn’t any smarter than any other version of himself. Kylo wanted to make Poe happy and was still filled with so much apprehension about what they were doing and if it would hurt. No one was relaxed. Both of them wanted to make the other happy and it ended up being a disaster.

He had blacked out everything, removing it from his mind until he needed to agonize about it. Whenever he touched on the physical memories from that night, he just pictured a building imploding and ignoring how his hands still wanted to shake from those few minutes and then hours of crying. When they finally talked about it, they decided that a dialogue wasn’t so embarrassing. He had missed Poe’s kisses and favour for almost a week and was easily drawn into starting over and being clothed and holding one another on his family’s couch until Rey came and hit them with a pillow and he realized that he was forgetting about how she felt again.

But after five years, he was almost close to liking sex and enjoyed being in love. It the heated and desperate moments, when everything aligned and his mind was in the right place, he thrived on sex because it was something that they shared together. It was a form of working out that left another person gasping beneath him, telling him how much he loved him. Yet, there were still too many times that he’d have to pull back, to make it stop. He didn’t want to call them panic attacks anymore, but they were.

Still, Poe wanted to be with him. He’d hold him in the shower after, letting him whimper and be pathetic and still not say that he was that.

But sex was the least of his problems. Or at least he wanted it to be.

They’d be celebrating Rey’s birthday the next day. With midterms this last week, they couldn’t go home this year; the timing was off. He’d seen Poe’s eyes the weeks leading up the exams; he’d just wanted to get out of there and had quietly punished him for having to put in too much work by making more bland food together than they usually did. Neither of them was as good at cooking as Rey when she was there. But she hadn’t been there in so long that the tension in his neck was starting to increase. He’d tried texting with her to understand what was going on but she’d end up not telling him everything.

Mom and dad would have lunch with them tomorrow and drop Rey off for the rest of the weekend, including the holiday Monday for her. With how Rey was doing in school, Han had emphasized that staying longer wouldn’t be good. Her break had been earlier and they had missed it and she had been upset about it; he knew that she was mad and he had apologized and made promises that he was probably going to screw up. Leia and Han had sent him her last report card and it showed a real decline; he didn’t tell her that he’d seen it and had read her lies about her grades. So Kylo had agreed with Han but hadn’t told Rey yet that they had more free time that they couldn’t spend together. She would be mad, but she was getting increasingly agitated with a lot lately. Most of it was his fault.
His grades were good, but he was also succeeding in displeasing everyone who he cared about.

"Feeling better? Feeling excited?" Poe was still in a good mood and Kylo managed a nod before they went inside the apartment building. He noticed how the outer door didn’t close behind them and instinctively reached out and shut it hard behind them.

He had seen too many people following them lately to take chances.

Paige opened the door with a bright grin that Kylo hadn’t realized he’d missed. "Hey, welcome to spring break!" She wrapped her thin but strong arms around his neck. "Happy birthday, Kylo! How are you guys?"

"Happy that midterms are over," he mumbled into her hair. It smelled like lilacs and her makeup had been perfect in the brief flash he’d seen of her face. But she still looked too thin. "It’s good to see you."

Paige’s grin brightened, stepping back. Not seeing her for half a year vanished in the depth of her dimples. "God, Kylo. Look at those arms." She turned her attention to his companion. "Do you really let him work out this much?"

Poe’s hand was on his back, lurking in the doorway of Hux’s apartment. "I can’t stop him. I’ve tried. But hey, I like it too so maybe I don’t try that hard."

Paige pulled Poe into a hug and Kylo finally found his way into the apartment. It really hadn’t been his idea to go over there to see Paige and Hux for his birthday. To him, celebrating now should be more private. After the trip home that coincided with his last birthday, he wanted more of those types of moments. It was always in his head how perfect it felt. That was one of the few times he didn’t want to pull away and the bubbles of realizing what love actually was were still floating in his chest on good days. At his parents’, Rey had been so happy to turn ten. She was finally almost a teenager. They bought her a new phone, even though she had just got one for Christmas. His parents had looked annoyed at them, but she loved it because it was pink and not silver. Poe had been listening more to her than he had; Rose had a pink phone and she wanted one too.

Yet with spring break, having time off was needed but also endless. He could catch up on readings, catch up on his thoughts, but would end up having too little too do. The promise of alcohol, which he had bought, wasn’t really something he wanted at that point.

But that afternoon, meeting Poe at home for lunch before he forced him to go somewhere else so he didn’t need cook, he saw in the other man’s eyes that he needed some form of break. He made him eat a brownie, singing him happy birthday in Spanish in the corner of the café until he relented and said that they would go. His reluctance later on had almost forced Poe to do it again. And he would have, if he had given him five more minutes.

Those small moments were layered upon how often they had sex. Clothed or unclothed, he loved the person he was with. He drove him crazy, but he knew he did the same to Poe. This was a storm that he could weather the rest of his life as long as Rey found someone to make her just as happy. If she didn’t, then he’d have to put everything in jeopardy in his heart. To him, they were equal in his head; but his heart held other phantom fears. The fact that Poe was happy now with him, despite how often he’d put them through troubled times, was important; but Rey needed him too. He hoped that it would never come to choosing one over the other.

For Kylo, the last two and a half years had been built on studying at first. He had put their relationship second for too long. He thought that they were there for one reason, like with high
school. He’d waited an extra year to make sure he had his grounding with him. He couldn’t take Rey, but he had Poe. He needed him to force him through these things.

The hurt in Poe’s eyes in not seeing Paige and even Hux for a low-key celebration of his stupid birthday made him again rethink how unfair his level of focus was yet again.

Steering away from the small talk in the hall, he found Hux on the couch in the living room. His friend smirked at him and stood.

“You cancel, and then uncancel,” Hux said, teasing him with his eyes. Thank God he didn’t want a hug. Whatever cologne he was wearing was truly awful. “What the fuck, man?”

He shrugged, sitting down rather than greeting him properly. “I missed your girlfriend more than you, I guess.”

Hux rolled his eyes. “Come on, when was the last time we hung out? Christmas? When we were home?”

He exhaled, still reliving the hangover from the evening that he had spent with Hux. They texted all of the time and would forward papers to each other, proofreading their work. But time always got away from him mostly because he let it happen. “Can I have a drink before I answer that?”

Hux raised his eyebrows and then grinned. “That’s why you’re here.”

Left alone, aside from the music from the stereo and the sound of Poe and Paige speaking in the hall, he sighed. He was tired of thinking about being too much.

Paige was grinning when the two of them came into the room. “You got him a cat? Why am I only hearing about a cat now?”

He let his head fall back and he squeezed his eyes shut. He could feel the annoying, yet wonderful, grin radiating off Poe’s face.

“We got into a fight, what, a year ago? Something like that. Ky just took off, left his phone, told me to fuck off. Thought I’d never see him again. He came home that night with this little orange kitten that he found on the street when he was out walking for five fucking hours. And, I’m really sorry now Ky, but he was just sobbing about this kitten. And said that it was for me and we needed to take care of it and to forgive him.” Poe sat down next to him and put his feet on the coffee table. At least he could afford socks without holes now. “He bit Ky the next morning and it stung, so I named him Bee.”

“I saved that cat and he fucking hates me,” he mumbled, feeling Poe’s hand squeeze his knee. He was deciding whether or not to get upset about himself for that night again when he shook out of it. “Can we get drunk now?”

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Kylo stared at how Paige was perched on Hux’s lap, laughing at what they were both saying. It had been something stupid, but he’d missed most of the words. They’d only eaten small snacks that Paige had tried to make and he wanted to tell her that his eleven year old could make better appetizers than she could, but let it go. There was more booze than food. He rarely got drunk for
this reason, but for once he was letting his guard down. He didn’t hate getting drunk; he tolerated it. Poe didn’t want to end up like his dad so there were very few nights like this; the aftermath of the office party was something that Kylo would actually tease him about. But he could let go for a few hours. The week had worn him down to that. The alcohol was finally starting to blur his judgement because he grabbed Poe by the waist as he tried to move by him and pulled him onto his knees.

“Oh, hey, Ky, how are you doing?” Poe actually chuckled, leaning back into him. “Should we go home soon? If you’re getting huggy then you’re drunk.”

He nuzzled the back of his neck, shaking his head. He wasn’t wearing that cologne tonight and just smelt like him. “No.”

Paige sat up, perching herself on Hux’s knees. She gave Kylo a long look and then turned to Poe. “We never get to see you guys like this. It’s nice. You’ve been together forever. You don’t have to be embarrassed in front of us.”

“Almost five years, shit. But hey, you guys are almost there too, right?” His hands tightened around Poe’s waist as he spoke and he felt another pair of hands join them. “Nah, it’s not that. I’m pretty open, but he’s…right? Kylo? You’re only all about me?”

“Yeah,” he answered, letting go of Poe’s hand to reach for his beer. “He’s worried I’m uncomfortable. And I’m not.”

He saw Hux’s eyes glide closed and then open again as Paige handed him his beer. Hux sighed. “I couldn’t imagine not being able to hug and kiss her when I wanted. Well, when she’s around, but that’s another problem. But you guys are solid and…fuck, where was I going with that?”

Kylo set his bottle down and pulled Poe closer, enjoying being open without starting to shake. He was protective and possessive on some days; their fight last month reminded him of that. But he was also withdrawn and cold at times; their fight two months ago also reminded him of that. But right now, he didn’t want a fight. He wanted to be like Hux and have the person he loved on his lap as they got drunk. Poe took another shot of tequila and then poured another into the same glass. He turned in his lap and held a shot glass up to him.

“When was the last time we got fucked up, Ky? If you’re feeling good, I’m all for this. But if you’re unsure, then we stop right now.” His eyes held mischief but also warning, wiggling as he turned. Kylo opened his mouth, making sure his feelings were showing in his eyes. He took the shot, swallowing and eyeing Poe as he leaned back to chase the burn with his beer. Poe was still looking down at him, making sure that he was okay. This was why he loved him; this was why he fell in love with him and then finally realized it. They could fight about everything, but it was only because they felt too much and wanted the one to be more okay than the other.

Paige giggled, watching them but not seeing the hidden tones. “You guys are so cute.”

“Ky will never admit he’s cute,” Poe teased, holding his eyes for a second too long before turning back towards her. “But he is. Bug him about it. He hates it. He’s too relaxed right now. Bug him now so his shoulders look bigger. Oh, or how he never skips leg day and then nags me about skipping leg day.”

“I’m relaxed because I’m happy, come on,” Kylo argued, sitting up, pulling Poe closer. He felt Poe’s hand tense on his because he felt that was half-hard and in front of other people. He slowly let his boyfriend go, recognizing how he didn’t want anything to make either of them feel awkward in front of friends who knew them too well, but still might not really understand. Poe shifted away,
but remained on his knees. Still, to Kylo happy wasn’t the right word; less tight was more accurate. He finished his beer and tried to hand the empty bottle to Poe who looked at it like he’d given him a cut-off limb. Rolling his eyes at his refusal, he finally shrugged off the look. Like he usually did with bottles, and probably had with a severed arm, he tossed it in the corner.

He must have been drunk if he was trivializing his previous life. But he refused to go there at that moment and squeezed Poe lightly, hoping that he knew what he was thinking about in that moment.

Paige groaned and left Hux’s lap. “Bottles don’t go on the floor.”

Kylo actually chuckled, forcing a light tone. He was acting like he didn’t care, so they probably thought that he didn’t. “They do if I don’t pick them up.”

Still grumbling, Paige glared at them as she placed the bottle on the coffee table. Kylo could feel how she was looking at them and it was a combination of annoyance and delight. She sat down beside Hux and put her hand on his leg, turning back towards them. “We miss you guys. Stop cancelling so much, Kylo.”

He could feel Poe sigh and then he poked him. “Hey, what?”

Poe turned again and he just stared up at him. His eyes still held the boy he’d been when they first got together, but the changes since then hadn’t dampened whom he was. The strong jaw and honest and playful eyes were physical, but the emotions within were the ultimate attraction. Kylo had kept giving him a home and more reasons to be with him, but also many reasons to go. His hair had finally grown out of the awful haircut from last month. Kylo stroked his cheek and tilted his head, inviting him to kiss him with his eyes.

Poe smirked, daring him to tease him further, and kissed him on the edge of his mouth instead. “Okay, so the goal for tonight is to get Ky drunk, but also keep him happy. It’s been way too long since he’s flirted with me in front of other people. I can use this for blackmail tomorrow when he’s feeling shitty about it with his parents. Drinking game. Go, Paige. Go!”

Paige instantly jumped up and grinned. “Oh, yes! Oh, yes! Truth or dare! You either tell the truth or do the dare, or you take a shot. Something like that. And get off his lap. It won’t be fun if you don’t. For my own sick pleasure, maybe I can dare you two to make out.”

“No.” Poe’s voice was rarely serious with other people so the tone made Paige and Hux sit up. “We’re not doing that.”

Paige bit her lip. “Okay, sorry for teasing. I’m a little drunk.”

“Good. Don’t, I mean, you’re our friends but, don’t make us a spectacle. Okay?” Poe was serious and Kylo shut his eyes at the words. Respect. That’s what Maz and everyone else had pounded into them. They could still act like idiots and forget one another at times, but they would always be pulled down into that concept. They knew each other, inside and out. He shuddered and felt how much he’d been drinking hit his chest.

Still, Kylo exhaled with annoyance when Poe dropped off his lap to sit on the floor. Paige was scrolling through her phone and he exchanged a look with Hux, who told him in a short and quick shake of his head that this wouldn’t end well. Kylo just let the rising tension fall away; he was drunk and happy. And if Poe wanted him to flirt in the open, he had to do that.

Poe was still looking at him. “Is that okay?”
He smirked, not forcing it. “It’s fine. I’ll be gone sooner this way.”

“I don’t want you to be gone, but okay. I can take care of everything. And don’t feel bad about it because I want to.” Poe looked at him with concern for a moment before Kylo shook his head. Poe’s eyes wrinkled into a careful smile and then turned back to Paige. “Let’s go. Paige, truth or dare. Before we lose him.”

She looked at him with a long mouth before huffing. “Fine. Truth.”

“You hate that your dad made you go to dance school rather than here to do something normal.” Poe took the game straight to the point, but also opening himself up to the same. He opened them both up to the same level of questions.

Hux held his breath and Paige narrowed her eyes. “Truth? Okay. I hated him at first. He was trying to break us up because, um, he’s white and it didn’t fit with the plan. And I’m not marrying someone I don’t know because one of dad’s business partners that he used to know has a son who might be good at business and not be a teacher. But then I sat down and talked with him about what I want and what we all want. He can’t Tiger Dad me into infinity. So, I go to dance school and will never be a professional dancer, but an instructor instead. And I still get to be with him as long as I keep going and might do a few auditions in New York. Happy?”

Poe’s eyes went wild at losing his own game. “Wait, do I do a shot when I get shot down?”

“Fuck yes, you do when you come after my girl like that,” Hux mumbled before taking a long drink from his bottle. “Do it.”

Poe shrugged and took another shot of the tequila that they had brought. At least they wouldn’t have to bring it home at this point. “Okay. So, is that a rule? If you’re a dick, you do a shot? Fuck, Hux and Ky are done for.”

Kylo laughed lightly, sipping at the new beer that he found near his hand. He didn’t ask anyone to bring it to him; it had just appeared.

Paige just nodded and kept going. “Hux, truth or dare.”

Rolling his eyes, Hux sighed. “Dare.”

“Lick my dance shoe.” Paige’s voice was flat and serious, meeting his eyes with a firm mouth. His eyes darted to Kylo, who shrugged. There were so many worse things in the world. Then, he quirked his head. “Paige, do you mean the inside or the bottom?”

Hux sputtered into his beer. “Whose side are you on, Kylo?”

Paige just let her smile take over her face. “Oh, the inside. They’re in the bag, babe. Just pick one and lick it.”

Hux wasn’t moving. His face grew more and more red before he finally left his seat. Kylo could hear his footsteps marching down the hall to find the damned bag. He let himself smile at the sound and the question. His hand was ringing the top of his beer bottle, but he still felt Poe’s hand find his calf. His leg had been aching the last few weeks, some sort of muscle bruising. Every other day, he was at the campus gym. They’d learned that lesson hard during the six weeks that they lived together alone; if he didn’t have any physical release, he’d grow frustrated with small problems too quickly. When he messed up anything sexual, it just made it worse. Poe, already worn down by their hard high school romance—which neither one of them would admit had been
fucking hard, wouldn’t back down from arguments and then try to understand how they both were thinking.

Despite the passion that took them at the height of the disagreements, it made Kylo think about how they had still talked through their problems the morning after, or on better days the afternoon after. But those talks were also on Poe’s initiative. Talking was the most important thing, but so was putting his body through hell. Kylo needed the gym at night, Poe needed it in the morning; it was decided, especially when Poe had a term when none of his courses started before eleven. Kylo would only want to stay in bed with him, losing his focus with trying to please him. Poe saying that he needed to go to the gym had kicked his ass out of bed so he could follow him to campus and get into the headspace for course work. Both had their concentrations in other places with how to balance their classes until they found a routine that worked. And his tender thigh was probably going to be forgotten soon, like all of the fights that they had had over the years. It would all disappear into muscle memory: gone but not forgotten.

Hux emerged with the ballet slipper and vigorously licked the inside and Kylo laughed, hard. The look on his face launched so many memories that still loitered in his mind from before and after. Hux, eating any vegetable when they were kids and gagging into his napkin. Hux, glaring at him in the library when they’d reconnected again. Hux, meeting his eyes in his car before they left the vehicle at Mr Dameron’s…

“Okay, I did it. Good enough?” Hux had heard him laugh and sat down and met him with a determined glare. The shoe had dropped to the floor with a hard thump and Kylo sat up and sucked in a deep breath. “Truth or dare, Kylo.”

He shrugged. “Dare.” It was better to get whatever perverted thing he was thinking of for him over with.

Hux’s eyes ringed with menace. Oh no.

“Kylo, give your boyfriend what you have in your jacket pocket.”

He was reaching for a shot when two pairs of hands stopped him.

Hux still held his eyes as their drunken conversation from Christmas break rattled around in his brain. Poe had gone to his mother’s, back to Florida to see his little brothers. It had been their first Christmas apart in years and Han had produced a ‘very nice and very smooth’ bottle of brandy on Boxing Day. After everyone else had gone to bed and then, after two glasses, he swiftly went to bed and left them to it because fuck being underage, you boys have it. The entire dinner had been annoying, despite how good the food had tasted. It was Rey’s first time deciding every dish and she was so proud of what she had done that he felt rotten inside for not being able to appreciate it to its fullest. All he wanted to know was what Poe would have thought about it. Christmas Day and Christmas Eve had been mom and grandma’s; Boxing Day had been Rey’s. And his head was somewhere else.

Hux and his mother had come over for dinner the day after Christmas and both Kylo and Hux must have looked upset, missing other people while still trying to absorb the family. It also meant he was home and unwinding after finals. Rey had come to love Christmas and the rush of so much food and presents and family. She had a new outfit for each day and he’d managed to calm himself down enough to sit and hear her describe where each one came from. She wanted to start sewing her own clothes, to do something creative. School was too boring, she said, and she was bored all of the time. He knew that she was missing classes to be by herself and wanted to talk to her about it, but let her have her lies. He told her it was good to have hobbies, even though his spare time was spent at the gym or sleeping.
She showed him her latest drawings. He’d noticed how Snoke had changed in her art over the years. He looked increasingly cartoonish, like something from a kids’ movie. The teeth were longer and sharper. Her memory was changing.

They’d bought her a new sweater and a Polaroid camera, one that wouldn’t just save things digitally. She had emptied the film by the afternoon of Christmas morning.

Being with just him seemed to put her in an even better mood and he never wanted to admit to her that he missed Poe. He had started seeing her eyes grow steady whenever Leia would mention him and ask how he was doing. Kylo knew every moment and at first had showed them all pictures; Christmas was different where it was always sunny. But Rey had only been able to smile at pictures of his brothers, since they were getting bigger. She missed him too and when she mentioned it, and he would say the same. But he saved most of his twitching for when everyone went to bed and he had Hux alone with a bottle.

Rey had frowned at him from the stairs, but he promised he’d be up in a while. The only other time she’d been upset was when she asked when she could visit again. He had to tell her that they’d be home in January and February for her dance concerts, but mom and dad didn’t want her to stay with them but it wasn’t her fault. And it was the truth and they’d catch hell for it when grandma left. She wasn’t doing well and he told Rey not to make mom too upset when she yelled at her about cutting back on the time that they spent together. At least wait until grandma went home.

And then his frustration about everything came to a head when he sat down on the couch and Hux muted SportsCentre on the television.

In the now, the one that threatened to tear him to pieces, Hux was holding him to his confessions that night.

His cheek twitched at it.

Paige and Poe were holding him back from taking the shot and letting the conversation die.

“No, no, no,” Paige was saying. Did he tell her? The look in her eyes was saying that Hux hadn’t. “What’s in the pocket? That’s my next truth. I’ll take the shot right now to skip to my turn.”

Poe had mostly been trying to block Paige from her goal. He was trying to be on his side when he spoke, but he knew he was curious. He was interested in finding out anything that was remotely about him. Their egos were another problem entirely. “That was totally unfair, Hux. You’re being a dick right now. Ky doesn’t want us to know. It’s probably a dead lizard or something else random that he found. He’s worse than the cat.”

Kylo finally pulled his hands away, standing in frustration. “Can I still take the shot and do the dare?”

Paige blinked. “Yeah, I guess. I mean…yeah.”

He pinned her to the couch with his eyes and nodded. He couldn’t look at Poe in that moment. The tequila burned his throat as he still held her eyes before turning away, with no one following him back to the coatrack. He had come there that night with the same weight in his pocket that he’d carried since the start of the school year. Hux was really being unfair in that moment but he was also closer to graduation than he was. His face finally found a smile as he plucked the familiar box from his pocket, knowing that in the end this would push Hux to doing what he was about to do as well.
Returning to the living room, he had his jacket’s contents in his hand, hidden in his fist as best he could. His hand wasn’t that large. “Poe, truth or dare?”

He squinted at him, weighing his mood. “Um, truth?”

He had a response to either answer, but this one was in his favour. Revealing the small box in his hand, he offered Hux a look stoked with bravado before opening it and turning to Poe.

“Would you ever marry me?”

Paige gasped. Poe just stared at him. It was the same look that asked if he really meant what he was saying and if he was okay all wrapped into an expression that would never be duplicated by another human on Earth. He could only nod in response, making sure that they were both on the same page.

“Fuck you all.” Poe turned away and poured himself a shot with shaking hands. His shoulders were still, his back to him from where he stood. When he turned after downing his drink, his heart finally stopped beating. Kylo could see the tears as he tried to wipe them away. “Was this something you two planned? I’m…” Poe didn’t let his mouth run too long for a perfect, hanging moment. “Yes, Ky. Fucking yes. Fucking marry me tomorrow, you fucking asshole, I love you.”

He was met by a hungry mouth and wet eyes, kissing him and dampening his cheeks with happy tears. Poe’s tongue deepened into his and he moaned, despite being in front of their friends. The sound he made caused them both to break the kiss to look down. Paige’s mouth was covered by her hands. And Hux was taking a drink from his beer, looking away.

Poe looked from their friends back up to him. “Did we just get engaged?”

Kylo, only able to breathe with the other man’s eyes on him, found his voice. “Yeah. I…bought the ring in September.”

Shoving him, Poe stepped away. “So the library fight? You went and got me a ring after a fight over library books and who forgot to return whose? Jesus Christ, I love you, but you have a really twisted way of solving arguments to get out of talking about them.”

He pressed the ring box into Poe’s hands and leaned over towards the coffee table to pour four shots into the messy set of blurring shot glasses. “I wouldn’t be my father’s son if I didn’t pull shit like this.”

He turned to put a glass into Poe’s hand and was met by a shining pair of eyes that he could never betray. This wasn’t a gloss over an argument. It was something he would be held to. And he wanted to follow that path, no matter how it scared him and how uncertain his feet still were.

The four of them clinked their shots together, laughing.

And until he was putting his key into the door of their apartment, he didn’t remember anything between that. Distant memories spun briefly as he studied the doorknob, but he couldn’t pin them down.

“S’okay, I got your phone. And mine,” Poe said, leaning against the wall, scratching at the flaking paint in the hallway. His voice was wobbling in his ears and his hands finally firmed to turn the key. “I got everything.”

He was slurring his words and Kylo narrowed his eyes. He stepped back and looked around the hallway. Nothing seemed out of place; the hallway was empty. No sound from the staircase.
He couldn’t get like this outside of home ever again. “How’d we get home?”

Poe looked around and then finally broke into a laugh, giggles that were only stopped with a hiccup. “I don’t fucking remember. I don’t know! We probably walked. Look, I’m dirty. And hungry. Holy shit.”

The night blinked before his eyes and then faded. Someone stumbled, landing in the mud outside of Paige and Hux’s. Someone else was laughing at the other. Paige was laughing too, outside smoking. Kylo didn’t know how to separate the two.

The door to their apartment finally opened and they were inside. Kylo had enough mind to set both of the locks. He’d found his head again and didn’t want to lose it. He made it to the kitchen after only a few turns and shook his head again. The rooms were spinning too much. He also needed to eat. Dropping to his knees by the freezer, he whined to himself at how empty it was. They hadn’t shopped for Rey’s visit yet. That was on the checklist and he had blown it off.

Poe was beside him, hugging and kissing up his neck, sending him into shivers. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m hungry too.”

“Ky, I just ordered pizza. It’s not even midnight.” Poe smiled into his neck, his warm breath reminding him of the promise that he’d made that night. “I gave them the address across the street. Like you fucking like it with your paranoia thing.”

He managed to smirk at the remark, letting his doubt about what he thought was happening fade away into his drunken state. “It’s not paranoia if they’re really out to get you. How soon?”

He asked the question and got the answer by Poe straddling him on their kitchen floor. He spread out, feeling his weight settle upon him and sighing. The teasing and physical contact had almost been entirely Kylo tonight and he got what he wanted in that time by having his partner on top of him, breathing into his neck as he bit the tender spot behind his ear. “Twenty minutes. Honestly, fuck you for tonight, Kylo. We’re getting pizza and then I’m just going to have to take twenty years to calm down.”

Narrowing his eyes at the ceiling, Kylo frowned, still feeling the other man’s growing erection against him. “But you said yes?”

Bee trotted up, meowing at them at Poe sat up to pet his cat. He glared at Bee as he rubbed against them. Poe, despite how sober he was trying to seem, still reached down to smudge dirt from Kylo’s face with a gentle hand. The gold band on his hand glistened in the dull kitchen light. “Guess I feel dumb that you don’t have a ring.”

Kylo snorted. “Knife drawer. Beside the sharpener. I was…planning”

Poe’s hand instantly reached into proximity of his dick, teasingly brushing the inside of his leg, and he sucked in a hot breath. “How dare you.”

His mouth was back against his, pushing his back against the cool linoleum. In September, when he didn’t storm out of the library, or out of the apartment, he started following the path to allow him to do that. They wouldn’t just be dating; they’d be married. He’d have more space, while also keeping Poe forever. He just wanted there to be someone there on the other side of all of this for him and Rey; he couldn’t do it alone. He leaned into the kiss, he arched up only to be left wanting as Poe stood up to rifle through the cutlery.

Another small box was placed on his chest and Poe giggled, dropping down hard onto him again.
He sounded like he was fifteen again, laughing at a game in his room or some idiots in the park. “Fuck, Ky, you really are a romantic. Fuck me.”

Unable to escape an easy opportunity, Kylo leaned up to pull him down into a kiss.

Locking legs and arms, and hands with combined rings, they laid on the kitchen floor and absorbed the energy that they both were radiating. It was what Kylo had wanted for so long; he wanted Poe to feel like he had a place to always call home forever. He had taken Poe away from his father, he’d saved him. In the process, he’d also saved himself. But he’d also taken him away from his mother and the other family. This needed to stick. This home, with a person who loved him, was what Poe deserved. If it had to be him, then it would be.

His phone rang from the coffee table and he groaned. But Poe took care of it, nodding at him as he left the apartment without shoes.

Why did he call from his phone? Why were they both so careless?

Despite how much he wanted to stay prone on the floor, he still pulled himself to his feet to watch the pizza exchange from across the street. Bee brushed against his legs and he pulled a reluctant cat into his arms as he eyed everyone on the street from the balcony. He could jump off the first-floor level and kill anyone who came out from the darkness in an instant. He’d practiced until Poe told him that the neighbours were complaining.

Instead, Poe waved at the deliveryman and then at him, standing too long on the street. It made him itch, but his head started to swim and he needed to force himself to make sure he got inside. When the front door to their building snapped shut, he could breathe again.

He could let the world spin again when he was back inside their walls, locking the door behind him.

“Stop it,” Poe said, sitting down and opening the box. “Let’s just…hey, get that wine I made you buy. I’ve lost my buzz, man. Lost it. It’s gone.”

Kylo eyed him and then shrugged. Maybe he could just black out the entire night and he wouldn’t have pulled them into what he thought he wanted. They didn’t even have wine glasses and just passed the bottle back and forth, spilling red wine all over themselves and the sofa.

When Poe tried to take a piece of his pepperoni from one of his slices, he stopped his hand by placing a kiss on the ring on his finger.

And then the soft memory blinked to him putting the pizza box and empty bottle of wine into the trash. He remembered stopping and staring at the empty bottle, eyeing the fact that there was nothing left. Not good. He had lost time again. He took the time to turn and give the cat food, but the dish was already filled. What had he done in the blackout?

“Ky?” Poe was standing in the living room, only in pyjama pants and swaying. Kylo actually sat up to look at how toned his chest and stomach looked. He was attractive; he never looked at anyone else, but the narrow waist and firm torso was something that made him burn inside because underneath that was someone who chose him without having to. He had to listen to Hux complain about worrying about other guys going after Paige; Poe didn’t need to have that worry. But the person looking unsteady and rubbing his eyes in the apartment at that moment, was someone who turned him on, despite how he was rubbing away vomit from the corner of his mouth. “I got sick.”

“What?” He turned, not understanding and still lost in studying the shapes of his arms. “Why?”
Poe shrugged, rubbing his eyes again. “I’m drunk and it happens. But we’re home? Right? We’re home and you love me? And we’re engaged, right? I don’t remember anymore.”

He shook his head again. He’d lost too much time. He just wanted to sleep. Sleep next to the man who he loved. “Come on. Let’s go to bed.”

Snatching a litre bottle of water from the fridge, he guided Poe to their bedroom. He flushed the toilet and made him brush his teeth. His eyes were losing focus, shoving his own toothbrush into his mouth and seeing reddish-black in the sink. It was the tone of the basement of Snoke’s after another child’s throat had been cut. He couldn’t be drawn into those memories right then; he had to try to keep Poe steady. It was the only thing he could do then as the room started to spin.

Shoving him into the bed with the water bottle in his hands, he pulled off his shirt and jeans. At least he thought he did that. When he flashed into the bed, he met a giggling, but clean mouth. It was a mouth, a person, who said he loved him. And it blurred into a mixture of feelings that would take him weeks to untangle. They drank more water and started laughing about nothing. He still pressed the water bottle into Poe’s hands and let their fingers linger together.

They were both too drunk to have sex, but the kisses still deepened until they slowed and he felt Poe fall asleep on his chest. He wasn’t far behind him.

The next morning was going to be painful.

But the last thing he thought about, as he breathed in the muted sickness in Poe’s hair, was that he’d done a thing that he’d never thought that he’d do. He’d made a promise that mattered to both of them.

And that he’d done on stupid impulse.

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Rey was too excited to go stay with Kylo and Poe. And it was her birthday. It was spring break and Kylo had promised that there would be no studying this weekend for her. She didn’t mind trying to help him with his homework but his papers weren’t exactly some dumb book about a guy being out in the woods that made so sense. She just copied Rose’s notes until the teacher asked her something that she didn’t know and got in trouble.

Kylo’s thick textbooks and tired eyes made her already know that she didn’t want to go to college. She got tired so easily in class, exchanging glances with Finn and then giggling to herself. He was getting cuter every day.

They were leaving early, but Rey had set the alarm on her phone for four a.m. so she could do her sit-ups and push-ups. She woke up to a picture that Kylo didn’t know that she’d taken; he was sitting on the porch, looking over at Poe and his jaw was just set in such a way that she needed to keep that look forever. She hated the way her stomach and arms had looked in her dance pictures and decided that this was the only way to fix it. Dad had put a dance bar in for her in the basement, where Kylo used to have his weight set. He had packed it into the garage when he left. But when he moved back, they could still share the same space.

She took a shower at 5.30, deciding that it wouldn’t sound weird then. Mom and dad would know how much she wanted to see Kylo and tell him what happened. She washed down her body, glad
that her scars were still fading, but hating how her tummy looked. It still stuck out too much. She needed to do more sit-ups and probably not have that much for breakfast.

For once, it felt good to know how to be hungry all of the time.

Picking up mom’s razor, she eyed the hair on her legs. It was still light and blonde, but thick. It matted in patches on her legs like an animal. Rose said that she had started shaving her legs but Rey didn’t believe it. Rose always wore tights in dance or track pants in gym. Finn had touched her leg to get her attention last week and she knew that he’d felt how hairy they were. Still, It wasn’t like Kylo’s facial hair; that was thick and dark. He was always careful when he shaved and she would watch him in the mornings.

It was not that long after they got home and into freedom; he refused to have his parents anywhere near them. Dad had wanted to show him how to shave and Kylo had slammed the door after getting what he wanted, but not what he needed. He had handed Rey his phone and they watched a video together, showing him how to do it. He cut himself and she saw how it hurt. She remembered how she wanted to tell him to get dad, to be nicer to him. But then he rinsed his face and told her that he wanted to tell her a secret; if she kissed his cut, then maybe it would get better. She was so happy to learn that. If she’d known that before, then maybe she could have made so many of his other cuts and wounds feel better.

And then, by the time the boys moved out, they both filled up the sink with thick, dark hair and no apologies for not cleaning it up.

She decided that since she was a woman now, it was time to shave her legs in that moment. There was no one there to show her a video on her phone, but she could figure it out on her own. Kylo had put this on her by not being there for so much. Blobbing mom’s shaving cream onto her legs, she stuck her leg into the corner of the tub and tried to get her balance. Breathing out, she ran the razor up to her knee and stopped.

Was the hair gone? She reached down and felt the clean patch. It was smooth and she grinned to herself. She had done it all by herself.

The next part of her leg, her hand moved to quickly and she felt the heat of pain scratch against her shin. Hissing, she exhaled as she shook with anger at herself. Taking quick breaths she shook her head. Nothing was perfect the first time. She didn’t have to be perfect the first time.

But that was the only cut. And it only bled a little.

Just to make sure, she ran the razor under her arms. There were only faint hairs there too, but she wanted to make sure.

By the time she was out of the shower, it was six a.m.

Leia came to knock on her door about fifteen minutes later. Rey was still deciding what to wear, wearing the robe that she’d gotten for Christmas from grandma and looking at her closet.

“You were up early,” she said, sitting on her bed and yawning. She looked over and smiled at her. “I was going to make sure that you were packed, but you already are.”

Rey grinned back. “I packed yesterday. It’s the longest I’ve waited to pack.”

“Oh, wear the new dress. The one we got last week. You look so pretty in it.” Leia was leaning back on her neatly made bed. “Rey, you know I don’t mind making your bed for you. Let me do a
She could only shrug, taking the dress out of the closet. It was light blue and hid how fat she looked. It would be perfect. “I’m sorry, mom. When Kylo and Poe come for a weekend, they can make messes for you to clean up.”

If only they came home more often, Rey wanted to say but kept the words in her mouth.

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Instead of meeting at the apartment, they were having lunch at a really nice restaurant. Rey knew that it was nice because the menu was posted outside the door. She was so happy about being eleven. Kylo had booked the table weeks ago; he’d texted her that, sending her the menu even then. She loved being able to text him all the time with the phone that he had bought her. When he was studying, his messaging would get delayed, but when he was watching a movie with Poe and was bored, he would text all of the time. At least that’s what she guessed was happening.

But both Poe and Kylo looked exhausted when they met them outside of the place.

Dad managed to laugh. She wasn’t laughing.

“Didn’t I tell you not to plan this much after your birthday? God, Kylo. Look at you two.” Dad still hugged him and chuckled, one of those deep dad laughs that meant he would be amused about this the rest of the afternoon. He hugged Poe next, looking at him with even more sympathy. He wasn’t even allowed to really drink, Rey wanted to say, but she held her tongue.

“It’s okay, we’re fine.” Kylo said shaking his head. “Really. We were at Hux’s and…we got home in one piece.”

“Many pieces.” Poe winced, looking pale. Kylo held his hand as a waiter walked up and show them to a table. Kylo had hardly looked at her; he’d smiled hello but then dad had started talking. She shifted her weight in her new dress. Didn’t he know what had happened?

The last time they were home she was still ten and they were treating her like a baby. They just slept the entire time. When she was tired of hugging dumb stuffed animals, she finally came downstairs and climbed into Kylo’s arms, ignoring the other hands that were wrapped around his waist.

Kylo was good at college. Why did he just want to sleep all of the time at home? They were supposed to do things together. They did eventually. Kylo would shake his head, bored with doing nothing, and watch her do the latest dance step that she’d perfected.

She was also mad at dad. He had said that getting settled in wouldn’t take so long. Now, it was like Kylo didn’t even want her there. There was always too much homework. And she didn’t want to talk about her schoolwork. It all felt stupid looking at what they had to read.

They were only sitting down for a few seconds when Kylo took Poe’s hand and she felt her frown deepen and the ghost cramps in her stomach returned. “Go tell Leia what happened.”

Poe shook his head and slicked back his hair with a nervous hand. “Come on, Ky, really?”
“Yeah, tell her what happened. About how stupid I was on my birthday. We’ll figure the rest out later. This will be important to mom right now.” Kylo actually smirked at the end and Poe’s eyes lit up. It was something stupid Kylo did when he was drunk. Rey didn’t want to hear about Kylo being drunk and forgave the secret in that moment.

Kylo turned towards her as the other two moved off to the side. He opened his arms and she hugged him tightly. Finally, he was just hers again. It had been too long. He smelt clean and good. He hadn’t just been lying in bed all day. He might have been sick the night before, but she didn’t smell it in his hair.

“Happy birthday,” he said, still holding her. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She looked up at him, grinning. “You don’t smell that bad.”

He looked at Han and then back at her. “I try, for you. It was okay, last night Rey. We just did college things. I’ll tell you later when mom and dad aren’t here. I promise. Bee misses you. He’s been meowing all week and head butting me.”

Mom and Poe came back to the table and she saw Leia reach for Han’s and squeeze it. Whatever had happened must have been bad. Poe’s hand fell in Kylo’s and they both looked embarrassed.

“Well,” Leia said. “For those that can have it, we’re getting champagne for your birthdays. I’m sorry, Poe and Rey. But you two can pick another nice drink instead.”

She still heard Kylo lean over and whisper to Poe that they could share. When he looked at Rey, she shook her head. No champagne that day for her. At least he asked her.

She just wanted her protector.

And when he turned his attention towards her, they could float up into their bubble again. He was smiling only at her, letting his brown eyes widen at her stories from school.

When the waitress broke their conversation, she started to be annoyed by everyone around them again. It was happening more often. Something would happen and her mood would just twist into anger. She tried to force it down and be calm.

Why did they all have to be there? Mom and dad just complained about everything that she did. How she needed to do more school work; they didn’t know how boring it was. Kylo was good when he texted but when Poe was there, he’d have to talk to him too. Didn’t Poe know how annoying he was sometimes? She sat up straighter, trying to look thinner and studied the menu.

Kylo helped her order, even though his hand was still locked with Poe’s. They both drank a lot of water, sucking it down as quickly as it was poured. But Kylo was trying really hard to be focused on her; he didn’t really need to try, he just had to be him. She wanted a salad without too much dressing and then something with chicken. He pointed out the things that he thought were good, things that she liked. He still knew what he liked. Kylo knew what to eat for fewer calories and more protein. She saw that in his eyes as he pointed out what she would want to try.

“How’s school?” Kylo asked.

She shrugged. School was awful. She was getting in trouble for leaving class and not coming back because she couldn’t focus and the subjects were boring. She didn’t want to try on her tests and even when Han and Leia talked to her about it, she’d lie and say that it wasn’t because she missed Kylo. It was always something else. Kids were picking on her. It wasn’t a full lie. Someone had written that Rey Solo is a rape baby in the girl’s washroom and they had to have a big meeting
about it.

“It’s okay,” she said. “But dance is going really good. Did you know that Paige is going to teach us in a couple of weeks? She’s got a practicum for her school. Can you get that?”

Smirking, Kylo shook his head. “But it would be fun if I could. When I have the internship during my last year, I can see if I can work at the station again.”

He was lying to make her happy and she read through it. As if he’d go anywhere than back to Virginia.

But the lunch was nice. Kylo seemed like he just wanted to talk to her, to catch up and not just through texting. Mom and dad were making sure that Poe wasn’t too stressed out over school and let him complain about how his professors didn’t like him. He also apologized for not getting good enough grades for a scholarship again. He felt bad taking their money.

But when he wasn’t talking to them, he’d be sipping champagne from Kylo’s glass or taking bits of vegetables from his plate when Kylo wasn’t looking.

As long as Kylo was looking at her, it was okay.

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Back in the apartment, leaving mom and dad behind them for the drive home, she hugged Bee and sat with him on the couch. The warm, orange cat brushed against her face, bopping his head against hers. He looked thin and she guessed that they didn’t feed him enough.

Lifting her eyes, she watched the boys look through the fridge. Mom and dad had accepted that they forgot to buy food, and they stopped and bought groceries. Kylo let her pick and plan the meals; there was the fun part. She could cook for them. Kylo or Poe still needed to help her with the hard stuff.

They still moved like one person, Poe always following Kylo, touching his sides and asking him where everything should go so Kylo could roll his eyes and put it away. At least Kylo looked better now, after lunch. He’d eaten without her having to tell him to eat; and Poe only took a few vegetables before he started tearing apart a bread roll and leaving crumbs everywhere. But Kylo’s eyes were brighter now. She felt so proud of him.

Needing to get their attention, she cleared her throat. Bee purred in her lap, making sure she was okay. At least he wasn’t lonely when she was there.

“I kind of want to see a movie tonight,” she said. “We can do that right?”

They turned, like animals, and closed the fridge after getting two more bottles of water. Kylo was the first one to look at her and the first one to sit beside her, but didn’t look like he wanted to talk. He just put his arm around her and drew her closer. Poe was still opening his bottle of water. He drank half of it setting it down on the table

“Sure, sweet pea. Do you want to do it at home or at the theatre? We might need to take a nap before we drive anywhere, but we can totally do it.” He sat next to Kylo and put his hand on his leg. “We don’t do this a lot, you know that. Last night got only a little crazy. You know?”
She didn’t know. She sighed, looking up from his hand back to his face. “Maybe here? Theaters are still kind of weird to me. My friends make me go and I don’t like how big it all is.”

Even as she was talking, she heard Kylo yawn and put his head on Poe’s shoulder.

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. He’s really tired. Hey how’s school been?”

Poe was faking being interested. The trigger in her chest snapped again; he didn’t care. Even as she told him how Finn had decided that he had liked her more than Rose, he had lifted Kylo’s hand to kiss it and then nodded, just acting like he hadn’t heard what she’d said. His stupid smug face was enough to make her stop talking.

All she wanted to do was talk to Kylo and he was falling asleep.

“Kylo?” She asked, loudly. “Can you wake up?”

Blinking, he sat up. “I’ve been awake the entire time.”

Huffing, Rey shook her head. “You knew I was coming and you had a party.”

“It was my fault…” Poe started to say and she latched onto it.

“Stop taking the blame for him.” She grit her teeth.

The words seemed to bring life to Kylo’s eyes and he looked at her. “What?”

She didn’t feel like explaining things to him that he should actually know.

Rolling her eyes, she stood up and set her arms hard across her chest. She even wore a bra today. “You always have to stay here and study. You’re always studying. You’re never home and I can’t be here like I used to before. Because Poe sucks at college and shouldn’t have even gone because he’s stupid.”

Now she felt them both sit up and look at her with sharp awareness. Bee buzzed against her leg and she shooed him away. He didn’t need to be there for this. He was too precious. He didn’t deserve to be Poe’s cat.

“You’re being really unfair right now, Rey,” Kylo said, surprising her. “This was what we always talked about. When things get busy here, we won’t have time together but when we’re done it will just be us and…”

“I always have to text you Kylo,” she said with a sneer. “The last few months, I had to be the one to make you talk to me. Did you forget me? You were never supposed to forget me!”

She could almost see how Kylo’s heartbeat increased as he sat up more. Poe’s hand was planted now on his leg. “That’s not how it really is, Rey. You know that.”

“I know what my phone tells me.” She rolled her eyes, lying. Kylo would text her in the morning and the evening. He’d tell her that he loved her. But right now the truth didn’t matter; she was listening to the throbbing anger building in her chest. “Can’t it just be you and me? Like it used to be? Why does he always have to be here?”

Kylo dared to glare at her. “Because he lives here. He’s lived with us for almost five years, Rey. And don’t talk about him like he’s not here.”

Feeling her nostrils flare, she snorted. She knew that it wasn’t cute, but she was too angry to stop it.
“You talk about me like I’m not here.”

She had tried for years to understand how Kylo could break phones and promises like they were nothing. When she was little, when she was dumb, it was easier to forgive him. He was damaged and broken; he could melt down at any minute into tears or anger. She had to take care of him. And the lift that she felt when she got help and a new friend, one who smelled good and smiled so much, was a push towards growing up. She loved them both and they loved her. But when they moved away, it was all about ‘settling in’. They’d had almost two years to settle in. Kylo left when he was nineteen and now he was twenty-one.

He’d made promises to her too.

She was eleven now and could make Kylo know how angry she was. How she felt it everyday. It wasn’t just about him leaving, it was about how growing up hurt so much and he hadn’t warned her enough.

He finally stood, looking down at her with slumped shoulders. Why couldn’t he try to look taller for her too? “Hey, what’s going on, angel? Tell us.”

Tell us. Not tell me.

She bit her lip. Can he leave so we can talk?

No, because he lives here. “So stop what you’re doing. Rey, I know that school is rough right now but if you told me, told us, I could help you. We both could help you. He was in the world when he was in your grade. He’s read those books. And he’s not stupid.”

“I remember, Rey. I remember those grades and I can help you find the answers,” Poe said and she didn’t look at him. “Come on, sweet pea, what’s wrong? We’re not mad…."

“Oh, don’t try to sound like mom and dad. And by the way, they’re not your real mom and dad. They’re not mine either.” She turned to glare at him.

“I know.” His eyes were still soft, so him. She didn’t have a real reason to hate him and tried to blink back the hateful emotions that pressed on her eyes. “Hey, Rey, we want to be home every weekend or we want you to be here every weekend. I can’t cook to save my life and we’re starving because Ky has learnt nothing from you. Neither of us did. But if you’re having trouble in school, with anything, don’t just text Ky silly things. Actually talk to him.”

Setting her head down to close her eyes, she shook her head. “They’re not silly things.”

She’d just asked Kylo what boys liked. How she should dress. If she looked fat. How it was like to kiss a boy who she really liked. And of course Poe didn’t understand them.

Kylo was quiet, chewing on his finger until Poe made him stop. She felt her rage rise again at the touch.

“I got my period and you weren’t there!” She screamed, right into Kylo’s face. She was so close that she could still smell alcohol on him. He didn’t smell like himself. “I got it at school and you couldn’t come get me! You were busy being here. I’m supposed to be here too. You promised Kylo!”

She watched Kylo swallow a breath and reach for her, stepping away from Poe. “Why didn’t you tell me?”
As if he knew how embarrassing it was, how much it hurt two weeks ago. As he if knew what it was like to have classmates tease her about her bloodied jeans. How the nurse didn’t understand that he wasn’t her brother. That’s why she didn’t call. Dumb adults were always making things worse and being awful. She just laid in her bed and cried for a week and had mom help her, showing her where the supplies were and how to hold a hot water bottle to her stomach and how no one cared if she made a mess in the bed. They could always get new sheets and she just needed to say when something felt wrong. But to Rey, it was all wrong. She could never sleep in Kylo’s bed again without worrying that she’d make a mess. She couldn’t wear favourite pair of white jeans again because they were ruined. Everyone who was an adult had tried to warn her, but not enough. It was betrayal by default.

And now the two people she’d grown up with were in that same group.

Maybe she couldn’t trust either of them.

“Because you were supposed to be there.” Rey pushed him away and gave him the deepest glare that she could manage. She tried to look like him, act like him. Be filled with hate.

He stepped back, his eyes wide.

But he didn’t say anything.

He just let her move by him and run into her room, the room with the stars, and hold her pillow until she started to sob. The feelings grew heavier, into a wail. It wasn’t enough just to cry.

She hadn’t felt this much pain in almost seven years and she wanted to bring it all down on herself as she wept into her pillow until she almost forgot what she was crying about.

She wanted to forget how she hated Kylo. Poe was just a part of it. She couldn’t hate him, but still wanted to. Kylo had managed to grow up and be normal because of him.

So it really was all Kylo’s fault.

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A careful knock on the door broke her from staring at her hands. She’d been looking at them when she woke up and hadn’t stopped.

“No, Kylo! Go away!”

“It’s just me. If that’s okay.” Poe opened the door and his eyes held the sadness that broke her. She nodded and put her head back down again. “Hey, sweet pea, what’s going on?”

“I hate him. I wish he never saved me. I wish I was as dead as he is.” She yelled into her pillow, ignoring the hand that was on her shoulder. Kylo was being so unfair right then. He’d been unfair the last two years, when he decided to move away from her and not be there when important things were happening to her.

“Rey, come here.” Poe was asking her, not telling her. His hand didn’t demand that she move either. She bit her cheek hard and turned into his arms. “Hey, it’ll be okay. I promise. Ky’s really hurt right now for you. He doesn’t know what to do and that freaks him out.”
“Why do you get to have him and I can’t?” She sobbed, gripping at his sweater.

She felt him sag and then straighten. “Because life isn’t fair. That’s what I told him and that’s what I’m telling you. Rey, this isn’t forever, the living apart stuff. We really want you to be here but we have to think about your future. We need to figure out why you hate school, if it’s the other kids, if it’s the teachers, if it’s just because you miss him. That’s why you can’t be here; it’s nothing that Ky and me decided. Talk to Ahsoka more. I heard what mom and dad said, that you’re sort of withdrawing from her.”

She nodded. “She started pointing out what’s wrong with me one day. It was like every other conversation. It made sense and then I just got…so mad that I wanted to burst. Like, explode. I never yelled at her before. I liked her. I still like her.”

Poe hugged her again. “Hey, it’s okay. I live with him everyday and he can scream until the neighbours complain. But I calm him down, if I’m not angry too. It gets fucked up sometimes because he knows how to push my buttons and I can’t always keep it in, you know? But we always apologize and talk about it. And the next time isn’t as bad. So maybe just say that you’re sorry and mean it. And tell her how you feel. I know that you already do so…”

The six weeks that they had had alone when Kylo was in Virginia flashed in her mind. She only got mad at him once the entire time. They were sending Kylo a package during the first week he was away, putting things into a shoebox that they’d found under Leia’s bed. And he made a joke about one of her pictures: *is this a chicken or something? What did you draw here? Tell me because I’m dumb.* Kylo always got her pictures and he didn’t understand. She ignored him the rest of the day and wouldn’t talk to him until it was time to talk to Kylo on the computer.

“I’m pretty good at going to therapy,” she mumbled. “I just want to know when I can stop going. No one tells me. But Kylo got better, right?”

Poe bit the inside of his mouth. “He’s still got good and bad days. Things aren’t perfect between us, but we’re working it out. I’m only here because he wants me to be here and needs me here too. We really want you here, believe me. It’s easier when you’re here. But he’s been planning this since he was sixteen and he just puts his head down and gets what he wants and forgets what he needs. Fuck, Rey, I’d go home tomorrow if he didn’t need me and I didn’t need him. But he needs you too; he’s never stopped needing you. We talk about you everyday, how we need a better place, maybe closer to a school for you so you can be here all of the time. Maybe it will be a good school, one that you like, you know? He wants to go to grad school now. That fucking checklist... He’s going to do this whether we like it or not, this school thing. And I’m going to help him make the best choices. Okay?”

Rey took a deep breath, stilling her tears. “You don’t want to be here?”

“Yeah, with him I do. But studying here, being here with everything else? I hate it. He thinks people are following us and gets all weird. He follows my friends sometimes when he’s got nothing better to do and they get creeped out. I’m holding on with both hands to keep him from freaking out and to keep my own head above water. I have to study twice as hard as he does and he sometimes doesn’t get it.” Poe’s words came out as unspoken thoughts, hitting her with every syllable. “But when he does, I’m just like, hey, there’s my guy. There’s the person who I love and it’s okay. It’s not perfect, but when he’s good, it’s as close to perfect as I deserve. He messes up but we need to be there for him and not forget ourselves.”

Exhaling, Rey nodded. It did feel better to know that Poe didn’t like some of the things that Kylo did and was trying to make it better. But there was still a weight on her chest. “What’d you tell mom before? What’s Kylo not telling me now?”
Poe bit his lip, stepping away from her. “You’re still pretty mad right now at him. We’ll save it for another time. When all of us can talk.”

She forced herself to narrow her eyes at him, pushing every bit of darkness into her to her look. Poe ran his hand through his hair and that’s when she saw it, the gold on his finger. She’d seen it before but hadn’t noticed it. Her brain had hid it from her, trying to protect her.

For the first time, in a very long time, Rey felt pure rage erupt in her chest. It wasn’t just the anger from before, but it was even worse. It burnt like a monster, trying to claw its way out of her ribcage. Like Snoke was trying to rip her apart from the inside out. And she let it tear out of her flesh, splitting her open.

“Get out. I hate you too! I hate you the most!” She got up from the bed and shoved him. He was a grown man and didn’t stand up for himself as she pushed him again. “All you’ve ever wanted was to fuck him! To have him fuck you! I saw that when you were fifteen and then you were always there around him. You never cared about me and you never wanted to be my friend. All you wanted was him to yourself!”

Poe stopped her hands when she tried to punch him. “Rey, that’s not fair. You know that I love you too and…”

“Don’t touch me! Get out of my room!” Rey screamed and thrust her wrist from his grip. She dove onto the bed and buried her head in the pillows “I fucking hate you and I wish that you were dead like everyone else!”

She cried into her pillow and hoped that she’d fall asleep, letting the words burn onto her heart.

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There was really nothing that they could talk about. They didn’t want to sleep in their room together. The awful afternoon had stretched into a night without dinner. No one wanted to eat and even asking Rey had resulted in more shouting. Instead, they sat on the couch, watching the news on mute.

Poe hugged him closer, gripping his hand.

Deep down, he knew that this would happen. But he thought that their bond was stronger than his worst fears.

“We can break up, forget all of this for her,” Poe said, his voice barely breaking the silence. “Like I said when we were kids, we can break up and just be…friends again.”

The words hung like smoke around them. It clouded his eyes and he needed to clear it away before his tears returned. Kylo kissed his forehead. “That’s not what you want.”

Poe sat up, forcing him to meet his eyes. “Ky, we fight. About stupid things. Normal people don’t do that.”

He shook his head. “Those are excuses. So, we’re not normal? I always wanted to be like that but I will never be. But you decided that you liked someone who was beyond lost in high school because you thought that he was sad and needed a friend. And that you needed a friend too. And
you put up with the nightmares, the post-trauma shit that will never go away. I mean, when we have sex and I freeze up? And you still stay with me? That’s not normal; but that’s just you. Right? You were my friend when I needed it the most. Rey needs someone like that too. But it can’t be me forever, even though I always want it to be me. I’m never going to be out of her life, but I can’t be at the centre of it anymore.”

“Because I’m standing in the way.” Poe’s eyes dropped, still looking at their hands. “I’ve been in the way for five years.”

“You’ve been keeping me steady for five years.” Kylo gripped their hands together, shaking his head. “You became a part of my family. Who cares about the stupid fights? My parents fight about the colour of a rug or who didn’t empty the dishwasher, about how fucked up their son is and how the little girl in their house is crying all of the time. Rey is your family too. And she’s just like me when I was a teenager: filled with anger for anything unfair. But those were just thoughts. And I still think that way now and again and I know that it’s wrong now too, but we can’t stop it. But we can make it make sense. It’s not good for her to miss school and time with her friends to come stay with me.”

Leia had warned him about Rey’s mood swings. Han had told him about how her grades were slipping. Every time she came back from staying with them, she’d act out more. She wouldn’t eat and would leave the house for hours. Both of those facts terrified him. The campus therapist—some loser who didn’t deserve to finish his PhD by how he reasoned, but it was free and someone to unload on—had finally said something that made moderate sense. She wanted him to come home. He wanted her to learn how to live with the distance because he was forcing himself to come to that truth and exist with it everyday. The feelings wouldn’t get easier if she kept seeing him so often, the moron had said. It was the cause of some of the fights with Poe; Poe wanted them to go home more. Being constantly pulled back to that house was a perennial hurt; it was the past but it was always haunting him.

Poe’s eyes were still down, but then they lifted. “You really want to be with me? You make me doubt it when you do things to push me away and then try to get me back. You start fights just to let me win.”

It was true. Kylo would start an easy argument, just to hear how Poe would react. He’d hold back from snapping, from letting his real anger show. He’d let Poe have the small victories. His war was his own.

“When we’re done with school, I’ll take a break. No grad school, fuck that. We’ll get married. And I’ll stop being such a dick and let you do what you want for a bit. There’s still so much money in the fund that we can buy a house wherever. Back home if you want.” Kylo wanted to get the words right, to make sure that he meant it. “Put my stupid dreams on hold for a bit.”

His eyes drifted to the FBI application form that was always stuck to their fridge door. It had been the first thing that he’d put there when they moved in, before any of the boxes and suitcases. Poe would doodle on it, or write grocery lists on it. Or write that he loved him on it. And Kylo would always replace it with a new form, putting the other ones in an organized box in the top of the closet.

“Yeah, your dreams hit me in the face every time I make dinner.” Poe smirked, following his eyes. “Ky, it’s okay. I think I’ll be perfectly happy being your trophy husband as the FBI kicks your ass, doing nothing but playing video games and swimming in the pool that we will have. And Rey will still hate me but will at least laugh at my jokes again by then.”

Kylo leaned down to kiss him. “Whose fantasy are we in now?”
“Maybe both of ours?” Poe grinned at him, then laid down on his chest. “Ky, I’ve been hungover as fuck all day. Arguing with you two has really fucked with my perspective.”

They kept watching the news in silence until Kylo felt him fall asleep. He kissed his forehead and then shifted away, laying him down on the cushions and pulling the blanket over him. He grumbled lightly, rolling over to face away from him.

Kylo sighed as he turned off the television and the lights. He still left the hall light on for Rey.

He stopped at her door, knocking lightly.

“Come in, Kylo.”

He stepped inside, seeing her sitting under the covers with the cat in her lap. “How are you doing?”

_I hate everything. And I hate hating everything._ She blinked in response. _I hate him. And you for doing what you did._

He took two careful steps forward. _You shouldn’t. You don’t need to._

Rey looked away for several painful heartbeats before she tapped the bed, her face still furious. _You can come here._

_Thank you._

He sat down on the edge of the bed and reached for her hand. She shook her head, still petting the cat.

“You should have told me first. You should have talked to me if you want to get married.” Her voice remained sour. “Do you even really want this, Kylo?”

He reached out and Bee came to him, purring and snuggling against his hand. The stupid cat was the only one in the apartment who didn’t want to start a fight with him at that moment. “I want you there too, Rey. You and me, we’re forever. You saved me and I saved you. Doing other things doesn’t take that away. And he means a lot to me.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” Rey folded her arms. “I love you. I’ll always love you. But I can’t be happy about this right now.”

He met her amber eyes, drawn into them and how they sat perfectly in her face. She’d always been perfect and she was just growing more beautiful with every year. He hated himself for not being there for her when she needed him. And it would keep happening. The only way he could deal with those feelings was by having someone to talk to. They weren’t meant to grow apart, but they were supposed to grow up. He was through with the harder parts, but there were still so many years left for Rey.

“I knew you wouldn’t be,” he said. He’d thought about that the entire morning, how he’d acted on impulse and didn’t have Rey in his mind when he’d asked last night. But the morning, he’d showered and still having alcohol lingering in his system, quietly wept to himself about what he’d done to her. He was going to have to avoid the news on her birthday, but he couldn’t keep it from his mother. Everyone always wanted something from him and he was never good enough.

“Tomorrow, it will just be us, okay? Your day. We can talk about this, or we can talk about you. All of this will still be there, but I want tomorrow to be about you.”

Rey’s arms slowly loosened. “I’d like that.”
He smirked, picking up the cat to pass it to her. “Can you apologize to him? Maybe?”

“I always made you apologize.” Hugging Bee, Rey exhaled. He could see the thought turning in her head and heart. “I’ll feel better in the morning.”

He took that as a promise. He leaned over and kissed the corner of her eye, pulling back to grin at her. She looked at him with bright eyes rather than the anger that he had felt before.

“I love you.”

He kissed her forehead. “I love you too.”

He backed out of the room, holding her happy eyes close to his heart.

“Want the door open or closed?” He asked, shrugging.

“Open a little, so Bee can get out. Kylo, I can think for myself. He doesn’t have to sleep on the couch. I know where he sleeps.” Rey was getting comfortable in the bed, but her words were still her own.

He nodded, leaving the door open enough for the stupid cat to paw it open if he needed to.

He closed his eyes in frustration and then shook it off. He made his way to the couch and woke his idiot fiancé who probably hadn’t emptied the litter box.

“Come on,” he said. “Come sleep in the bed.”

“Hmm?” Poe’s eyes dully focused on him. “Why?”

He rolled his eyes. “I can carry you.”

He’d said the wrong thing and Poe’s sleepy grin widened. “Can you really?”

He didn’t like being exhausted and dared at the same time. He gripped him by the arms, still gentle enough so Poe could break it, pulling him up from the couch. He kissed him in his arms, letting the emotions of the evening take over fully as he tried to lift him fully.

“No, put me down, this is too fucked up,” Poe swatted him away, awkwardly finding his feet. “Maybe carry me another time? Let’s just go to bed. This is the worst couch ever. Why did I let you buy it?”

“I liked the colour. You liked that I actually liked anything.”

Kylo followed him down the hall to their room. Brushing their teeth in the half-bath off of their bedroom, Poe leaned against him again. He was still doubting how he felt, but Kylo felt the same. Still, he couldn’t know that.

Holding the toothbrush between his teeth, he reached for Poe’s hand. He lifted it, so that they could both see the ring in the mirror.

“No breaking up,” he slurred, foam spilling from the side of his mouth. “You’re home. It’s okay.”

Part of him lingered in the idea of splitting up for Rey. It was a tiny part of his thoughts. But it still surfaced. Again, how all of the expectations he had to meet with people were so hard to overcome made him just want to go quiet and be inside his own head. At least with school, he could figure it out. It wasn’t really a lie, because it made Poe feel better. And it still got him a fresh mouth to kiss
when he was done rinsing his.

The rule about no sex when Rey was there was pushed to the limit. She’d screamed at both of them from an angry place that they well understood. Kylo still couldn’t slow his hands when they turned off the lights and fell onto the bed.

“She won’t hate me tomorrow?” Poe asked as Kylo kissed up his neck, sucking lightly behind his ear. They were both the most sensitive at the same spot; they were matched. “God, I don’t want her to hate me tomorrow.”

Kylo kept going, nipping at his ear. He was outside of himself, caught in the in between. “She’ll be okay. I want her to be okay. Tomorrow it will just be me and her. Can tonight be you and me? So you’re not sad?”

Poe pulled away, making Kylo squint in the darkness. “Why’d you say that?”

He shrugged and then sat up to pull off his shirt. At least in the darkness, no one could see his scars. Even though Poe knew each one of them, he hated how he needed to see them all of the time. “You get sad. You think you’re in the way. But you’re not. That’s why I said that.”

Poe’s hands crept up his chest, testing him. “Just needed to hear you say that again.”

He leaned down, partly angry but mostly searching for comfort. He kissed Poe and covered his body with his, making him feel his full weight. He felt how he shifted beneath him, taking him in but at the same time still overwhelmed. But he liked that. He liked feeling too much. He wasn’t in pain yet.

“Fuck, Ky, I’m not ready, but fuck.” Poe groaned into his neck as he ground their hips together. “You always call me on my bullshit.”

“And you call me on mine.” He kissed him again. “That’s why we fight.”

They held eyes in the darkness. It was the only place that Kylo knew inside and out, but to Poe it meant something else. It meant being together. Kylo longed to latch onto that side of being in the dark, of feeling safe in it. Poe knew this side of him too, but not like Rey. Maybe that’s why he was still trying to change it for Kylo.

Quick hands removed the last of their clothes, awkwardly shifting against one another and chuckling when elbows got in the way. It was like being drunk again, fucking on the couch the other night when they were too tired to argue anymore about who didn’t sort the fucking recycling. Fuck the recycling. Fuck it.

“God, Ky, we can’t…she’s next door.” He was kissing him again, pressed against his body, feeling the heat between them.

“I can…” he started and then started shifting down Poe’s body to complete the thought. He had his dick in his mouth before Poe had the chance to respond. Kylo had planned it perfectly. He couldn’t reply when he was getting sucked off. He would stop thinking about Rey. She was okay. She didn’t hate them, really. They’d have tomorrow together. If that lie got him through the next few minutes, it was the best one that he’d ever told himself.

Tonight, he needed to do this. In the five years that they’d been together, he’d rarely gone down on him. He’d rather take Poe and fuck him until they both couldn’t breathe, unless he caught the tail end of a ghost memory. But this part always was hard for him. It meant knowing how he tasted. He didn’t hate it because it was Poe; it was part of him. But it meant something bigger. He was
nudging onto the other side of his sexuality with this and he only went there because of how he felt for the man beneath him.

Poe squirmed and gripped at his hair as he brought his hand up to stroke in time with his mouth. “Fuck, Ky. Fuck I love you. I love you so fucking much.”

If Kylo didn’t have a dick in his mouth, he would have told him to shut up. Instead he smirked and swirled his tongue in the other direction, moving his hand faster. He knew how this felt and thought he knew how to do it, or at least he had to learn how to do it. This was who he was now. This was what he wanted, what they both wanted. Poe always got him off quick. He could do it faster.

He had to stop to take a breath, to look up, meeting the wanton eyes against the pillows. “Come here. I can’t come and leave you hanging.”

He shook his head and took him into his hand again, returning his jaw to the work that it had to do. He wanted to learn how to be good at his. This was the rest of his life. He had to be good at it. He matched his mouth with his hand when he heard Poe moan more, when he set his head back. That meant the touching was good. That meant that he was…

“Ky, I’m going to come. You can stop. Don’t do it if you’re...”

He shook his head and kept going, taking him in until he felt like he would gag. But he didn’t. So he quickened the pace. He had to be good at this, just like with school. *This was the future. Their future.*

He didn’t hear the restrained moans beneath him. But he felt the change in his mouth, how the vein straightened beneath him. It was like it had been before, the last time when it was two years ago and they’d fought about where to put the junk drawer. Normal people had a junk drawer, Poe had said. Kylo had argued that normal people didn’t have junk because they threw it out. And he’d let Poe fuck his mouth in the kitchen so he could win the argument and not have too much stuff in their house.

His cock seized and Poe covered his mouth as he moaned. It was a strange sensation. It was something so intimate that Poe was always so willing to do to him, but his own problems constantly kept him from doing it in return. Sex wasn’t about dominance; it couldn’t be. Sex was about being even, about talking. Kylo drank down his come as it spilled into his mouth in lazy spurts. It tasted the same. It was still sweet and salty, but still him. He could do this.

He kept sucking a few moments too long, feeling Poe soften in his mouth before he looked up. “If you can promise me blowjobs like that the entire time that we’re married and fight about anything, I swear to God that I will argue with you about everything.” Poe’s face was flushed, even in the dull lighting from only the street lamps outside their room. “Come here. Ky, stop being a martyr. Get off too. Don’t be weird with how both of us are feeling right now.”

He snorted and shifted to kiss the man beneath him. Poe never wanted them to kiss after he’d done the same. Kylo didn’t care how either of them tasted. He didn’t need to be afraid of that and Poe should stop feeling that way too.

“I’m going to touch you now, is that okay?” Poe whispered in his ear, even as his hand wrapped around his erection.
“I love you,” Kylo said, knowing how quickly he was going to come. “Don’t leave me.”

“Wouldn’t think about it.” Poe’s voice pressed huskily against his neck, driving his desire. “Just come for me, Ky.”

He only needed those words to let go.

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“This is a nice place,” Kylo said, looking around. “I come here to write sometimes. What would you want to do here?”

Rey really liked the café and fixed her sweater. It was too small still, too tight in the arms. She should have probably not have ordered anything with sugar and would have to do more push-ups tomorrow. “I’d like it more if people were smiling. Is everyone always so serious at college?”

He grinned, a rare happy look that showed off his teeth. “Yeah, pretty much. You’re tired all of the time and still agree to do things that make you more tired because people tell you that they’re fun.”

“Guess that’s why I can’t live here all the time.” She forced her voice to sound icier than she meant.

“Rey,” Kylo’s voice started firm and then faltered. “It’s okay for you to feel that way.”

Exhaling, she rolled her eyes. “Don’t just repeat what we hear in therapy. I’m there too, Kylo.”

He looked down at his drink. It was just a latte. He didn’t have any indecision when he’d ordered it. He would normally ask her to order something for him, but now he had a standard drink. He was getting away from her and she needed to stop it.

“I’m always there.” Kylo sounded distant when he spoke again. The rest of the coffee shop grew faint at that point and Rey gripped her drink, trying to keep onto what was real. “We’re always there.”

From the look in Kylo’s eyes, she knew that she shouldn’t bring up how she’d heard them last night.

“I’m tired of being there,” she said instead. “When is it going to stop?”

His large fingers traced the lip of his coffee. “In the quiet moments, it stops.”

Sighing, she picking up a napkin, starting to twist it in her hands. “I’m sorry for being so angry yesterday.”

“Really, it’s okay,” he said, setting his elbows on the table to lean towards her. “Rey, we know each other better than anyone else on this planet. I’ve been there; I’m still there. We’re not getting our damage deposit back because I’ve put so many holes in the pantry wall. But I keep trying.”

“Because of your dream?”

He nodded. “Yes. Having a goal, having that piece of paper on the fridge, I feel better with it. I thought we talked about this for you, over Christmas. That it would be good to have it too.”
Putting her head down, Rey looked at her coffee. She had the old, childish list, with where she wanted to go and what she wanted to do. It all felt so stupid now. There were things she felt like she was good at, but she wasn’t the best. She probably wouldn’t be tall enough to be a dancer. She probably wouldn’t be able to do anything with cooking; all of the television shows were about how hard it was. She hated doing these exercises at school: she just wanted to grow up, she didn’t want to decide what she wanted to be when she was an adult.

“Maybe for me, it’s different,” she shrugged. “Maybe I don’t want to have goals for a while. Maybe I just want to live and be…me for a while.”

Kylo licked his lips, sitting back and folding his arms. He was so much bigger now. She had a hard time remembering how different he looked when he was fourteen, or when her first memories of him stuck in her mind when he was eleven or twelve. His was so thin, but his eyes still burnt the same even now. Having him was her lifeline.

Now, almost seven years later, that life was so far away.

She wanted to be as nice as she used to be, but it was hard not to snap and be fierce and hateful in a second. It happened so often with her friends; Rose didn’t talk to her for a month because Rey had yelled at her when she spilled juice on her favourite shirt. It had been one from Kylo and it was destroyed by cranberry juice.

“I don’t like being angry,” Rey said, finally looking up at Kylo. “Can’t you make it stop for me?”

He reached for her hand. He looked so pained and tired then. “Haven’t I been asking that my entire life?” His lip started to tremble and he pressed his fingers into his eyes. She watched his shoulders shiver before he looked at her again. “Rey, I didn’t mean for any of this to happen. I still think that you’re perfect. You don’t have to feel bad about anything that you’re feeling and I’m not just saying that because of therapy. We both keep things from one another and it’s fucking awful but we need to be our own people. I never wanted this to happen to you and I couldn’t stop it because I…”

He paused and then took a long drink from his cup. Rey was frozen, watching how he moved and how he flexed his hands. She was tearing into him now, cutting him down to how they were when they were kids. When it was just them. When it was just them in their bubble, in the safety zone of care.

“I fucked up,” Kylo finally said. “I messed you up. I thought I was making you better by pulling away…”

She never wanted Kylo to feel bad and shook her head. “No, it was fine at the start. I could do it then. But then I started feeling awful about different things. When you’re not home, I can be okay and then someone will say something and I don’t understand anymore. I want to be happy and I want you to be that way too. And I feel worse knowing that I feel sad every time I come home from being here.”

Kylo’s face softened and he sat back again. “This hurts so much, Rey, but please trust me right now. For every reason that you love me, just trust me. It’s important for you to be okay. There are only so many things I can focus on because my head just screams at me all of the time. But you being okay, you being normal, that keeps me focused on any day. On the bad days, it’s working with George, but still you. I don’t stop thinking about you when I don’t talk to you. I wish that we could share thoughts in our mind and not just on the phone. But we need to…you need to start feeling better again. And if not coming here will help that, and we know it will, then maybe that’s what we need to do.”
It wasn’t red rage that filled her eyes, instead it was blue. “What about on the good days?”

He swallowed and shook his head. “You’re doing what I do and avoiding what I said.”

“I heard what you said and I don’t want that. Don’t you always get what you want?”

He shook his head. “Not always. You know that.”

But all she saw in her eyes was how Kylo got his license, got his car, got out of going to jail, got a boyfriend, got to go to an internship at the FBI, and then get into college. He worked hard for all of those things, well some of them happened because he was magically lucky at the same time, and it made her dig down into her early memories. Kylo was able to survive for so long by playing along, by playing others. The only one that had survived was her. Why did he pick her? Why was she worth saving when she felt like this all of the time now?

Kylo exhaled and reached for her hand and she took it. “I’ve had to work hard for everything, Rey. I hate therapy, but I still go. I take the medication. I’m trying to be better. And I have him. He pulls me back, just like you, when I’ve gone out too far. When I’m about to lose myself, he brings me back to you.”

He swallowed at her silence, because she sat back to look at him again. He hadn’t shaved that morning. There was a hint of a moustache there. They’d been too hurried about being late. She hadn’t seen Poe that morning. He was hiding in the bedroom with Bee, probably even hairier.

“So I can’t spend so much time here?” She asked, swallowing her sadness in a heavy gulp.

“You can’t be so split up, Rey. You need to be more grounded. I feel like an asshole for saying that, because I hated whenever anyone said that to me, but I found that. I’m still me and fight against it the entire time, but I have it. And you…you’ll find it too.” He tried to look as serious as could and she finally relented and nodded.

“But that’s so far away.”

He frowned. “I know. It’s always so far away.”

“But…you’re almost there.”

He shrugged. “Not yet.”

“What will I do if I’m not here?” She asked, putting out the question she was afraid to ask. “Should I really…just work harder at school? Be better to my friends.”

Kylo’s eyes lit up. “That’s what I did. And I made it out of there.”

Sitting back, she swallowed. “Maybe I can try.”

His eyes kept the same shine. “That’s what I used to say. And it felt good when I started to mean it.”

She didn’t believe him. Sitting there, in the stupid college café she noticed the ring on his hand too and let her anger blossom again. “Why do you want to marry him?”

He looked up, meeting her eyes and then sat back, sipping his coffee. “I thought that we weren’t talking about that.”

That wasn’t at all what she had said when they got there. The feeling twisted again in her chest,
slipping so easily into anger. She had never said that what had made her so angry yesterday wasn’t going to be a part of what they’d talk about that day. Kylo had just taken her words and twisted them. He was being so stupid right now and she needed to make him think clearer.

“You don’t even love him.” The words left her mouth before she could even think about taking them back.

Kylo finished his coffee. He took off the lid and set it aside. He was stilling gradually, his hands moving without him talking.

“How could you say that to me? After what I just told you? Look, Rey, I wouldn’t have been able to get through these years without you or him. I’ve told you about how I feel about him before, but he’s so…I don’t know. He can make me angry for real reasons. Not just someone saying something and it pissing me off, but someone telling me to my face that I’ve done something wrong or messed up. Mom and dad avoided that so much and now I have someone who can say that to my face and mean it and I’ll still love him in the morning. Just like I’m doing to you right now. Say these things to Han and Leia. Say these things to Ahsoka. Poe and I talked about this before you got up and we’re sad that we have to be here, but it will get easier if you…spread it around. The hurt. Like we used to do.”

“But he doesn’t want to be here,” she said quickly. “He’s only here because of you.”

She had been so focused on his hands that she forgot to look at his face as he spoke. When she finally met his eyes, she saw a hurt that she didn’t know she could cause. Even yesterday, she didn’t see the same focus and hooded eyes from him. Now, after she’d given her bitter and hurtful remark, she was meeting another side of his fury.

It had been so long since he’d been angry at her. Had he ever been mad at her before? He needed to be mad at her. He should be mad at her. He should be feeling anything right then.

“Rey,” he repeated, his eyes drilling into her further. “How could you say that to me.”

Sucking in a long breath, she crossed her arms. “Because it’s true. He told me.” He’d left her alone for so long; he had said that he would never do that. And now, she just wanted to hurt him. She had the power to do that. “Kylo, he’s miserable. He doesn’t want to be here. If you really loved him, you wouldn’t just be buying him things and making promises that you won’t keep. So, really, you don’t love him.”

The silent hate in his eyes made her cringe for a moment, but she refocused her eyes; she couldn’t back down. She wanted him to smash the table. She wanted him to break the stillness by knocking their cups aside with an angry swipe of his arms.

Instead, he just sat up straighter. And she tightened her arms across her chest.

“Rey.” His voice was deep and normally the tones of her name would have been soothing, but now, the edges of anger made her shake inside. “You know that I don’t talk this much with anyone else, even him. He takes me into it kicking and screaming. I know why you’re angry. I missed something important to you. And I keep missing other things that are important to you, to us, but our world isn’t the…” he paused, swallowing the crack in his voice. He wiped at his eyes and frowned. “I’m still there, everyday, with you Rey. But I want…at least I think I want it, I want a future for tomorrow. And I don’t have many options right now. And that was because I’m trying to give us the future that you wanted when we were kids. The one that we all wanted. And that will include him.”
Despite the quivering in her stomach, she narrowed her eyes. “Why.”

She had pressed on the right nerve and got the right response. He slammed on the table and stood, but didn’t yell. Only a few heads turned in their direction. This really wasn’t their neighbourhood at home. No one knew them there.

He took a step back and breathed in deeply. His hands were shaking and she could see that he was counting back in his mind, to avoid screaming at her. She longed for him to tell her something with his eyes but instead he just narrowed them.

“That man is fiancé, Rey. I’ve been with him for five years. I love him. Why are you being like this?” His hands rested on the table and she looked from his blunt fingers to the features of his angular face. She saw them growing even sharper and more vicious in her mind. He was asking a stupid question. He knew why she was angry. He knew that anger. He was trying to be dense on purpose.

“But I don’t think you love him.” She couldn’t stop. She wanted to watch him collapse. “This whole time, you’ve been just pretending so he doesn’t leave you.”

Hissing, he sat down. And, offensively, she heard him counting backwards in Spanish before he responded. “What are you trying to do here?”

She tossed her hands up in the air and groaned. “You’re not happy! How are you in love?”

Kylo fixed his sweater and didn’t react. He looked at his empty coffee cup to distract himself. He was only trying to frustrate her. Finally, he met her eyes.

“I love him. We’re in college and everyone is miserable. We only have one another here.” He clenched his jaw and glared at her harder. “I’m happy when you’re here, but right now you’re being really difficult.”

“I’m allowed to be difficult. Remember, Kylo, I can do whatever I want.” She wanted to flaunt that she could live without him. She wanted to press on the wound that she had created.

Kylo couldn’t leave her. He had to take her home. Instead, he just glared at her. “He loves you. Don’t ever forget that.”

She couldn’t. She never could. Poe nuzzling against her, Poe pulling her onto his lap. She locked onto that, wanting to burn it all down.

“I never asked him to touch me.”

Kylo finally flinched, running his hands through his thick hair. “Don’t you ever accuse him of that. He’d never do that to you. Rey, for fuck’s sake, you grew up with him. He doesn’t even like girls. I’ve tried…and I’m not going to stop trying, I love you too much but this. I caused this. This is all my fault…” He trailed off and his eyes fell away, torn between screaming at her and leaving.

“What do you want from me? What do you want, Rey? We love you. That should be enough. That used to be enough.”

“You can’t marry a person I hate!” she shouted. “He didn’t rape me but he took you from me!”

Kylo’s eyes darted wildly. He should have blinked to her in response but he didn’t. “What are you even saying? Rey, I…”

She just started screaming and the moment ended in long and hateful shouts.
Dad came to get her. She spent the rest of the day curled up on her bed. Someone would knock on her door and there would be pizza there; they never could cook without her. She never wanted to come there again. Looking at Poe again made her only think of anger and hate. Looking at Kylo just made her feel nothing.

She was cuddling with Bee when she heard Poe and Kylo answer the front door.

“…it’s been awful…we told her and…” Kylo’s voice sounded slow and stupid. “I don’t know what to do, dad.”

She looked at the cat and bit her lip. She was making people hurt; but they deserved it. They were the ones being selfish.

Gliding off the bed and onto the floor, she crept towards the door. She liked how her legs looked as she moved across the floor. They were getting longer and were skinnier than Rose’s, but weren’t the thinnest in her class. Focusing, she nudged open the door with her finger. Bee was nuzzling her, bopping her with his head. It would just look like he opened it.

Peaking out the door, she saw them standing down the hall. Dad had his arms crossed, looking at Poe and Kylo.

“She’s been really sensitive lately. It’s been rough at home, to put it lightly. We’re really frustrated right now. She’s not eating and we hear her exercising in her room all of the time. But hey, you did the same and got better? That’s about all of the hope that we have right now. To keep talking to her, keep sending her to therapy. Keep finding one that she likes.” Dad wiped his eyes and shook his head. “But I’m happy for you two. We’ll figure it out in the five years it will take you to actually get it over with.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Poe said and she could hear the annoying laugh in his voice. She used to like how he sounded and now it was just like a knife in her chest. She was never stabbed at Snoke’s, just cut, but she’d seen the jagged lines on Kylo’s thighs and how they arced deeper and harsher towards his groin. But the last time she’d seen them was two years ago, at the beach. Now the only person who got to see him was her worst enemy.

She’d heard them having sex last night. She was supposed to stay a day longer and had called dad in tears that she never wanted to come back there again. Poe had let that happen; he didn’t respect her. She’d heard his gasps and moans and the only thing that she saw was hurtful shades of red.

Swallowing, she pushed away from the door to finish packing. Whatever she would leave there, she’d make Kylo bring back. She only had to pack the most important things.

She changed and left he pyjamas on the bed. They had been and old gift from Poe.

She wanted to erase him from her mind. All of the times that he’d cared for her were stupid and just pretend. He only wanted Kylo and sex. He was like Snoke, wanting to bite and hurt her.

She burst out of her room, her backpack over her shoulder.

“Can we go home now?”
Poe tried to smile at her and she just glared.

“Rey.” Kylo’s voice was level and in warning. “You can say goodbye to all of us.”

“No, I don’t want to.” She frowned at him and left their stupid apartment and the stupid glowing stars on the ceiling.

Now Rey understood why Kylo hated Hux when they were younger. The moment a friendship ruptured because of the choices of one person, because he chose someone else, sent ripples forwards and backwards. He’d betrayed him, just like Poe was doing right now to her. She had never hated anyone other than Snoke before, but as she slammed the door of Han’s car, she decided that she hated Poe and meant it.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: References to past rape, abuse, suicidal thoughts, manipulative behaviour, stalking. Plus descriptions of m/m sex.

I apologise in advance for how long this is but I couldn't stop. It kept coming and coming and I just sort of went 'fuck it'. And if you have the energy to read it, I'm sorry for making everyone feel shitty, readers and characters. This hurt so much to write. Every line was pain. And the next chapter is up in the air still. I've put many hints here and it's come down to about five different options.

Thanks so much for reading. And I'm sorry again. The next chapter will be a world of pain, no matter which direction I take.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Rey's plans for escape are interrupted.

The final appearance of Poe Dameron in this fic (even though he will haunt it, just not as a ghost even though I want to make him one).

Read the chapter notes for warnings and pay attention to the tags.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kylo came by every day for a week after she got home. He was missing his break and Rey just slammed the door in his face every time. The front door, the backdoor, her bedroom door. The smack of the wood hitting the frame reverberated in the house and into her confused heart.

Their eyes would lock for only a second and his apologies would cloud his face.

And she didn’t want to hear them or see him.

Every time she looked at him, a piece of her trust broke further. If he had wanted her to be around so much, to be home so much, he should have tried harder before he ruined everything. He was stubborn, selfish, and determined to drive them apart. He was coming there to punish her for not following everything that he said.

She used to listen to him to survive. She kept listening to him because her heart was tied to him: he protected her, saved her, and filled her head with reasons to love him. He was only soft with her, kind to her. He would have to be hard to the other kids to protect her. She was too small, too weak, to protect anyone. He went downstairs, thinking that he was going to die for her. And back then, he acted more to save her than save himself. She’d heard it in his stories, how worried he was about being outside again. But her memories were tainted now not by that boy, but by this man.

She didn’t understand him anymore and that was terrifying. She had only herself to trust.

She could only count on herself to get away from him, to go somewhere that he’d never find her and continue to torment her.

He stopped coming by. Instead, she had to ignore his texts and calls; when he called the house and she’d answer, thinking it was grandma, she’d hang up on him. Poe would text her too, but she blocked that number. She was using her old phone, the one from a while ago, rather than the one that they got her. But she still stared long and hard at her pictures. They were still perfect, by Kylo had ruined them now. They both had. It was hard to look at happiness when it wasn’t real anymore.

Mom and dad told him to give her space. And she had to see a new therapist. And Paige wanted her to talk to her more about not eating. It was just like the last time Kylo had a secret. Everything was always her fault because he lied and she just couldn’t be left alone.
Mom and dad were trying to be nice. They would sit with her and not talk about Kylo, but try to ask what was wrong. It was hard to tell them that her brain was making her think that everything was wrong. The biggest problem made the smaller ones stand out. The words at school hardened in her mind. She was so small and didn’t matter; that thought always pressed on her the hardest.

She was alone. That’s all she could think about when she tried to sleep.

The thought pounded on her everyday when she had to walk by Kylo’s room to go down to the living room. She had to look at Poe’s room every time she tried to practice dancing in the basement. There were pictures of them everywhere and it made her want to scream.

She hated them. She hated her house.

She just didn’t want to be anywhere anymore.

And Kylo was the one to hurt her.

No matter what he said or did, he couldn’t do anything to make this better.

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Exhausted from driving and talking with his parents, Kylo let his head slump against his steering wheel. He hadn’t slept well the last week; the ache behind his eyes was familiar by now, but he still wasn’t used to it. He’d still try to finish his readings and course work that he’d planned to do over the break, and then spent the rest of the time driving back and forth to his hometown to see Rey.

And she wouldn’t even talk to him. It was a silent wall, her brown eyes locking on to him as she shut him out. Han and Leia said that it was enough now. What he was doing wasn’t working and she was just hurting more. Terrified, he told them how to watch for cutting, how he used to do it. They looked genuinely horrified that he had kept that a secret for so many years. Well, that’s why they had to work harder for Rey. If he couldn’t be there, then they had to help her. Then they had to ask the question why he wanted to be there so often now when he’d been avoiding coming home before.

And he didn’t have an answer, or at least not one that anyone would accept. He didn’t have an answer for Poe or his parents. In his heart he knew that it was because he wanted Rey to learn how to be stronger without him, because he wouldn’t always be there. He was solid in his promise that she would come and live with them. But her whole world couldn’t be him. It would hurt too much if he had to work too often; Agent Jinn’s wife couldn’t deal with him being gone all of the time. He’d pressed Poe hard and he hadn’t broken; instead, Rey had.

He wanted her to be independent and now that she was, he just wanted her back.

“What the fuck am I doing?” he snarled to himself, slamming his car door shut. He shook with anger at himself as he turned on the alarm. With heavy feet, he stomped up to their apartment.

At least there, he had someone to talk to.

“No luck?” Poe looked up from his phone. He had his feet up on the coffee table, his cat curled up at his side.
It was pretty much where he’d left him that afternoon.

He didn’t answer, just hanging up his coat. Kylo shooed Bee away and slumped against him.

“Ky, I’m so sorry.”

“Han and Leia said that I need to stop coming. She’s been miserable all week and panics because she knows that I’ll just show up.” Shutting his eyes, he shook his head. “She won’t even let me talk to her and try to explain.”

“Yeah, because your explanation isn’t what she wants. She just wants you to stop being so stubborn and let her have what you guys used to have.” He kissed his forehead, pulling him closer. “I was there all the time, I saw it. I felt it. She liked me in the beginning because you liked me, or at least liked having someone around who made you feel less worse. But you were always the one to come to her rescue. I just stupidly let you keep telling me that it was okay.”

He sat up. “But it was okay. She said it was okay.”

“Yeah, but getting your period out of the blue? Feeling like no one could come and get you? All of the girls I’ve been friends with have unloaded all of that stuff on me without me even asking. It’s scary and stupid and they feel gross all of the time. She wasn’t going to be a little girl her entire life.” Poe didn’t sound mad. He wasn’t trying to draw him into an argument. Kylo had to keep telling himself that. “Sometimes, the way you talk, it’s like we would grow up and she’d still be a serious little six year old, asking us to show her videos about how to bake cookies or play some game with her. Is that how you were thinking?”

Blinking, Kylo dropped his head. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Hey,” Poe lifted his chin. “You’re not fourteen anymore. You’re not trapped there. She was going to grow up the second you got her out of there. And now she is and she’s having a rough time. But no one is going to torture and rape her here. And she has a world of people who love and care about her who are going to help her. Maybe we’ll just have to do it from a distance for a while until we figure it out.”

“That’s not what I want.” Kylo tried to look away but was drawn back to his eyes.

“Yeah, but it’s what you get.”

It wasn’t the answer that he was looking for, but he still nodded and put his head down again.

“Hey, I love you.” Poe whispered into his hair.

“Don’t ever leave me.” He swallowed and ran his hand along the inseam of his jeans. “I’ll…I’ll try to be better. Better to you. Sorry for leaving you alone so much over the break.”

Poe’s hand covered his. “I’m fine on my own, you know that. I hung out with the friends that are here, helped out at the computer lab. It was fine because I knew you’d always come in the door at the end of the day.”

But what if he didn’t one day? “And I would have called if I stayed there.”

“Yeah, reminding me to lock the door and balcony and not let any strangers into the apartment.”

He sighed. “Don’t joke about that.”
“Sorry. I’ll stop. You’re exhausted. Let’s go to bed.”

Licking his lips, he shook his head. “Let’s just sit here for a while.”

Their apartment was quiet and he just drank it in, still trying to rethread the needle of what he needed and what he wanted to do with his life, aside from hurting himself and disappearing.

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Finn was waiting by her locker at school on Monday. He looked at Rey and grinned, pulling her into a quick hug. She liked his hugs, but today it just felt tedious. His step-father always dropped him off too early and he’d wander the halls and do nothing until she got there. He smelled like sugary cereal and she gripped her stomach, but pretended to just be fixing her sweater. She had been late on purpose getting up in the morning to avoid eating breakfast at the table and had already thrown away the sandwich that Han had made her.

“I thought you were going to skip again today?” He didn’t sound mad when he asked the question. He was just being curious. They’d been texting all night, mostly about how worried Rey was about the college semester ending soon.

She hadn’t seen or talked to Kylo in two months.

Rey took off her backpack and opened it to show Finn. “Kaydel wanted to buy some of my old clothes and stuff that I don’t want anymore. She finally has the money, so I came. Even though I really didn’t want to.”

There had been so many meetings about her attendance, especially after she got home in March. The school was patient at first, but now they had to have more annoying meetings with a social worker, not just with her therapist. Even when Kylo was getting into fights, no one like that ever came to the house. Even after he attacked a man and left him in the hospital, the police seemed to take a step back. No one came and looked around their house, asking too many questions. Or many she hadn’t noticed. She didn’t know and it made her empty stomach growl louder to think about it.

Finn leaned against the lockers, looking at the things that she pulled out. It was mostly clothes, stuff that was too big. But there were a couple of stuffed animals in there too. They were kids’ things. Things that she didn’t want to be anymore.

“How are you ever going to forgive him?” he asked, shuffling his feet. “I’m not saying that to be mean or anything, Rey. You’re my best friend and I don’t like how…sad you are.”

She didn’t like it when Finn called her that. Her best friend was Rose, but he had different ideas that didn’t match what she thought. “I’m not that sad anymore. My new therapist is helping me and really understands. He’s really cool and doesn’t get upset when I scream at him.”


She folded her arms, leaning against the lockers beside him, waiting for Kaydel and Rose as the rest of the children, the mean ones and the not-so-mean ones, started to arrive. There were so many kids at her school that reminded her of the ones who’d died; she tried to focus on them and ignore the bullies and their savage words. It was another thing that made her think too much; she had no one to talk to about her memories anymore. But she finally heard her friends laughing from down
the hall and checked the time. They’d have to go to class soon and she really wanted her money.

“Hi guys,” Kaydel said, waving. “Thanks for the clothes, Rey. Sorry it took me so long to save up so much.”

She shrugged, watching her take out the shirts and sweaters, putting them into a plastic bag. She grinned at the plush dolphin and put it there too. Rey had wanted to burn it but if she could get some money for it, then it would be better.

“I don’t mind. The next time you come over, you can pick some other stuff. I really just want to get some new clothes.” Rey was lying, but her friends nodded.

She opened her locker to put her now almost-empty backpack and heard Kaydel sigh, her exhale rising at the end. Snapping her eyes up, she noticed that she’d forgotten a Polaroid of Kylo and Poe that she’d stuck up there months ago. Swallowing, she let the memory of the day play out in her head. They’d come home during a snowstorm. Kylo looked rattled from the drive, but Poe had laughed off how many times they’d almost crashed. They were taking off their coats in the back door and Kylo started telling him how it wasn’t funny at all, making Poe laugh more. She ran upstairs and got her camera, surprising them in a moment.

“Your brother’s boyfriend is so hot.” Kaydel was tilting her head at the picture. “Your brother too.”

Rey snatched the picture from her locker, angry that she still felt anything for them. “You can have it. For two bucks.”

Kaydel’s eyes went wide and grabbed the money from her pocket. “Thanks so much, Rey!”

Putting the money with the rest of it, in the pencil case at the top of her locker, Rey was just happy to let the picture go.

On her way to class, Kylo texted again: He’s going to Florida for the summer. It will just be me if you let me come home. Not sure if I want to go with him and leave you alone.

She almost replied before she deleted it and shut off her phone. Her first-period teacher hated her and would take her phone if it made a sound.

-=−

Kylo stared at his phone, willing her to reply. She hadn’t, for two months. He scrolled up the hundreds of unanswered texts, just to twist the knife in his neck. He told her how much he missed her. He told her how much he loved her. He went over how he never meant to hurt her. But nothing had broken through to her. He let the phone fall from his hand to the floor and sighed, going back to stroking Poe’s hair.

They were watching some movie that Hux had recommended about serial killers. At least he could complain about how inaccurate it was. Fiction could never match the real fear and feelings of being there. They were just people pretending, as Rey used to say when she was small and happy.

“Maybe you should just come with me to my mom’s. Keep giving her some breathing room,” Poe said. He was right. Anything that Kylo did now would just provoke Rey. But the distance and
silence had made it hard to focus on exams last week. Now, they were just waiting for the results and trying to figure their summer out.

“That’s what Han thinks. Or at least that’s what he says to me, so I don’t know. But they have so much to deal with right now and I’m not helping. I need to talk to George about this when we see him on Friday, after the talk.” He was drifting off into self-pity again and he deserved to feel that way.

Turning in his lap, Poe reached over to pause the movie and then looked up at him. “I’ll go to the presentation, but maybe you should spend some time alone with him to talk about this.”

“He likes you. You don’t need to worry.” Kylo looked down and frowned. “But I won’t make you do it.”

“We’ll figure it out, Ky.”

Kylo just shut his eyes. There hadn’t been any fights the last two months. There had been more kissing and hugging and slow love making as Kylo tried to get over his guilt. The sweeter days were bringing him out of the haze, helping him focus on studying. But the stressful days, when he spent most of the night crying, made him touch on the emptiness that was growing without having Rey. This wasn’t just when he was lying when he was sixteen and she was still a child, too innocent to admit that him being in a relationship had hurt her deeply from the start. And he’d been too full of himself to realize it.

“Hey, don’t go away.” Poe reached up, stroking his face to make him open his eyes. “She’ll get better, Ky. You wrote that paper that said that puberty is rough on girls, especially traumatized ones. I didn’t understand half of it, but that one guy you cited…

“Kilpatrick?”

“Yeah, that guy. All that stuff about trauma being effected by hormones and shit? Making it worse? It made sense. Too bad that guy didn’t have any answers for us.” Poe’s eyes were still serious. “It’s got to get better, right?”

He still had hope that it would. That wouldn’t die. He reached down to smooth Poe’s eyebrow. “The studies I’ve read say that with enough help and therapy, it might. She’s so strong. Mom and dad are talking about sending her to where Luke is living now, in Michigan, because he’s closer to some doctor that they found and a school for troubled kids. It’s like I was the experiment for them. They never tried to send me anywhere special.”

Poe frowned at him. “Well, they did, Ky. When you were gone, in Virginia, I was bored one night and Rey went to her friends’ after we talked. And mom was up, looking at family pictures and drinking wine. So I sort of starting talking with her, about you and Rey and how weird it must have been to go from no kids to two kids and then three kids in like two years.”

Kylo didn’t like the idea of his mother spilling secrets to Poe, but then again they had nothing to hide from one another anymore. He was all that he had, losing the other half of him because of lies and stubborn decisions. He just nodded, telling him to keep talking. Like he could stop him.

“She said that it was like a dream at first, hearing that you were alive after so long. Like, how they called and she was at work and thought it was a joke. They’d had to look at so many pictures of dead kids that they’d found over the years and none of them was ever you. But then, there you were out in California of all fucking places. And you saved a little girl.” Poe grinned at him, getting lost in his own story. “And then it was just hell for like two years. Ky, they know you tried to kill
yourself when you were fifteen. They knew all that and didn’t know what to do with you and Rey all by themselves; but they couldn’t send you away from her. She said they talked about sending you away, to try to get you better. You weren’t going to therapy and were fighting all the time.”

His smile faded and he shook his head. “You didn’t do it because of Rey, right?”

“Yes.” He answered quickly, refusing to drag himself down that road again. “I didn’t trust my friends. Everything was weighing on me and I just couldn’t keep my head from suffocating me. If it weren’t for Rey and George, I would have just fucking died and it would have been over.”

“I’m glad that you didn’t.” Poe sat up, resting his head on his shoulder and taking his hand. “But they were looking at places that could handle you, but didn’t want to let you go too far away. They had you back and wanted to keep you there. And you would have felt like you were being sent away from Rey.”

“Then you showed up.” Kylo managed to smile, hoping to change the subject, but failed when the next thought surfaced in his mind. “And I ruined your life and now I’m ruining Rey’s.”

Poe’s fingers tightened in his then loosened. “We can still break up. Or maybe take a break. I’ll go down and spend time with mom and the boys, you talk to your parents and your shrink about what to do with Rey and how to make her feel better.”

“That’s not an option,” he said lowly. But really, it was the only option that they had.

“Okay,” came the reply. “Let’s keep watching this. See if you can solve the crime before the cops.”

Kylo had already figured out who the killer was in the first five minutes, but then again this was just a work of fiction.

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Finn’s friend Ethan looked at the gaming system, lifting it up to look under it. “Are you sure you only want $50 for this? I mean, it’s all I have but you can probably sell it online for more. When did he get it?”

“Like two years ago. I don’t remember. It’s still good, right?” Rey shrugged, leaning against the wall in Kylo’s room. It was Tuesday afternoon, before mom and dad got home. Mrs Hux was in the kitchen, making them something to eat and she’d have to figure out how to sneak her food onto Ethan’s and Finn’s plates. Maybe she’d ask to eat in her room, but those tricks were harder now. She should have paid more attention to how Kylo could hide so many things.

She was never in Kylo’s space anymore and only brought Finn and Ethan there so they could look at the stupid video game thing. They’d turned it on and saw that everything still worked. Kylo wasn’t logged in anymore. He’d set it up for her to play and she’d only used it twice. “Mom and dad won’t let me. He’s got one at college so he won’t miss it.”

“Also, Rey won’t let him come home ever again.” Finn quipped. He was looking at Kylo’s bookcase. Her eyes found a framed picture of the three of them from some ancient Christmas, back when they all were happy. Stamping over, she flipped the picture down.

“I don’t ever want to see him again. But he can come home. I’ll just be in my room when he’s
here.” She folded her arms, trying to calm her heartbeat.

Ethan tilted his head. “So why are you selling his stuff?”

She just shrugged. “I want to buy a new bike.”

He didn’t look like he believed her, but Ethan shrugged and gave her the money. “Thanks so much, Rey. It’s older but mine is broken and I can’t wait until Christmas. And grandma’s birthday money just came in.”

She left them to pack up the cables and cords because she couldn’t be in that room anymore.

It smelled too much like him and her body kept telling her to crawl up onto her side of the bed and imagine his arms around her.

-=-

Kylo had been refreshing the webpage for a half an hour, waiting for his last grade to come in. They were supposed to be in on Monday, and now it was Tuesday morning. Poe was sitting across from him at the table, still grinning over his cereal about his 3.4 average. Last semester it had been 3.2. During first year, he’d barely made it above 2.9 for both semesters. Now, he was finally on track. At least one thing was going right in his life.

“I still don’t know I pulled that off in calculus,” he said, in between crunching. “The last few months were awful and I thought I flunked that fucking thing.”

He nodded, still distracted by hitting refresh. Finally, the final grade popped up and he groaned. “Fucking 3.9. Fucking anthropology fucks me over again.”

“What?”

Kylo turned the computer, furious at himself.

“I just couldn’t think on the day of that exam. I should have asked for it to be delayed. I thought that that prof liked me too.” He groaned and then shook his head. “It’s okay, for the one Masters program in criminology here that I looked at, they’ll drop your lowest grades. But I can’t mess up next year. And the year after.”

Poe shrugged and turned back to the cereal, before sliding the bowl over to him. Annoyed, Kylo started to eat. “And then no messing up for two more years. Got it.”

He’d said it with a smile in his voice, but Kylo still turned in his chair to disguise his eye roll with the excuse of getting more cereal. “I can still take a break. When we figure out what to do with Rey, once she gets better, I can still…”

Poe was already shaking his head, grabbing the spoon from his hand to take another mouthful of cereal from the same bowl. “Nah, we keep going. They’re always looking for people to work with the IT stuff like I’m already doing now, but then I’d at least get paid. Allison told me. I can work there for a bit until it’s time to go to Virginia and find something better there and have some experience. With Rey.”
Kylo snatched the spoon back and sat back, keeping the bowl out of his reach. “Without Rey, I won’t be able to do it. We’ll figure it out.”

That had been their mantra the last two months. And they still weren’t any closer.

Grinning at him, Poe’s eyes shifted into mischief. “We should go out tonight, to celebrate. Everyone else who’s still here is going to be out. Maybe we can get Hux on board. So you two can complain about not being perfect and I can just enjoy being above average for once.”

“You know that they got engaged right?” It was Kylo’s turn to talk with his mouth full. “Last weekend.”

“No shit.” Poe had his hands folded behind his head, revealing the hint of his stomach. “Just copying us.”

Kylo finished eating and when he was rinsing out the bowl, he noticed the pile of mail sitting on the counter. He’d grabbed it yesterday and Poe had ignored it, like he always did. “You got another letter from your dad.

Tensing, Poe quickly settled his elbows on the table. “You didn’t open it again, did you?”

Back in November, Kylo couldn’t control his curiosity and opened one of the constant letters that they got from Poe’s father in California. He didn’t know how he found their address at first, but they showed up every couple of weeks. Poe finally asked and his mother had told him that she’d done it, but she never expected him to actually write to them. She wasn't even sure that he was in California. Kylo had watched the fury in Poe’s face as he yelled at her; he’d never done that before. Kylo wanted him to calm down, but also felt proud of him. In a twisted way, he was happy that he could be angry at someone else. Then, when he’d opened the letter that he’d retrieved from the trash, that same cutting feeling was aimed at him. His excuses of protecting them never worked, but he shouldn’t have needed an excuse. All he was doing was begging for money; it wasn’t anything private, or asking how his son was doing. He just needed money and he was in trouble. He hadn’t opened another one since, but that fight had been harsh and personal: stop going through his things, stop acting so controlling, stop being paranoid and talk about it instead. Control was the last thing that Kylo felt. Poe’s posture told him how he still carried the words that they shouted at one another with him all of the time and had just learned to hide them.

Shaking his head, he turned and handed him the still-sealed envelope. His posture loosening, Poe smiled at him. “I knew I could trust you. Sorry for…that.”

“No, I understand. Trust is important.”

Smirking at him, his lips looking inviting in the gesture, Poe nodded. “Yeah, that’s what I shouted at you. I’m glad that you remembered it.”

Still, Poe burnt the envelope on the balcony until it was ashes. He stomped out the small fire that they were both enjoying watching and let the remains fall to the ground.

Kylo stared at the small bits of paper as they fluttered to the lawn.

They ended up at a loud bar, where Poe knew the guy working the door. Kylo knew that; he’d seen him going there with his friends several times. Poe still didn’t believe him that he wasn’t following him because he was jealous or because he didn’t trust him. He didn’t understand that there was always someone following them and he had to keep him safe.

Hux was in a good mood for once, carrying a pitcher to their booth. “My best grade was in the
hardest course. I’m so fucking thrilled. Pedagogy can go straight to hell and burn.”

Slipping his arm around Poe, Kylo took a long drink from his glass. “My worst grade was in a bullshit course. It’s going to haunt me forever.”

There were plenty of things haunting him. He’d rather focus on the most trivial one.

They had to shout over the music, but eventually the alcohol made it easier to pretend like he’d been listening to the others. He was trying to focus on school rather than worrying about Rey, letting his real thoughts out. Poe kept telling them stories about all of the weird porn that they found on campus computers and how they basically had to ignore it for tenured professors. Hux laughed but Kylo sat back, frowning. Poe gripped his leg; there was always something sexual that made him uncomfortable for no reason. He was fine, they both were. He didn’t need to tense up and be put off from a stupid story.

He let his eyes drift, hoping for a distraction. From the dance floor across the bar, he spotted a blonde girl waving at them intently.

Poe looked at him. He had been watching him, even though his had was still stroking his thigh.

“That’s Allison. But you already know that.”

“She wants you to go dance with her,” he leaned over to say, but his eyes stayed on the tall, thin blonde. He’d seen her and Poe studying in the library or eating lunch, when Kylo had said he was busy but wasn’t really. He knew how often they went out together and Poe had given him her phone number. He didn’t ask for it, but was happy to have it. The rest of his friends’ numbers were on his phone too. But Allison was his main object of confusion. Was Poe attracted to her? Why were they friends? He had asked but the answers didn’t make any of his thoughts less aggravating. He’d even met her twice, retrieving Poe from the weird basement office that they had the volunteer IT workers were using. But they still spent too much time together; he had to let that happen if they were going to be together.

“Can I?” He looked almost pleading. It made his stomach tighten. Still, Poe smiled at him, wiping away the look in a flash of teeth. “Do you want to come too?”

Both he and Hux shook their heads in tandem. Kylo tried to smile back at him, desperate to look relaxed as he trailed his hand across his cheek. “We don’t dance.”

Grinning, Poe finished his beer and took off for his friends. The distance hit him in an instant. Guilt followed, like it always did.

“Am I really that bad?” Kylo asked, watching how easily his hands fell on her hips.

“I’m not sure but…” Hux had to lean forward to hear him over the music. “Are you two still fighting? Are you still following him everywhere?”

He shook his head, turning to shift closer to the other man. “We haven’t had a fight since Rey blew up at us. It’s been solid and good, I think. And I don’t follow him as much. Sometimes I start doing it and don’t even realize that I am.”

“That part is really not good, Kylo.” Hux’s tone of voice was telling him more than his words ever could. “Both the following and what happened with Rey. Why didn’t you tell her right away? Text her when you got home and prepare her? You really fucked up and this won’t go away like when we were kids.”

He sadly held his friend’s eyes and nodded. But still needed to hear it again. Whatever made him
feel worse. And his silence made Hux keep talking.

“She’s hanging out a lot of the time at Paige’s house and she just moves the food around her plate. She mashes it up and hides it napkins. Her mom is really, really worried. How could you have missed that? You know everything about her.” Hux sounded angry, but Kylo appreciated being told how was wrong he was again.

He swept his eyes back out to the dance floor and shook his head. When he turned back, Hux was refilling their glasses. Taking a thick gulp of beer, he stared at the bubbles as they rose in the glass. “I didn’t miss it. I just didn’t want her to think that she wasn’t perfect.”

Hux gripped his shoulder. “Paige is talking to her. She gets like that too and it’s fucking awful. You see how she eats; it’s always small bites. I can only help her so much when she’s here. It’s a lot of work, but there are programs and people she can talk to.”

“How many problems can an eleven year old have?” he asked, absently remembering being eleven and having to take care of an infant under the threat of death. But that was there; this was here.

“It’s…it’s a shitty age,” Hux answered and shook his head.

When Kylo looked back out towards the dancer floor, he’d lost track of Poe. The panic swept over him instantly. He stood, scanning the crowd. He couldn’t find him after two or three sweeps of the room and took off, leaving Hux behind him. He’d only looked away for a moment, trying to be normal and have a conversation. He kept studying the people, trying to find Allison or Poe or his other friends. He couldn’t find him, sending his heart racing until he couldn’t breathe. He scanned the entire open area that he could see: not in the booths or at the tables, not at the bar. The lighting was too low and there were too many people. This is why they shouldn’t leave the apartment. Even together, something could go wrong.

He caught the back of a head leaving out the back exit. And he narrowed his eyes.

It wasn’t Poe, but it was the figure that had always been following them. He was familiar but he couldn’t place where he’d seen him before; it wasn’t Snoke. This wasn’t in his mind. The man was shorter, stockier. He had proof now. He needed to confront the man and see what he wanted from them.

Bursting out the door and into the near-summer air, he saw no one outside of the side entrance.

His hands were shaking. He hadn’t been that slow, pushing by the idiots who didn’t know that he needed to get to that door now. The muddy ground was covered in footprints; he couldn’t find anything that would let him know more than he already knew.

Stepping back inside, he smoothed his hair and rubbed his eyes.

“Hey, Ky.” Poe popped into his line of vision. “Hux said you took off, looking for me.”

Pulling him into his arms, Kylo shook his head, breathing in the smell of the bar in his hair. “I saw someone,” he mumbled.

Poe just sighed. “Come on.”

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Rey pretended to be sick on Wednesday morning, saying that she thought her period was coming. Leia stayed home, working in her office. Both mom and dad had looked at her with scepticism, but Rey tried her best to lie like Kylo did. Don’t make up too much; just keep it simple and pretend to be sick. He was good at making big lies.

“Mom?” Rey asked, leaning against her doorway.

“Yes, dear?” Mom looked up, taking off her glasses. “Do you want more soup?”

Rey nodded. The chicken broth had been good, but she’d pushed the vegetables and chicken pieces aside and tossed them in the garbage, under a bundle of paper towels. “Can I get it myself?”

“It would be good for you to get out of bed, if you feel like it.” Smiling, Leia nodded. “There are those crackers that you like in the cupboard. Just take as many as you want. You need to have your snack later too, remember.”

Turning, Rey grabbed the tray from her bed and padded downstairs, trying to ignore the idea of having a snack later too.

She started to fill her bowl and spotted her real goal: mom’s purse was on the counter. It was the bag that she’d helped her pick out two years ago. Rey loved that bag; it was perfect and white. Mom let her get a matching one, but smaller. Putting down the soup, she glanced up the stairs, towards the office. In the distance, mom was typing.

Sucking in a breath, she slid the zipper open as quietly as she could. The wallet was right on top, above a make-up bag and an umbrella.

Taking out the matching-white wallet, she carefully opened it. She only took the small bills and was careful to leave one of each behind. It was still $45. Rey eyed the $50 bill that was still sitting at the top and took it too.

Quickly closing the wallet and tucking it back in the purse, zipping it shut with careful hands, she could finally exhale. She hid the money under her napkin and went up the stairs with her tray.

She was eating carefully, dragging the soup slowly across the bottom so it would sound like she was eating more than she was.

“Feeling better?” Mom’s voice knocked her from swirling the spoon along the porcelain.

“I’m just thinking,” Rey answered. It was the wrong thing to say because mom came and sat on her bed. Rey’s eyes were locked on the tiny corner of a bill peaking out from under her napkin. She couldn’t move it. But she had to stop looking at it; mom would notice.

“Ben called again. He really misses you.” Leia sighed, leaning down to talk to her. “He’s worried about you.”

“I’m not worried about him.” She took a big spoonful of soup, chewing the vegetables and chicken and swallowing hard. “I don’t care about him anymore.”

“Rey,” mom was being serious, making her look up, “I’ve talked to them both. Neither of them wanted to keep it a secret, but were worried that you’d feel outshined on your birthday. They’re both adults, Rey. They didn’t do this to hurt you and know that lying is wrong. We’re not asking you to be happy about what they’re doing and what their relationship is. We’re just asking you to
let them come home so we can all talk as a family about what’s best for everyone.”

Chewing the inside of her mouth, Rey shook her head. “Poe has another family. He can go stay with them. There are other people that love him now so he can just go away. Mom, Kylo doesn’t really love him. He’s just afraid of being alone and now I’m alone.”

“She’s just afraid of being alone,” Leia said, then sat back and frowned. She shook her head and reached to move the tray; Rey felt her eyes grow wide, but Leia just set it on the floor. She quickly moved into Leia’s arms and hugged her. “You’re not alone. He still loves you. They both love you. But how they love each other, that’s a different.”

“I feel alone,” she whispered. “I don’t mean to feel like this. I love you and dad so much. I love our house, our dog, my friends, dance class…but why isn’t it enough? Mom, why did Snoke put a hole in me that can’t be filled with all of these nice things?”

“I don’t know sweetheart.” Leia held her tighter. “I don’t know why that man did those things to you, or Ben, or all of those other children. But you’re home here, with us. And those boys love you too. This is our family, Rey. Grandma and Uncle Luke too.”

She sat back and wiped at her eyes, even though she wasn’t crying. “Why doesn’t dad have a family?”

“Well, because he’s been alone for a long time too. His parents died before I met him, when he was fourteen. He’s been working hard his entire life to not feel alone either. When we thought we lost Ben, before we ever knew about you, we also felt alone. There was no one to help us. No one had the answers. Maybe all we ever do as people is try not to feel alone.” Leia paused, reaching out to stroke her cheek. “Everyone feels like you do Rey, just not as much, and they find other people to help them not feel that way. And we’ll keep helping you. Ben and Poe want to help you too. Keep telling these things to your new therapist. Remember he’s coming tomorrow.”

Rey still frowned, pulling back to rest against her pillows. “I heard them having sex the last time I was there.”

Exhaling, Leia shook her head. “They shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry, Rey. We always tried to keep that part from you, or at least help you understand what they were doing. God, how we tried. Rey, we didn’t want to keep this from you; some of the books say one thing, some of the books say another thing. But like I told you then, if they felt ready and really cared about one another, and used protection, then they could explore that part of their relationship. But it was very inappropriate that they did that and I’ll tell him that the next time he calls. Which will be soon.”

“When can I have sex?”

The question sat thick in the air, like the words hadn’t left her mouth but were still just in her head.

Leia licked her lips, but didn’t look mad. “Well, do you have a boyfriend?”

“No.” She pouted as she spoke.

“Do you want a boyfriend?”

“Kind of.”

Leia shifted again, moving closer to her. “Well, let me give you two stories here so you can decide which one you think sounds better. When I was about your age, maybe a little older, my mother—grandma—sat down with me and said ‘Leia, you’re a pretty girl, and pretty girls should know this.
A boy will promise you the world to have sex with you. And you should want more than the world and more than a boy.’ And I think that still makes sense for you. You’re very pretty, Rey, and boys will say things that they probably don’t mean to feel better about themselves. But, my other story is the one I told Kylo and Poe. When you find someone who you respect, and respects you back, when you trust one another and can talk about anything and everything, then have sex and deal with how awkward it is afterward.”

Rey’s eyes widened. “Did they say that it was awkward?”

Chuckling, Leia shook her head. “As if they’d tell me. And Rey, it’s like we talk about in therapy. Sex is something that you do not do just to please another person, but because you’re there as equals. When you’re a bit older, when you feel like you can talk to a boy like we’re talking now, then maybe you’ll be ready. But always come to us first, just in case you’re getting carried away without knowing better and might be doing stupid things because you like someone.”

“Like Kylo did.”

“Yes.” Leia pursed her lips. “And we still don’t think he should have taken you that night.”

Rey liked revisiting that night. She got to make up her own mind and followed Kylo into danger. She thought she understood what a boyfriend was and would rather still have those childish thoughts than the ones that she had now. Kylo just needed a friend; she never thought that he’d take him away from her.

“I went because I had too. I just thought I could keep going.”

“Sweetie, we need to figure out what’s happening at school. And with your eating. How to make you feel better all of the time. And if you can forgive them, we’d love to send you back when you have more of these bad thoughts figured out. Okay?” Leia tucked a strand of hair behind her ear.

Rey nodded. “I’ll think about it. When I’m not feeling so sick.”

“Well, your soup is cold. Do you want me to warm it up?”

Rey sat up. “No. I like it better this way.”

Leia nodded and left her alone and Rey could finally climb down from her bed to get her money and hide it with the rest of it in her pencil case.

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Kylo sighed, nuzzling closer to Poe. It was early on Thursday morning, probably around 8 a.m. They woke up on the couch together an hour earlier, too drunk to make it to the bed last night. Kylo always found it easier to have sex in the morning, when he was just waking up and still couldn’t remember who he was or how he’d fucked up so many people. It felt so innocent, hearing Poe gasp beneath him in the heated moments from only an hour ago. He was still living those sounds as he stirred in his arms.

“The cat is hungry,” Poe said, lifting his head to kiss him. “And you’re too big for this couch. I’m all curled up in the corner here getting crushed.”
“It’s your cat.” He smirked in response. “Get up and feed him so we can go to bed.”

Groaning, Poe shifted over him, purposely elbowing him in the stomach as he went. He pulled on his shorts and grimaced at Kylo. He’d grabbed whatever he could to clean up afterwards.

“Thanks, asshole. I’m going to shower after this. Come join me?” He still met his eyes with a raised eyebrow, despite wiping their combined semen onto a kitchen towel.

Kylo sat up, stretching his neck. They had stopped using condoms years ago, both satisfied that there would never be anyone else. They were together, but as long as Rey hated them he couldn’t let go of the last of his guilt. Poe was talking with Bee in Spanish, telling him how much he loved him and how special he was. How they weren’t bad daddies just because he didn’t get to eat everything that he wanted all of the time. He sat down, spooning wet food into a bowl and the cat still buzzed around him, ignoring it until he got a kiss on the head. Poe looked up and met his eyes and shrugged.

“So what? You talk to him too. I really need to shower. Clean up the couch a little before the hot water runs out.” He sounded serious, but he was mostly joking. Except for wiping down the couch.

Kylo, still lingering in his hangover, managed not to kick Bee as he grabbed the cloth from the kitchen. He did the best that he could but thought about getting a new couch for the start of the next semester. This one was still a little too small, but it was still better than their first couch.

He picked up their clothes and put them in the laundry basket in the main washroom. He put the covers from the throw pillows in there too, along with the light blanket they’d left there for whoever had to sleep on the couch when one couldn’t stand the other.

But it hadn’t been like that in so long.

Checking his face in the mirror, he realized that he needed to shave.

Poe was in their washroom, running the water too hot already.

“Hey,” Poe said, turning as he stepped over the tub and behind the shower curtain. “Thanks for the good morning. And sorry for bitching at you right after.”

Pulling him into a wet kiss, Kylo leaned in closer. “No, it was good. I’m okay.”

Still in his arms, Poe kissed his shoulder, his hands running up his back. “You’re freaking out less lately. Is it weird that I’m worried about you not being freaked out?”

Letting his mind wander, he leaned closer, embracing how alone they were in that moment. It was something delicate. It wasn’t fighting until they were both red in the face and in pain or arguing about who did what wrong; who forgot to buy what; who forgot to feed the cat; who was hurting Rey more by being there and doing what he wanted. “Maybe don’t get used to it.”

“Yeah?” Poe smirked, pulling back to meet his eyes. The water pinned his loose curls against his forehead. “I won’t. But I know things are shitty and up in the air right now, but I love you. We’re not going to be okay until Rey is too, but you still love me, right?”

“Of course I do.” Kylo narrowed his eyes at him. “Why wouldn’t I love you?”

“No idea.” Smiling, Poe shrugged. “Let’s just shower. I’ll tell you later.”

He was shaving after, still mulling over the question; Poe was making breakfast. He could smell
something burning and just ignored it. He couldn’t be mad about every little thing. He needed to stop following him around, but whoever was after them was probably going to show up again and he needed to be ready. No more alcohol for a while.

He was dressed for the day, but Poe was still in pyjama pants.

“Sorry that it’s all fucked up. I tried. But I suck at so much.” He put the pan of eggs directly on the table and Kylo had to reach back to grab a cork form to put under it. “Sorry about that too.”

They ate and Kylo started to feel growing nerves at how quiet he was being.

“What’s wrong?”

Poe lifted his shoulders, keeping his eyes down. “I booked my ticket for Florida yesterday, before we went out. I go on Monday. My mom paid for it. I’m tired of using your parents’ money, but my mom has money now too so she wants me to be there. And now that my grades are good, I can apply for those scholarships. Mom can help a bit there too. Your parents and you don’t have to take care of me so much.”

His parents were helping them to a point, but most of it was because of what he’d been through. And he was the one making sure that they had a safe place to live where no one would hurt them.

Blinking, Kylo put his fork down. “They still want to help us. That fund is for you too.”

“I know, I know. But Ky, I feel like the biggest dick on the planet whenever I see you text Rey and then frown into oblivion when she doesn’t answer. Driving across the state just to get a door slammed in your face. I think about what she said to us and what idiots we were for not telling her right away. I want to marry you. I love you. But we haven’t been apart for longer than a week in so long. What, six weeks of you being in Virginia when I was 17? That first summer when I was 15? When I go see my family, it’s only been for a week here and there. I want you all of the time and it’s not your fault that it took you a while to catch up.” Poe licked his lips and then started eating again. That only made Kylo more nervous.

“You want to break up.”

“That’s not what I’m saying. I’m just saying…some time apart. Let us both breathe. And you can go home and take care of Rey and say that it was my idea and maybe get me in her good books for a bit, you know?” Poe had pushed his plate aside and reached for his hand. “Ky, things have been better when it’s just been us, but she’s everything. You saved her. She’s always going to be tied to you and only you. I tried my best and, bam, that just blew up in my face.”

Kylo squeezed Poe’s hand like he thought it would disappear. “So we’re not breaking up, but taking some space?”

“Yeah, just to…I’m not going to sleep with anyone else when I’m away. I’ll just be at my mom’s house, taking care of the boys. She’ll probably make me get a job to make sure I’m not getting lazy from all of the white-people money. And Ky, I’ve got this,” he pulled away, lifting up his hand. “No one’s going to try to pick me up and if they do, I’ll tell them to fuck off. It’s just for a couple of months. We’ll talk everyday. And it will just be you and Rey for the summer. Like it was that first summer.”

Slowly breathing out, Kylo focused on the ring. He’d spent too much time trying to figure out the size and what kind to buy rather than what it meant. “You’re not leaving me?”

“Ky, no. Go home to your parents. Talk to Rey. Let’s just…not think about it for now. It’s on the
table, but don’t go overthinking it. Have a weekend together. Flesh it out on Sunday night? Wait until the last minute like we usually do?” Poe was trying to be kind and reached out to take some eggs from his plate. “It’ll just be the summer. And then we’ll be back together.”

“And you won’t be with anyone else?” Kylo was ignoring Poe’s fork, poking around on his plate on his side of the table. “Please.”

The echoes of Allison’s hands around Poe’s neck flashed in his mind.

“You’re the only person who I’ve ever really been with. I messed around a lot before we met, but just thinking about anyone else…no. Never. The good, the bad, you’re all there is for me.” He tilted his head. “Ky, I love you and…maybe I just need to stop being in the way for a while.”

“I love you too.” It was all Kylo could say. “Let’s just…okay. Let’s have a weekend. Tomorrow, George will be here and then it will just be us. I can talk to him and figure some more things out.”

“Great. Greatness.” Poe exhaled and Kylo finally saw how tense he had been by how he moved easier after he breathed out. “Bee needs his shots and we have the vet appointment at one. Let’s do nothing for a while and then maybe you can take me for lunch at that weird Vietnamese place we saw last time? And then we take him home and do nothing the rest of the day?”

He swallowed. “Sounds like a good plan.”

They ate the rest of their breakfast in silence. Kylo texted Rey I think he wants to break up with me.

He managed not to cry until he was alone, punching another hole in the pantry wall as he pretended to look for more paper towels.

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Dr. Windu was so much different than Ahsoka. He was tall and seemed mean at first. But back then, she wanted someone to be mean to her. It would teach her how not to be so nice to everyone.

He had come over for dinner on Thursday night. Rey ate so she could make him believe that she was eating like that all of the time. She liked cooking, but hated eating. She hated feeling full and fat and lazy. Tomorrow, she’d go for a run before school, or maybe sneak out and run around the track to avoid stupid first period. Tomorrow would be the start of everything.

Mom put the teapot down on the coffee table and nodded at them before going back to her office to work. Han was in the garage. Everything looked normal and she hoped that Dr. Windu would think the same. The social worker had been by again that week and said that everything still looked good. Han and Leia were working less and Kylo hadn’t been by. Things were stable. Maybe they would stop coming if he kept away.

“Have things been better this week, Rey? You only missed school yesterday.” He sipped at his tea, sitting back and looking at her.

“I thought I was sick yesterday. But I wasn’t. Sometimes I still get the pains in my stomach. But they’re getting better.” She shrugged, shifting her teacup in its saucer.

“Hmm…don’t lie to me, Rey. We agreed on that a month a go. You don’t lie to me and I don’t lie
to you. And then we’ll have a good relationship.” He looked serious, his face getting intimidating.
“Right?”

“Yeah.” She didn’t mean it, but wanted him to believe it. “Yes, I know.

“We’re going to talk about Kylo now. Is that all right?”

She shrugged. “He’s been texting me all day. How his dumb boyfriend is going to break up with
him. He’s trying to make me feel bad about it and make me think that it’s my fault. I’m going to be
happy when they break up because then Kylo will be alone too.”

Windu sipped at his tea. “Okay, I want you think about how he’s feeling right now about this.
Don’t think about how you feel, or how you think he wants you to feel. Think like he would.”

Exhaling, Rey reluctantly put herself into Kylo’s head. She had to push through thicker anger this
time; everything was so clouded with the last few months of building up a wall around her feelings
for him and about him. “He’s afraid of being alone. He’s afraid of dealing with all of the things that
he’s done wrong and facing them. And he’s afraid that if someone isn’t there, he might kill himself
because I hate him right now.”

“That sounds very serious, Rey. Despite how you feel about him right now, you still care about
him. Correct?” Dr. Windu’s voice didn’t change, but he did put down his cup. She couldn’t figure
out what that meant.

Frowning, Rey slammed the door on her pathway to Kylo’s thoughts and folded her arms. “I
wouldn’t be so mad if I didn’t care.”

“And your parents know this?”

“My parents are dead.”

He cleared his throat. “Let me correct myself: your current parents know what’s going on?”

She shook her head. “He only talks to them about me. They don’t even know how much they
argue. When I was there, Poe was just pretending to care about me so I can’t trust what he told me.
Kylo used to tell me all the time about the things that they argued about. Then he stopped because
he wanted me to think that he actually loves him.”

Dr. Windu took another long sip of his tea. “How often did you argue with him?”

“When I got mad,” Rey answered. “When he was lying. That’s why I got so mad that they didn’t
tell me about getting married. That means Poe has him forever.”

But she knew what divorce was. And she knew that people argued all of the time got divorced. But
Kylo still got whatever he wanted and Poe was too stupid to ever leave him.

The thoughts were getting to be too much and her lip started to quiver.

“What does forever mean?”

She glared at him. “What?”

He punctuated each of his words. “What does forever mean?”

She couldn’t roll her eyes. He hated that. Instead, she folded her legs underneath her and thought
about the question. “It means…forever. Like, a long time.”
He folded his hands, tipping them at his mouth. He wasn’t impressed.

Frowning, she dropped her head. “It means that I’ll always have to share Kylo. I still...I guess I still want to live with Kylo, but only him. I want to be mad at him for a long time for this lie. If he came to get me now, I wouldn’t go with him. But maybe when my stomach stops hurting and I stop feeling alone, I’ll want to see him again. And give him a hug. I don’t really want him to kill himself because Poe is done with him. That part isn’t my fault. It’s all of Kylo’s mistakes.”

“But you make mistakes too, Rey. Right?”

Pulling her legs up under her chin, she shook her head. “Not like Kylo. Sometimes I’m mean, but not because I hate other people. Maybe they were mean to me first, or I’m having a bad day. He could be mean for no reason. And he was mean for not telling me that he wants forever with someone else.”

Sighing, Dr. Windu looked at her with his dark eyes. “But aren’t you a part of that forever too?”

Rey bit her lip. She didn’t want to start believing that she was part of what Kylo had planned anymore.

Hope would keep her from doing what she wanted to do.

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“I don’t know what to do, George. I’ve already lost her. I can’t lose him.” Kylo’s hands were firmly around his water glass, staring at it to avoid seeing the look on the agent’s face.

It was well after dinner on Friday, before 8 p.m., and Kylo had said all of the praise he could about the talk that Agent Jinn had given. The auditorium wasn’t as full as he thought it would be, but he saw many of his classmates there. They only came up to talk to him when he was standing next to George afterwards, speaking with one of his professors. Kylo hadn’t felt calm all day until he saw George that afternoon before the talk. Poe kept gripping his leg during it. He’d noticed how quiet he’d been since their conversation yesterday, and had just repeated that it would just be for the summer. It would be okay. Fix things with Rey and then be together again.

“Well, Kylo,” George was speaking so he had to meet his eyes and sit up. “When was the last time you talked with him about what he wanted? You surprised him with an engagement that you said that you’d never discussed before and then asked him to lie by omission to Rey. What does he want to do with his life?”

But they did talk about these things. They talked about being together; that meant getting married. And Poe had basically said that he’d be fine doing nothing for a while after school. His degree would be useful too, when he was done school. It was true that he knew that Poe hated studying and wanted to have more freedom. But had he really asked him to lie to Rey?

He was about to speak when George raised his hand. “And if your next words are going to be ‘be with me’ then I think that you should reconsider them. What does your fiancé want to do with his life?”
He knew that his mouth snapped shut too quickly and put his head down. “We’ve been talking about something in IT. He does some part-time stuff on campus. It’s not exactly his dream job, but he likes solving problems and telling people what they did wrong.”

“What’s his degree in?”

Of course he knew. He helped him plan his course schedule.

“Physics and math,” Kylo replied. “He’s always been good at it, even though he thinks he’s not.”

“How often do you talk about how he’s feeling?”

“All of the time.” Kylo felt himself tensing and tried to shake it off. George was asking important questions that he should answer truthfully. “When I’m not a mess.”

Sighing, George took a long drink from his wine glass. “I’ve always been honest with you, haven’t I? So you have to trust me right now. If you want to be an agent and work with me, you need to handle a lot of stress and show that you’re capable of that on the psychological exam. I can only help you so far in getting prepared, but controlling your anger issues and your depressive episodes, along with your interpersonal skills, are amongst a dozen other things standing in your way. If you want a stable partnership, you need to talk and not just after you’ve had a fight or argument. Fights won’t happen if you communicate before about what you’re both feeling. That goes for you and Rey as well. You messed up, I understand that, but you can start working on that relationship with her once you realize how and why you messed up.”

Kylo wanted to get angry, but just nodded instead. What Agent Jinn had just told him was real and honest and made more sense than he wanted to admit. “Thank you. I needed to hear that. And I’m already working on all of those things. I’ll be ready in four years. I won’t let you down.”

“You rarely have.” George smiled and finished his wine.

And Kylo felt a little better about the future.

He walked Agent Jinn back to his on-campus hotel, embracing him and thanking him again for the talk and the dinner. He had to go to the gym, to work off the annoyance and stress from the last week.

It was a warm evening. It was almost summer. It was almost time to deal with being alone again.

8.15 p.m.

Swiping his keycard, he glanced around the entrance to the building and lifted his bag. He’d felt dumb carrying around his gym bag to dinner and at the talk; it was hard to fit under his seat. But he just forced through with what he wanted. There were only a few students across the way, smoking outside of the math library. No shadows. Maybe he’d stop seeing them if he worked harder at therapy. Maybe everything would get better if he quit lying to himself.

Lingering in the entrance, he slipped off his shoes and texted Poe.

At the gym. Be home at 10.

Really? How was dinner? Mine was great, but I sure did miss you. Miss me?

Sorry. Of course I missed you. How was your night?
Pretty great. Saw the guys and Ally. Had some beers. Going to do finish the laundry soon. It should be done by the time you get home.

Okay. He paused, his thumb hovering over send, then quickly added Thank you.

No problem. Love you.

“Hey, Kylo.” Another voice broke his concentration and he looked up and pocketed his phone instead of replying. Arthur was across the floor, on the other side of the check-in desk, waving. “How’s it going, man?”

“Good,” he answered. Everyone was always bothering him to make new friends. He was almost there with Arthur. He would sometimes spot for him, but tonight he just wanted to run his frustrations away.

They changed together and Kylo kept the conversation going about his grades and the talk that he’d been to. He wasn't trying to distract him, but more himself. He’d seen his scars before. They had faded over time, but some of them were thick and rigid and would never go away. It just looked like he’d been in fights, he decided. He could play that role. But his forced conversation didn’t lead anywhere. Arthur didn’t care that much about school; he never had. He was on the lacrosse team and changed the subject to some party they were going to have that weekend as they left the locker room.

“You should come. Bring your girlfriend. She’d like it, I’m sure.”

Biting his lip, Kylo nodded. Why hadn’t they talked about this before? Because Kylo kept secrets from everybody. “It’s actually a he.”

“Oh,” Arthur quirked his head. “That’s okay too, you know. A couple of guys on the team are out too. It’s easier to be at a smaller school, I guess.”

The weight on his chest shifted lightly, and Kylo managed to give him a light smile. “I’ll ask him when I get home. He goes here too. You've probably at least heard him. Shorter than me, dark hair, talks all the time and makes annoying comments. He probably asked to change the music and danced to it.”

Arthur laughed. “Oh, you’re Dameron’s boyfriend. Okay, I get it now.”

“Get what?” Why did he have to be such a thick jock? Kylo thought, his splash of good mood fading in almost an instant.

“Why he talks about you all the time. This one chick tried to pick him up and he stopped for like fifteen minutes to show her pictures of, I guess, you. I think there’s still a chance for a threesome there.” Arthur winked.

Hiding his disgust at sharing Poe in any way, he forced a smile to fit in with the environment. “I guess I’ll ask him that too.”

When he was left alone at his machine, Kylo could finally run in peace, listening to music and feeling his legs burn on a track that led nowhere. Dealing with Rey hadn’t led anywhere: his parents wanted him to stop texting her and talk through them. Maybe she was open to seeing him again, but that was just a maybe. His and her therapists and his parents suggested a neutral meeting place, at a spot where Rey would feel comfortable but still give her space to leave if she didn’t want to talk. She was hurting and he’d caused it. She wasn’t healthy and was missing school because of how he’d lied to her again and how he couldn’t protect her enough in the past, in their
old life there.

He’d let Snoke touch her, hurt her. If he hadn’t done anything, he’d have taken her from him.

And Kylo was just like Snoke by pushing her away and drawing her into torment.

His anger pushed him faster until he needed to slow his pace again, his lungs burning.

Settling into a slower jog, he thought about what George had told him about Poe, opening the next box in his already flailing emotions. He really was taking up too much space in the relationship. But he did listen to Poe. He was worried about the twins and how his mom was coping with them in daycare. How much he missed them and wanted them to go to Florida to see them again more often and not be worried about him while he was gone. He was watching his brothers grow up from so far away and missed them. That was Kylo controlling him, keeping him away from what he wanted. Like with following him, he was being unfair and hurtful.

Space might be good for them. He could focus on Rey and Poe could decide what he wanted to do for a change.

He felt right about himself as he finally left the machine and checked his phone.

9.30.

But no follow-up texts. He rolled his eyes and put his phone back into his pocket. Poe could punish him too.

Quickly towelling off and changing, he avoided talking to Arthur again. He always showered at home. Changing in front of others was almost okay now, but showering always put him off and sent his shoulders rigid. Poe would be there and he could shower and then they could watch a movie. That’s how normal Fridays worked, but this was an important one. There wouldn’t be this routine again until the fall. He knew that tonight he wouldn’t be able to see past the opening credits of the movie before he’d want to hold him, be inside him.

Sex wasn’t a punishment anymore. Sex was what connected them.

9.45.

He’d timed it right and would be home exactly at ten. He didn’t care about being late to most things, but getting home on time meant that he was consistent. Poe wanted him to come home. He could keep that the same. He needed to be better, talk more about what he wanted to do. The walk around the buildings behind campus was swift and clear. He always enjoyed the walk; the streets were well-lit and he could watch how anyone moved.

9.58.

Glancing at his phone, he took off his headphones when he reached the front door. He was tired and still sweaty from the gym and looked forward to being clean again.

Climbing up the first-floor stairs, he was still scratching at the lingering dampness in his hair when he heard a cat meow.

Their cat.

Bee sat at the top of the staircase, surrounded by a mess of their clothes and an overturned laundry basket.
He took the final few stairs in two strides and his breath caught in his throat. Their door was ajar and there was a smudge of blood on the knob.

All feeling left his arms and his heart thundered in his ears as he reached for the door.

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Rey heard mom and dad’s door close and quietly shifted out of bed.

She had to make sure she was as quiet as she could be, like before when Snoke was always listening for them to move.

Her backpack was under the bed; she’d hidden it there after school, after she’d dumped out all of the dumb books and useless homework on her desk. Why did Kylo think that school would help? That school was just filled with bullies and mean people. Her friends were nice; they helped. But they didn’t stop the older kids from shoving her and calling her fat or stupid. Or a rape baby. Or how her brother was a psycho, or a homo, or everything mean that they could come up with.

She couldn’t be there anymore. She was going to explode and take everyone down with her in the flames if she didn't leave.

The bus for the station left at 9 p.m. and then that bus would leave at 9.30 p.m. She had enough money for both, finally having saved enough. Her heart had felt lifted because mom and dad had looked exhausted that night so they wouldn’t be checking on her. She’d actually talked at dinner, letting them know how Dr. Windu had helped her work through how she could talk to Kylo. She still needed to decide when, but she was ready.

And they bought her lies. It made the hairs on her arm stand on end.

She looked at the address for her grandparents in California again and nodded to herself. She had asked Agent Jinn a week ago about her family, apologizing for not emailing him in so long. He’d said it was okay, but maybe she wasn’t ready for that information yet. Still replying politely, Rey thanked him for answering and that she understood. She found the information instead by looking up her last name, the real one. She didn’t want to be a Solo anymore; she had never really been. She found some people that she was sure were her grandparents; one had the same name as her dad. It had to be them. She just had to take the bus to Albany, and then the train to Chicago. Then she could get to California.

She felt bad for not saying goodbye to Lumpy, or mom and dad, but she’d hugged them all before she went to bed. They would be okay. It wasn’t like she mattered that much anyway. She was just a bit of dust that was attached to Kylo as he was swept back into their lives. Other people had forgotten her, so maybe that would happen again. No one would remember her if she went away. Everyone was so mad at her and felt bad all of the time. If she wasn’t there, they’d have fewer problems.

*Remember your snack, Rey*. Maybe she didn’t want a snack because it was just making her fatter and maybe that’s why Kylo didn’t want her anymore and why everyone was always mad at her. And why everything hurt all of the time. If she was smaller, then maybe she wouldn’t feel so much and she would be less sad.

*Rey, come and watch this with me and tell me what you think*. Dad always tried to trick her into
talking about her feelings with movies or television. She was tired of talking about pretend emotions as a way of talking about real ones.

*Want to help me make dinner and tell me about your day?* She just wanted to make dinner without help or talking. Why couldn’t everyone just leave her alone?

It was only about her because she was the problem. But Kylo had made her that way by choosing someone else.

He’d made a promise and he’d broken it.

Sliding open her bedroom window, she crept out onto the ledge. Kylo had shown her how easy it was to climb out that window when she was seven. She blocked Poe from the memory and enjoyed the feeling of Kylo guiding her out and showing her how to climb down the house and onto the lawn. He had a harder time going out his window, but hers was easier. He’d tried it when he was a kid and knew how to find the right spots to use.

When she reached to close the window, she slipped and bumped her chin. Blood quickly spilled onto the ledge and she had to ignore it and keep climbing. Mom and dad wouldn’t notice that she was gone until morning anyway. She’d be halfway to California by then.

Finally on the ground, she pulled a bandage from her purse. The cut wasn’t that big, but it still looked stupid to have a plaster on her chin.

She had to run to catch the local bus, but made it on time.

Everything was going perfectly, except for the fact that she fell.

She never understood why Kylo didn’t try to run away ever. He could have done it at anytime. The only time that he tried to run away was just because of *Poe* and never because of anything that he felt. He was too afraid of strangers, she thought as she looked around the bus at everyone there. She knew who was scary and who wasn’t by now. She knew to sit near older women so they’d feel sorry for her. She’d done it many times when she took the bus to the mall because Kylo wasn’t around to drive her there.

The bus finally pulled up to the station and she started with her plan.

Breathing in and out, she stood up taller. She had to look older. She knew that. She just needed to get away. The entire week had felt like a black cloud and the skies had to clear.

She picked the window with a woman. Women were always nicer, or at least she could talk to them more until they understood what she wanted.

“Can I have a ticket to Albany please?” She’d practiced the words so many times and her voice sounded confident.

The woman leaned back and frowned at her. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. You’re not old enough.”

“But you didn’t even check.” And she was old enough. She was a woman now. She could take the bus by herself. “But I have to. Please.”

Sighing, the woman leaned forward again. “You need to be at least thirteen to travel alone and go out of state. And you need your parents to fill out a form. I’m really sorry.”

Rage was easy to find, but so were anger and sadness. She couldn’t yell at this woman. But she
needed to get out of here. The hole inside threatened to grow wider as she bit her lip.

“But,” she started, pushing back tears. “But my brother just dropped me off. He told me that he
didn’t want to take care of me anymore. My parents are dead and I have nowhere to go.”

The woman looked at her long and hard. Rey’s heart lifted for a moment when she reached for her
keyboard, but then stopped. “There are rules here that I have to follow. But if you’re alone, then I
can call someone to help you find your brother. I need to call the police and…”

Rey bolted then, her plans quickly falling apart. But she had the money. This should have worked.
She had saved enough for a ticket. Why wasn’t she old enough? Why wasn’t anything ever fair?
She stomped her feet and tears came to her eyes. Even as she tried to blink them away, they
wouldn’t stop.

“Hey, are you okay?”

She looked up and a pretty girl in a blue coat was the source of the voice. She was smoking a
cigarette. At least Kylo and Poe never smoked, but this girl looked nice anyway.

“It’s fine,” she answered, sitting down on the curb. “They wouldn’t let me buy a ticket.”

The girl shrugged and Rey was trying to figure out how old she was. She was tall and thin and had
beautiful green eyes. “Well, that sucks. Where are you trying to go?”

“To my grandparents in California,” she replied, hugging her knees. She shouldn’t be talking to
someone who she didn’t know. But the hint of green in the girl’s eyes reminded her of one of the
kids back there. It was easy to imagine that the girl hadn’t really died and escaped somehow. Rey
felt herself being drawn into that fantasy and couldn’t let it go. “I just want to see them.”

Sitting down beside her, the girl nodded. She smelled bad, but Rey tried to ignore it. Escaping
Snoke meant going through bad things. She probably didn’t have that much money. Kylo got so
much money because he could come home to nice parents. Maybe the other kids never got that.
Rey was searching for the girl’s real name as she started to speak. “That sucks that they won’t let
you go alone. But they’re assholes like that. I always had to get my parents to fill out a dumb form
for the bus or the train. And they need so much information. Totally unfair.”

“My name is Rey,” she said carefully.

“Hi, I’m Casey.” She snuffed out her cigarette and reached for her hand. Her fingers were boney in
her grip. “It seems like you had a rough night.”

Rey frowned and Casey pointed at her chin.

“It’s okay.” Rey tried to shrug. “I fell. Earlier.”

“That’s okay. I fall down all of the time.” Casey smiled. Now that she was closer, Rey could see
how thin she was and how yellow her teeth were. She smelled acidic, something toxic. Her hair
had looked beautiful from a distance, but close up it was dirty and oily, like Kylo’s when he spent
all day in bed.

She hadn’t escaped Snoke. She was just a hurt person. Who was probably out to hurt other people.
Kylo wasn’t there to save her. So she had to save herself.

“It’s okay.” Rey tried to shrug. “I just wanted to go somewhere.”
“Well,” Casey leaned back, “I might be able to help you. My boyfriend is going to pick me up soon. You can try at the train station. Maybe you can at least get to a ticket that way.”

Rey tried to ignore how strange Casey looked and latched on to how she sounded. Her voice meant that she wanted to help her. Maybe she didn’t need to think so wrong about her after only a few minutes by how she looked. Kylo always judged people instantly. She couldn’t be like him. She had to find her own way. “Could you go with me? Take me to Albany?”

Casey laughed. “I kind of have a night planned, Rey, but maybe I can help you get a ticket.”

Nodding, Rey smiled. Kylo wouldn’t trust a girl like Casey. But she’d been hurt too. She’d been in pain too. Kylo ignored how girls felt, except for her. He didn’t understand how much it hurt to be a girl. He didn’t know how much it hurt to re-remember what Snoke had done to her. He’d bit her where only people who she trusted could touch her. He’d shoved his fingers inside of her and she didn’t understand what was happening. It hurt more when she thought about how Kylo had made her forget all of that. Maybe Casey knew too.

A car pulled up in front of them. It looked like a nice car, like one that mom would drive.

The guy that got out of the car finally made her listen to the distant warning bells she’d been ignoring the entire time. He was skinny too; his teeth were bad when he smiled. She should have felt this earlier. She should have listened to Kylo. He didn’t trust strangers for a reason. He had taught her this and in her anger at him she’d been pushing it away.

She needed him so much right then.

And she’d left her phone at home.

“I just remembered,” Rey said, suddenly standing. “I can call my friend to come help me. It’s okay. Thanks for helping, Casey.”

“Are you sure, Rey?” Casey reached for her hand and Rey pulled away.

“Yes, I’m fine.” Rey smiled again, forcing it. “Thanks for helping me.”

She turned and fled inside the station, going towards the payphones. She pretended to put in some money and dial. Not wanting to turn around, she listened to every person who came into the station and hoped that it wouldn’t be them.

When she finally turned to look out the window, they were gone.

She hung up the payphone and gripped the straps of her backpack.

Where could she go now?

She didn’t want to go home; she’d left that place. She couldn’t get a ticket; that was useless. She was still just a stupid kid. That’s why Kylo didn’t want her. She was still too young and stupid. He just wanted Poe, who could at least get a train ticket and do what he wanted. He only wanted to do college things and get married. Her anger made it easier to leave the station and look around. There were more strangers there, lurking and looking at her.

Gritting her teeth, she started walking towards the bus stop again. She was really too hungry to think. She knew that the older kids hung out at the diner downtown. If she went there, then maybe she’d see someone who she knew. Maybe they could help her get a ticket.
Breathing in and out, she took off her backpack and gripped it to her chest. Now she was looking at everyone like they wanted to hurt her. Why couldn’t Kylo just leave her alone? His stupid ideas only made her hurt.

The bus ride felt endless and she was tired. As her head touched the window, she thought for a second about going home. She wouldn’t even have been missed. But that thought made her shake away her compulsion. Of course she wouldn’t be missed either way.

As the bus creaked to a stop outside of the diner, it only reminded her of bedsprings and her next idea of calling Kylo died in that instant.

It was warmer inside. It was after 10 p.m. but there were still so many people in the building. None of them were the kids from school and she tried to push beyond that. She could do anything. Kylo had taught her that; she was capable of what she wanted to do. Even though she hated him and his stupid boyfriend and how they had disgusting sex, she could look at the good parts. She straightened her shoulders, trying to look taller and older, trying to approach the counter. But her resolve was starting to break. She couldn’t get anywhere or do anything on her own. She’d always be tied to Kylo as long as she stayed there.

“Rey?” A strange voice shook her from the doorway and she stepped aside.

A blonde woman waved at her, smiling brightly. She kept waving, ignoring the two men with her. The man at the counter was glaring at her so Rey forced her feet to move.

“Hey, it is you, wow.” She grinned, flipping her hair. “Do you want to sit down?”

Her mind finally clicked into place and she sighed. “You’re Liza.”

“Yeah!” Liza’s eyes seemed to sparkle as she pointed to her friends. “This is Mike and Andrew. This is the little sister of my friend from high school. He was a total asshole but she was always so nice.”

Rey bit her lip, wanting to correct her but the lie might as well be true at this point. The two men waved lightly, looking mostly like they wanted to ignore her. Rey tried to smile, but slumped down at the table. She was just a little kid again.

“Hey, do you want some fries? I couldn’t eat them all.” Liza slid over a cold basket of fries and Rey started picking at them, taking careful bites. “Anyways, how’s Kylo? I haven’t seen him since graduation.”

Rey tilted her head. “Don’t you go to college too?”

Laughing, Liza shook her head. “I quit after one year. It was so boring. Everyone pretended that they knew what they were doing and it was just too much. I liked the parties, but my dad got me a job and an apartment. And now I can have my own parties.”

Munching on a fry, Rey stared at the woman. She had beautiful, long blonde hair, styled over her shoulders. It looked shiny even in the dim lighting. Her high cheek bones helped set off her smile as she flipped her hair. Her shirt was bright yellow. She leaned against her hand and smiled at Rey again. Rey couldn’t understand how Kylo couldn’t have fallen in love with her in an instant.

“I guess that’s cool,” Rey finally answered, then popped a fry in her mouth.

Liza’s friends started talking to her, leaving Rey to relive her miserable night. Why hadn’t she thought ahead? All she had to do was look up what to do online. She couldn’t even manage that.
She wiped at her eyes, realizing how stupid she was. She couldn’t sit still in school and needed therapists all of the time. They were supposed to make her better, but nothing was happening. She pushed away her thought about how Kylo got better but the rotten idea pushed its way into her head anyway. Kylo tried hard to help her get better; things had been good during the first year. They had been normal and nice and just like he had promised. They’d come home one weekend, and then she would go to stay with them the next. Then Bee showed up and they couldn’t come home as often to make sure that he was okay. That was fine. She loved Bee. He needed to be taken care of and loved. He would always chirp at her happily and played with her on the kitchen floor until he was exhausted, flopping down so his head would rest in her hand.

The chair beside her moved and she looked up. Liza’s friends were leaving. She’d made them go away by being sad. Her head dropped further.

“Come sit by me, Rey.” Liza motioned. “You look like something’s wrong.”

Liza wasn’t a stranger, even if Rey hadn’t seen her in years. It wasn’t like all of the panic that Kylo had told her about and then had proved right. Liza was prettier than Casey and nothing was weird about her. She just remembered her as a girl that Kylo hated because she wanted to be his girlfriend. And then he went out and found a boyfriend instead. When she was still an ignorant kid, that thought had comforted her. She’d be the only girl for Kylo and it had made sense then. Now, it was just sending her mind into a spiral.

She left her chair and rounded the table to sit next to Liza at the booth. She slid in and shrugged. “Everything is wrong.”

Reaching out, Liza rubbed her back. “Do you want to go home?”

Instead of answering the question, she shook her head. “Can I talk to you?”

“Of course.” Liza smiled. “My apartment isn’t that far. Do you want to hang out there for a bit until you feel better and then call your parents?”

Biting her lip, Rey nodded.

“Come on.”

Liza took her hand and led her outside, past the other tables and back out into the near-summer air. Liza didn’t even have a coat on, but she just smiled at the sky. She looked so pretty, with long legs and high-heeled boots. She even had a tattoo on her shoulder. Liza didn’t need college to be happy.

Her building was so much nicer than Kylo and Poe’s. The lobby was brightly lit with a long red carpet. She didn’t even know that there were buildings like that downtown. She mostly just went to the movie theatre there and never really walked around. Liza entered a code and brought her inside, looking at her with bright eyes.

She started talking about how nice her apartment was if the lobby impressed her. Her dad wanted her to be safe but also have a place that reminded her of home. Rey wanted to ask why she didn’t keep just living at home, but then thought about it again. Liza could have her own home in the same place as her parents. Why couldn’t Kylo? In the elevator with Liza, Rey hugged her backpack as she touched her back again.

Inside her apartment, Rey let herself relax in how welcoming the space was. It wasn’t just empty, like the house’s that mom showed. That’s what she had expected. Instead, there were pieces of art everywhere: there were half-finished paintings and sculptures all over the broad and open space.
Beside the large, living room windows, her eyes were drawn to an easel. Every wall was a different color, covered in decorations: masks, spears, and cubes.

“It’s pretty nice, right?” Liza smiled. “I decided to be an artist. I work at an art studio. Everyday, I can just live in my imagination.”

“I didn’t know that.” Rey slipped off her shoes and took off her jacket. “Kylo never said that much about you.”

Liza smirked at her. “Yeah, I can guess why. But come on, come sit down and let me know why you were trying to run away.”

Swallowing and looking at the floor, Rey slowly followed her to the kitchen. Liza leaned against the island, watching Rey climb onto a lime green barstool. “How did you know?”

She shrugged and turned, grabbing two diet cokes from her fridge. The door jingled when she shut it. “You came in and looked really upset. And your backpack looks pretty full. Where did you want to go?”

“California. To my real family.”

Liza’s mouth settled into an almost frown. She sipped at her coke and guided Rey to the sofa. Rey hated how desperate she felt as she curled up at her side.

“What happened?”

Exhaling, Rey didn’t know where to start. Her list felt endless. There were the awful girls at school who always called her fat and stupid, and bring up rape every chance that they got. And how her brother was a murderer and a homo. They would stop for a few weeks after Leia came by the school and the girls got detention, or they had to have a dumb group session of talking about their feelings. They would stop for a while, and then they would just start up again. And two months ago, Rey just stopped complaining about it. School was awful not just because of them, but also because of how she could never focus. There would always be some ghost pain or memory waiting to come for her, to make her want to think about something else. The pain didn’t come from Snoke anymore; it came from the hole that was growing inside of her that nothing seemed to be able to fill. She had Rose, Finn and Kaydel. She had her friends at dance. She had so much and the gap just got bigger when she felt guilty about none of those things working.

And then there was Kylo and Poe.

She took a long drink from her coke, letting the sweet taste fill her nearly empty stomach. “Kylo wants to get married.”


“Yeah.” Rey sneered. “And then he didn’t tell me. And it was my birthday.”

“Oh my god, that’s fucking awful, Rey.” Liza set her coke on the coffee table. It was made up of old, painted barrels that were cut in half. How did she make that? “Can I hug you? That’s so shitty.”

Rey put her can beside Liza’s and let the woman’s arms come around her into a freeing embrace. Liza wasn’t making excuses for them. Liza was actually listening to her and not telling her to cheer up. Rey wanted to keep talking to her. And her apartment was really cool.
“Thanks.” Rey breathed in Liza’s perfume. It smelled like apricots.

Sitting back, Liza shook her head. “I mean, I never got what was going on there. Paige would always tell me, back then, that it was something to do with not wanting to hurt a girl? What does that even mean? Like, Poe is only a little taller than me. I’m as tall as him when I wear heels, or at least I was at graduation. I mean, I had a boyfriend by then so I didn’t really care but it was just so weird. And they’re still together? Ugh.”

“Yeah.” Rey snorted. “Poe was always nice to me. He always said that he was in the way. I used to feel sorry for him because no one loved him. I could always hug him when Kylo was having a bad day and he’d do fun things with me. But I think he was just pretending to be my friend so he could take him away from me.”

Liza sat up, folding her legs under her. Rey copied her, sitting up too.

“Look, Rey. I only know what I saw from high school and then what I heard from Paige back then. I haven’t talked to her in so long so I’ve kind of lost touch with everyone. Everyone is trying to grow up so fast and I just want to be me, be here, with my art. Maybe move to New York in a couple of years and live with people who know how to make real art.” Liza paused, swallowing a long clunk of pop. “But, like, they never came out to anyone really. If you knew they were together, you couldn’t say anything. Kylo scared the shit out of so many people. Like, what he did to that one guy? And then what he did to Poe’s dad? It was like, shit, he really is crazy. I never really believed that. I just wanted him to like me and he never did.”

Slouching, Rey reached for Liza’s hand. “Weren’t you mad? When he chose someone else over you?”

Liza smiled, her pink lips parting to show her teeth as she laughed lightly. “Nobody, like, does that on purpose. I had a crush on him. I saw him at Christmas in town last year and, wow, that crush never went away. But he ignored me, looking away. Like he used to do all of the time. But I don’t let that hurt me. I just put myself in his shoes and think: oh no, here’s a person who I don’t like, but I don’t want them to feel bad by telling them that. Better to pretend that I didn’t see them. It makes me feel better to think that way. We don’t have to like everyone and not everyone has to like us. I got through so much of high school thinking that way.”

Shifting her weight, Rey pulled her legs up under her cut chin. “That sounds like something Poe would say. I yelled at him the last time I saw him. And he still likes me and I said that I hated him.”

Nodding, Liza shifted to rest her arm around the back of the sofa. “He was always nice to me too. When he first came to school, he’d always try to talk to me. It would be about what I was wearing, because I had really nice clothes, or my nails and stuff like that. I thought he was cute but he was, you know, a freshman and Latino so like, totally a big no for me. So I didn’t think about dating him. But I sort of missed all of his questions about Kylo. He’d asked what music he liked, what movies he liked. He’d ask what his family was like. So I told him that he had a little sister who he thought hung the moon.”

“Really?” Rey asked. “But, I’m not really his sister.”

Liza set her head back. “Ugh, I always forget that. Sorry, Rey. It’s like, I’m not like one of those people who has their weird, little Ben Solo scrapbook about the details. I just cut his picture out of the paper because I thought he was cute. And that’s so creepy. I’m sorry I told you that.”

“No, it’s okay.” Rey liked how Liza talked. She didn’t look upset or stressed at all. Even Poe’s
delight in life had been dampened by living with Kylo for so many years, having to do everything that he said. He would have his shining moments still, but she didn’t want to think about them right then. “I haven’t talked to them in two months. It’s been awful. I have to see another shrink and people come and look at our house because I’m skipping school. And it’s not because mom and dad are mean to me. It’s because school just sucks and I miss Kylo when he’s not home and with him instead.”

After rolling her shoulders, Liza stretched out her hands behind her head. “And you miss him more right after you see him, right?”

“Yes!” Rey dropped her head the second the word left her mouth. “I mean, yeah. I just…I don’t like school as much as he did.”

“And you think everyone is comparing you to him?”

Blinking, Rey looked up again. “Is that the problem?”

“Yes.” Liza smirked. “Kylo came back all weird and quiet and angry, but he was so focused on school that it was crazy. It’s like he could shut everything off and just do all of the stupid assignments. He only got bad grades when he argued with the teachers so he stopped that pretty quick. But I was so jealous of his grades. Then he started dating Poe and I was super jealous of him. So I kind of understand a lot of how you’re feeling.”

Rey felt her eyes getting heavier. “Liza?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re really nice and I wish that Kylo had dated you instead.”

Tilting her head onto her shoulder, half of Liza’s mouth curled into a smile. “I think you would have felt better if he hadn’t dated anyone. And wasn’t marrying anyone.”

“Maybe.” Rey yawned. “Can I please stay here tonight? Please? I don’t want to go home.”

Liza sat up. “It’s almost midnight, Rey. We should at least tell your parents where you are.”

Trying to look as sad as she felt, Rey met Liza’s eyes. “But I’m safe here. If you take me home tomorrow, then it will be fine. They’ll be mad, but I’ll just promise to let them take me to more doctors.”

Rubbing her face and smudging her makeup, Liza shook her head. “It’s still not what we should do. I’m really sorry, Rey. You’re, what, like twelve? I mean, when I tried to run away when I was twelve, my parents freaked out and called the cops and it was a total mess. And I totally understand why you’re trying to run away. If Kylo wants to marry his weird high school boyfriend without telling you first, then I’d want to get away from him too. What’s your parents number?”

Blinking, Rey realized that she didn’t know. All of her numbers were in her phone. And that was at home. “I don’t know.”

Shrugging, Liza pulled out her phone and started scrolling. She hit call on one number and made a face.

“Ugh, Kylo blocked my number. Fucking asshole. Um, let me look up your parents.” Liza stared at her phone and then rolled her eyes. “It’s still unlisted. Are reporters still calling your house? So weird. I can’t find it. Um…”
Liza trailed off, still looking at her phone. She swore again when she realized that she didn’t have Paige’s or Hux’s numbers. She really didn’t know her friends anymore. But she’d kept Kylo’s and he’d blocked her. She tried a number and it just rang.

“Poe is not answering either. At least he hasn’t blocked me,” She glanced up from her phone for a second and then back down. “I don’t want you to take the bus or a cab home. It’s so late and there are weirdos out and I had so much to drink before you showed up at the diner. But I promise that I’ll take you home first thing in the morning and explain what happened and act like you were just coming to meet with me. Your parents will be less mad if they can blame someone else, right?”

Nodding instantly, Rey actually smiled. “Thanks, Liza. I just…I just want to wake up somewhere else and not be me for a while.”

Liza set her phone down and looked at her with firm eyes. “Can you do one thing for me, though?”

“Okay,” Rey narrowed her eyes at the look. “I can try.”

“Don’t try to run away again. You’re a beautiful young woman, even if people just say that you’re a kid. You’re going to just keep getting prettier and stronger as long as you find yourself. And Kylo will still be Kylo, not really knowing who he is.” Liza’s eyes softened at her glare. “Maybe tomorrow, after your parents are done yelling at you, you can call him and tell him how you’re feeling? Because about the only thing I know is that he loves you a lot. I saw it when I was there. Paige told me. And Kylo told me too. I wouldn’t have remembered you if he hadn’t talked about you so much.”

Leaning back against the cushions, Rey started to feel exhaustion claw at her eyes. “But he didn’t talk that much to other people back then, back when we were just in the world.”

Liza didn’t answer her lonely thought and instead reached out and guided her off the couch. She helped her get her pyjamas from her bag and she guided her to the washroom so she could change and brush her teeth. Rey’s eyes were falling shut, but she still slipped on her nightgown and ran her toothbrush over her teeth. When she was sitting on the toilet, Liza’s shower curtain started to distract her. It was splashes of red on a white background. Shapes started to blur and she finally forced herself to leave the washroom after washing her hands.

“Do you want some water or something?” Liza asked. She was leaning against the wall, waiting for her.

“No, I’m okay,” Rey answered and then yawned. She started for the couch and that’s when Liza grabbed her shoulder and turned her towards a bedroom.

It was an actual plain room in the chaotic place.

Liza shrugged after she turned on the lights. “This is where my grandpa sleeps when he stays over. He says that the masks are weird and look like him.”

She waited by the door as Rey climbed into bed. “Thank you, Liza. I’m sorry that Kylo was so mean to you.”

“He was never mean. He was just him. Goodnight. I’ll wake you up early and take you home.”

Rey curled up on the comfortable pillows and hugged them closer to her body. They still didn’t feel like Kylo. They didn’t even feel like Poe. They were just pillows. The light went out and she didn’t care that there wasn’t another source of light and that the blinds were drawn. She was too tired to be afraid of shadows in the dark.
She dreamed about when things were easier, when it was only about survival. If her head were kind, then those dreams wouldn’t turn into nightmares of hurt and terror. She didn’t want to feel the dirt on her feet; she just wanted to see Kylo’s kind eyes and feel how he used to be when he was soft and small. But her dreams turned into now, how he was alone now. Because he’d made so many stupid mistakes. Before, how he thought had been easier to understand. Now, he was building up walls that she couldn’t break down.

It wasn’t the world that pulled them apart, it was Kylo.

A warm hand was rubbing her shoulder and she jerked awake. “Kylo?”

Instead, Agent Jinn was squatting beside the bed, looking at her with blood-shot eyes. He glanced up at a group of policemen behind him. Liza had her hands over her mouth and was pushed away from her line of sight. What time was it? Why was Agent Jinn there? Had she messed up this bad?

“Thank God we found you.” He pulled her into a hug and she heard him sob and she was instantly awake. “Thank God, Rey.”

“I didn’t mean to run away.” She quickly said, feeling tears from exhaustion and pain sting her eyes. “I just didn’t want to be there anymore.”

“It’s…it’s okay, Rey. We found you. You’re alive. That’s all that matters?”

Pulling back, she shook her head. “Alive?”

“Rey. Come on. Get dressed. We’ve been looking for you all night.” His voice dipped into anger and she swallowed hard. When he met her eyes again, she saw ripples of tears that sent her heart thundering. “We thought that you were dead too.”

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Kylo looked at the blood on his hands, slowly turning from his palms to his knuckles. It was still damp and tacky when he touched his fingers to his thumbs. He counted his fingers again, making sure that they were all still there. But they faded away into the thickness that covered his hands. It wasn’t warm anymore. The cold had taken the last of the life from it over time.

He’d forgotten how it felt.

Seven years had erased the texture, the sensation of having caked blood under his fingernails. They’d wiped the thick smell of dead leaves from his nose, how it lingered and spread up to fill his head. It had been seven years since he saw how crimson stained his skin, but still left patches of his own pale flesh beneath them.

But sitting there, with the police lights flashing around him and dull voices filling his unfocused ears, he was fourteen again.

He was twelve, ten, and seven all at the same time. He was watching children being dissected, putting his hands into motion when he was commanded to. He was cleaning up patches of dried and ruined flesh. He was drenched in the pain and death of being there again.

He wasn’t sitting on the curb outside of his apartment, police circling around him.
His neighbours weren’t lurking around him, asking what had happened.

He wasn’t there; he was gone.

An officer dropped to one knee beside him, touching his arm. He nodded, keeping his eyes down and let himself be taken to wherever they were taking him.

Snoke’s shadow followed him the entire way to the police car.

He didn’t want to wash his hands when it was offered to him. He needed to keep one last piece of Poe with him for a little while longer.

He didn’t say anything as they brought him into the station, into an interview room. He’d lost time, blanking out the drive. He just stared at the people trying to talk to him, still locked into walking into his apartment.

There had been questions and faces, but he didn't register any of them.

But the ringing in his ears finally cleared when someone moved a chair across the table from him.

“We’re so sorry, Mr. Solo,” the detective across from him said, sitting down. “We found the cat. He’s being taken care of. You can pick him up when things are more settled. But we’re going to have to go through some questions about your evening.”

He lifted his head, then let it fall back down again. He slouched down lower in his chair and mumbled an agreement. At least Bee was okay. He’d just left him in the hallway like he was nothing. “I know that you have to.”

“So you had dinner with Agent Jinn and then went to the gym. When did you get home?” The room was too quiet. The question made too many ripples through the silence. He’d already answered this. It was the first thing he’d managed to say when he was outside and mumbled his answers to stop from screaming.

He looked up at the detective again. He’d forgotten his name; he had introduced himself to him when he sat down and offered him a glass of water in the interview room. He didn’t care. He didn’t need to know his name. He didn’t know his own at that point.

He was fourteen, but in a grown-man’s body.

“At 10 p.m. I…you can check my phone records.” He forced the words out, staring again at his hands.

“Exactly 10 p.m.?”

He flaked a streak of blood from his knuckle. “It’s when I said I’d be home. I go to the gym on Fridays. Then I come home, shower, and we watch a movie.”

“How long were you at the gym?”

He blinked at the question. “About an hour and a half.”

“So, you’d say that you got there at 8.30?”

He wanted to look at something other than his hands, but the room was starting to spin so he had to focus on something else. “Quarter after. I texted him then.”
His phone was sitting in the centre of the table and the detective lifted it up, asking him to unlock it. He watched the man open his text messages and scroll through them. He closed his eyes then, seeing the words in his mind.

It had been a normal day. They’d woken up together but Kylo had been up too late the night before, agonizing how Poe was leaving and he needed to deal with that. It was just the summer. He could go home and be with his family and Kylo could force Rey into talking to him, to deal with both of their feelings. Since Rey erupted, they’d talked more. Kylo had stopped causing arguments, making sure that Poe felt okay. They were doing better. Things were good. They were supposed to stay that way. They were supposed to have the weekend together and then he’d fix things with Rey. This wasn’t happening. It wasn’t real.

He’d smiled at him after listening to Agent Jinn’s talk, even though it wasn’t anything that he was really interested in. Then, after hugging him, he walked away.

The last time he saw him was walking back to the other side of the campus, in the direction of their home.

He should have followed him.

Not replying to the last I love you burnt in the back of his mind.

The pressure started in the back of his head, spreading ache across his brain until it reached his eyes. Angry tears formed and he slumped to the floor. He didn’t know when he started screaming, but it came to his ears when someone touched him and he lashed out, striking out at whoever had tried to get close to him. He curled up on the floor, forcing the hands away as the sobs kept his breath away. He forced himself up against the wall, trying to get air into his lungs. He still smelled like him.

Poe had stolen his hoodie the week before and they didn’t have time to do laundry until today. He had glared at him when he had put it on that morning, feeling how the pocket had been stretched out and finding an empty chip bag there. He told him to stop taking his clothes, how they were too big for him but still managed to stretch them out. Poe had puffed off his chest and punched him in the arm, saying that he was just as big. And then they missed doing whatever they had planned, ending up on the couch and filled with one another.

Gasping, he pulled off the garment. He needed to keep him. He needed to still be there.

The police officers looked down at him with sympathy burning in their eyes. He didn’t want those eyes. He didn’t want these feelings.

“We need to keep going, Mr. Solo. We know that this is hard but…”

He snapped his head up, forcing himself to his feet. He stood up to his full height and wiped at his face. “This isn’t hard. It’s impossible.”

They wanted to leave him to gather his thoughts but he shook off the idea. Get it out. Get it over with.

“So you and Mr. Dameron spent the evening apart? He went out with his friends and…”

“Jeremy Carter, Allison Drake, and Totti Allé. They have the physics lab together. He was out with them and then went home to do the laundry. I needed to make sure his friends were safe. All of their numbers are on my phone, with their addresses and notes about what they do. They haven’t been in trouble with the police.” His response was gruff as he held his hoodie in his bloodied
hands. “He…I…where’s his phone? Were we robbed too? I didn’t see…”

The detective sat down again, motioning for him towards the other chair. Still keeping his eyes unfocused, he forced himself to sit down. “We have it. We’re going through the crime scene now. We’ll do an inventory and then you can see if anything is missing. We need to follow your evenings, okay? You know all this. We saw the work that you’ve been doing.”

He didn’t bother to frown. “So you know that I was the kid who was…”

“Held by a serial killer for seven years? Yes, we’re aware of all that. Now, focus. Did anything strange happen that day? Anyone following you?”

He sucked in a forced breath. “He thinks I was being paranoid. When I…after I got out, I’d sometimes see things that weren’t there. I’d imagine people following me and my…the little girl who I saved, she would see them too, so we weren’t crazy. But the last few months, maybe a year, I knew we were being followed. I saw him the other day but I couldn’t catch him. I’ve looked up everyone in our apartment building and all of our friends. I couldn’t let anything happen. There’re only a few criminal records, but only for things like possession and theft. I can give you their apartment numbers if you want.”

“That might be helpful, but we’ll get to that later. We’re talking to your neighbours now.” The detective sat up, giving him an even look. “We’ve already called your FBI agent friend. He’s here. Would it help you answer some of these questions if he could come in? Questions about your partner?”

“Fiancé,” he corrected, weakly. “He’s my fiancé.”

He had asked to call Agent Jinn and not his parents. He didn’t want Rey to know that Poe was dead. He didn’t want anyone to know. If they knew, then he’d really be gone.

The detective took a deep breath. “Can we send in Agent Jinn?”

“Yes.” He sounded pathetic. Poe would have taken his hand then, squeezing it until the world felt right again. He would have put himself aside and let him take over everything. Like he always did.

The detective looked at the door and nodded.

George entered the room and Kylo almost tackled him, needing to feel something as he left the chair the instant the door opened. He was drawn into a hard and long embrace and his tears returned, even as he tried to keep them down. Crying was what got people killed. He couldn’t cry.

He was fourteen again in the hospital courtyard, watching Rey play in the fountain.

“Kylo, Kylo, shh…” George whispered. “Let’s sit down. Let’s do the investigation. Let’s find out who killed him. Follow the steps.”

He clung on tighter. “When I found him, I thought that I did it.”

Only George could hear him. Only Agent Jinn could know what he felt.

The thought had pressed on him the last hours. He didn’t know what time it was. He didn’t really know where he was.

He was walking through the door of their apartment, drawn by the smear of blood on the door and the laundry basket on the ground. He was tired from the gym, stretching out the last of the aches in
his legs. His calf was still stiff. When his hand touched the door, time stood still.

He stopped and stared at it.

Neither of them got nosebleeds. Maybe Poe cut himself doing something stupid. He would always cut vegetables like his own fingers didn’t exist. Maybe he cut his hand on the laundry basket. That’s why it was on the ground.

But the hairs on his arms stood up and he couldn’t lie himself into believing that.

He left the door open and stepped inside.

All of the lights were on. Their apartment was small but worked for them because Kylo was always tidy when he had to be and kept the space in order, despite Poe’s hurricane characteristics. They didn’t fill up the house with junk. It was easier to leave if they didn’t have that much stuff.

But the living room was in pieces. He saw notes and books scattered on the floor. The coffee table was pushed aside. The couch where they had made love the day before had its cushions disturbed, strewn in all of the wrong places.

The splash of blood on the wall was smeared and he wasn’t breathing.

He was trying to listen for anything.

Any sign of life.

He followed droplets of blood towards their bedroom. The guest room, Rey’s room, was also lit up. But their room’s door was closed.

“Slower, Kylo, slower.” George pulled away, forcing him to meet his steel-blue eyes. “Keep going. What did you see?”

He’d been talking. He’d been saying everything that was happening.

His cheek twitched, but he nodded. “The door was closed. But I saw the red puddle on the floor outside. It was still warm. I thought that he still might be okay. I…I didn’t want to touch the doorknob. I didn’t want to destroy the evidence. We have these dumb dish-washing gloves, so I went back and got them. And then I saw him.”

Poe was curled up on the floor, at the foot of their bed. His eyes were open, staring up at him.

His hands were still wrapped in the quilt from their bed.

*Their* bed, *his* fiancé.

Nothing bad was supposed to happen to him.

Kylo had screamed until the world blurred out at that point. He didn’t understand how he had gotten outside because he was still on his knees in their bedroom, cradling a warm corpse.

Everything was burnt into his mind and he couldn’t get the words out fast enough. He remembered grabbing him, screaming at him to be okay. He saw the slit throat. He felt that the blood was still hot. His skin was still smooth and warm, but his eyes were lifeless. He knew that look. He had held death too often in his hands not to remember its intimacies.

“I just wanted to hold him. I knew that I was ruining the crime scene. I just…” he broke to sob
again. “It’s the guy who’s been following us. It has to be him.”

George slowly guided him to sit again, gripping his hand. “You said that before. I believe you, Kylo. What else did you see in the room?”

“Just him.” He looked down, staring at his hand in the agent’s. “There was no pulse. His heart always…I…But I looked up and saw how messed up the bed was. He fought him. I didn’t see the weapon, but his hands had defensive wounds. He fought until the end but he saw him. There was other blood. Check the bed. It’s like…there was other blood splatter. A smear on the closet. I saw that.”

It was all clear in his head but the words came out wrong. He was still standing in that room, looking down and hoping for Poe to breathe again.

He wasn’t looking at the other detective. He just heard Agent Jinn telling him that he was doing a good job.

“Kylo, it wasn’t an easy death. He fought hard. I’m so, so sorry, son.” George was saying, still holding his hand. They were equal now. His hand wasn’t so small anymore.

He was back in the courtyard again, looking up and realizing that he was the only man in the world he could trust. He would make it better; he would figure out what was wrong with him. Agent Jinn would fix this. He was looking through the pictures again, feeling his grief build about the kids that he couldn’t save. In his mind, Poe’s picture was shown to him in that moment. He’d just missed it before.

Kylo sucked in another breath, breaking the stillness of the fountain. “The defensive wounds…I…my DNA is going to be there. I kissed him. I tried to make it better. Touching always makes it better.”

He wept again, clinging to anything familiar. Poe’s scent was still in the room and Agent Jinn was there. He was fourteen and sixteen at the same time. He was stuck in Snoke’s basement, but Poe was there, holding his hand and telling him to stand up to him, to fight back for him and Rey. Rey took his other hand and he fought Snoke again with his bare hands, killing the terror.

But this wasn’t Snoke.

This was someone else.

But at the same time, it had to be him. He hadn’t killed him. He’d come back to haunt him, to take light from his life.

“I need to talk to Rey,” he managed to say.

“I’ll call your parents again when we’ve gone through a few more questions, okay?”

He just stared at George and he sighed, knowing the look.

He turned back to the detective and let Kylo fall into silence.

He heard the story of their relationship retold from another perspective and swam in the warm memories. How his emails started to tell the tale of a friendship that blossomed into something else. The dinner before the anniversary when a very nervous teenager shook his hand and then stared at him all night. How he’d called Agent Jinn from his car at sixteen when he thought the world was going to swallow him up. At his graduation from high school, when Poe had been afraid
to talk Kylo’s idol still. During his temporary internship, when he asked if having a boyfriend would hurt his chances. At the ceremony in the spring when Poe had held his hand before he spoke publicly for the first time in years about the pain he’d felt over the years.

“…so I’ve been working with Ben since he was fourteen. The progress he’s shown has been exceptional; he’s fought through many anger and intimacy issues, but he’s still seeing an agency therapist at least every six months at this point, as well as a therapist on campus. This relationship, between him and Poe, is something stable for him, but they have their problems. We have kept in constant contact over the years and I’ve watched him grow up and into himself. He still has only a small circle of friends, but the two most important people to him are Rey and Poe. I can give you a list of potential suspects, everyone who has shown over interest or obsession about this…case.” George paused to look at him. “Are you here again?”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m back.”

“Good, that’s good.” George turned back to the detective, who was nodding.

“This is our case, but we’ll take all of the help that we can get. He was a boy that didn’t do anything other than go to school. No drugs, nothing with campus security. Neither of them has been on our radar for anything. We’ve checked with the campus, but it’s the middle of the night so we won’t know much than the bare bones until morning. Since they’re not in the dorms, they only will tell us if they’ve been busted for drinking at a frat house. We’re still canvassing for witnesses. Whoever this is, he came there for a reason and surprised him. Maybe he thought they’d both be there.” The detective’s voice was grim but Kylo was nodding.

“It has to be one of the parents,” he said, his voice neutral. “Someone mad at me for not being dead. If he’s been following us, he’d know that he’d be alone. I’m stupid for having a schedule. For having patterns. I left him alone. He killed him to hurt me.”

Both of the other men were quiet until Agent Jinn sighed. “We’re often lucky if our suspect is so easy to find, Kylo. You know that.”

The detective left them to make a phone call and Kylo finally let go of Agent Jinn’s hand to grip the hoodie to his chest. He wasn’t crying anymore but he knew that he was mumbling to himself.

“Kylo, you need to rest. We’re going to call your parents so think about how to say this to Rey. And we need to talk to Poe’s parents. Do one more thing for him, okay? He needs you right now.”

But Kylo could only look at the smudges of blood on his sweater. “He needs me but he’s gone.”

A warm hand covered his, but it was still the wrong hand. “Do you have the information on your phone?”

He weakly nodded, rattling off the unlocking code. “His mom is in Florida, with her new family. He loves his little brothers. She can’t tell them that he’s not here anymore. I don’t know where his dad is exactly. He fucked off to California when he was sixteen. He sends us letters, asking for money all of the time. I saved one. I think that his address is on it.”

“All right. Thank you, Kylo.”

Without words, just his eyes, Agent Jinn left him alone, taking his phone and lifting it to his ear when he was outside of the room. Kylo stood to watch him go, feeling darkness gripping at his mind.

Then he saw Agent Jinn pause in his step, gripping his phone. His shoulders straightened and then
fell. He turned back towards the room, fixing his suit jacket.

Kylo took two steps back and sat down, gripping at his knees, digging his nails into the fabric.

But he didn’t feel anything.

When the door opened, George’s face was calm but Kylo knew that he was fighting some sort of panic. His eyes never darted around like they were doing right then.

“I need to go, Kylo. I need you to take a deep breath and be as centered as you can be at this moment. Find whatever is left. Whatever you used to do in that house, go there right now.” The seriousness in George’s voice made it hard to find that old and buried feeling and dust it off again. But he had no strength at that moment and fell into numbness.

His shoulders slumped and he let the emotions that had been coursing through him be pushed back. Whatever pain was coming, he couldn’t feel it.

“Rey is gone and they found blood on the windowsill.”

His jaw started shaking and he needed to fight against his reaction. Be numb. Don’t feel anything. What was left of his soul shattered as he nodded. “I’m alone.”

“I’m going to go there and find her.” George knelt at his side. “You can’t answer anymore questions right now. Stay here and they will take care of you. I’ll see you when I find her. Think about that.”

He dropped his head and managed to dully shake his head in agreement.

When George finally left him, he overturned the table and the world blacked out.

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They were driving. It was morning.

The sun was still shining. She thought that the world was supposed to stop moving when someone died in the real world, but it hadn’t. The trees kept rolling by and the cars were passing them; people were probably going to work.

When a kid died in the house, she would always feel it before it happened. The way that people breathed would change. Time would get slower and the flakes in the air would spin longer in the thin beams of sunlight that she could stick her hand into to feel warm when Kylo was away.

But she didn’t feel any of that.

“Is he really gone?”

Her question was met with silence.

Her hands wouldn’t stop moving so she stuck them under her legs. The hole in her made it hard to deal with how she felt.
Rey’s head hurt as she still tried to swallow what Agent Jinn had told her and the quiet that followed. She’d heard the words but they were just fantasy. They just bounced around her head and wouldn’t stick. He was the only one that she had to talk to and he wasn’t saying anything.

Mom and dad couldn’t go to Kylo. They were looking for her.

He was alone.

She’d left him alone when he needed her the most.

Her lip trembled and she furiously blinked back her tears. “Why?”

The agent didn’t look at her. His hair was sticking up and his tie was loosened. He’d been up all night, looking for her, thinking that she was dead too. She had heard how he shouted at Liza, for being irresponsible and not contacting anyone. He had kept his voice level when he talked to her, but she knew how angry he was. How scared he must have been.

“We don’t know yet.” He shook his head. “Try to get some sleep.”

“But I can’t.” Her head hurt too much to sleep. “How can he be dead? Why is this happening?”

“I don’t know. But we’ll find the answer.” He still wouldn’t look at her. “Rey, there is a lot for me to think about right now. I know that you have so many questions, but I hope you understand how terrified we were. I don’t know enough about what happened to him yet not to give into the panic of thinking that this is something personal. We’ve been monitoring people still drawn to this case. There are hundreds of them. I thought I was doing the right thing, letting you both have normal lives. I should have done more to protect all of you…”

He trailed off and wiped at his eyes. Rey wanted to reach for him, but kept her hands on her lap. Agent Jinn wasn’t weak. Rey knew all about weakness, when she couldn’t keep pushing herself to be what everyone wanted her to be.

“You’re safe right now,” he said. “Let’s just get back to Kylo.”

That was the last thing that she wanted, but she didn’t say anything.

Nothing meant anything.

Things like this weren’t supposed to happen in the real world.

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He woke up and he was in a hospital. He smelt it before he opened his eyes.

His wrists were heavy.

He blinked twice and then decided to go back to sleep again.

Everyone always died because of him, but death was never kind enough to take him too.
The car stopped. She’d managed to fall asleep, but woke up in a haze.

Her heart was beating. Her eyes were open. She was looking at Agent Jinn but the world tilted.

Why were they at a hospital?

“Did Kylo kill him?”

His eyes were furious, blue shifting into black. She saw Snoke in that look. Her hands wouldn’t work. They couldn’t find a way to open the door.

“Rey.” Agent Jinn exhaled and his eyes cleared. They switched to a calm blue sea rather than the rough waters from before. “He thought you were gone too. Can you, for me, find somewhere in your heart to not think of him like that? He tried to kill himself last night. He’s lost, Rey. We have to find him again.”

Her lip trembled and she finally felt her breath catch in her chest. “What if I can’t do it again? What if I’m tired of saving him?”

With sympathy, but also with harshness, he reached for the car door. “Someone you loved has died, Rey. We all need to come together and figure out what happened. You’re not alone, but he thinks that he is.”

The door slammed shut and finally broke the final string that Rey had been clinging too.

He wasn’t just Kylo’s boyfriend.

He was always supposed to be there.

There was supposed to be forever in the real world. People weren’t supposed to go away like this.

He was her friend and the last thing she ever said to him was that she hated him.

Tears stung her eyes as the thought settled in her chest.

Screaming alone, she let her hands scratch the dashboard of the car. She didn’t want to feel anything anymore.

But as the words came back to her she reached for the door. Agent Jinn was already there and she fell easily into his arms.

“I’m sorry.” She gasped, breathing in the exhaustion that he was radiating. “I didn’t mean to…”

“Shh,” he whispered, holding her closer. “We’re going to be okay.”

She didn’t believe that.
Mom hugged her tightly. Dad didn’t know what to do with his hands. Hux was leaning against the doorframe, looking like he’d just woke up. None of it felt real. She could smell how much they’d been crying.

Kylo was still asleep. She didn’t want to look at the angry stitches that snaked up his arms or how the machine was beeping beside the bed.

She didn’t know how to feel.

It all melted away into nothing as she looked at him.

The memories of the softness of his eyelashes brushing against her cheek made her look somewhere else. But the echoes of his lips against the corner of her eyes, how soft and gentle they were. She could only look at his mouth as he murmured something in his sleep.

His arms were taped up.

There was too much white.

Death wasn’t this clean.

“Is he going to be okay?” She found her voice, still holding mom’s hand.

“We…we hope so.” Leia exhaled. “We need to…we need to talk about what happened Rey. When we figure it out. But he needs you right now.”

The words made it easier to step towards him and take his hand.

-=-

“…and just one more signature and then you can be discharged.”

Kylo could only nod, adding one more Ben Solo to the form. “It was…I mean…”

They made him stay there for a week, but he didn’t trust the calendar. It felt longer, endless. There were things that he had to do but they kept watching him.

He just wanted to go home, but he didn’t know where that was anymore.

The nurse quirked her head. “You don’t need to explain. Your family is waiting. It will be okay, Ben. Just call us if you need anything. We…we’re so glad that we saved you.”

He let the pen drop on the paper and turned.

He finally saw Rey for the first time in the daylight.

He knew that she’d come to see him many times in the hospital, but he never opened his eyes when she was there. It was a bruise that he let grow into a wound.

He fidgeted, trying to pull down the short arms of his t-shirt as the bandages grew in his mind.

“Come on,” Agent Jinn’s arm pressed against his back. “Let’s go somewhere and think about
something else for a while.”

He’d been there the entire time. Kylo had drawn him into this hell too.

He could only nod.

He hadn’t said anything

He was done with talking for a while.

-=-

Kylo wasn’t speaking. He just kept staring at his hands. Tears were falling down his face silently as his eyes were fixed on one spot.

Dad had helped guide him into the hotel room. There was nowhere else to go. Home was three hours away and they’d go there eventually, but right now they needed somewhere neutral that wasn’t the hospital. The last week had been spent going to the hospital or talking to the police. Rey didn’t want to think about what was happening as she held mom’s hand, getting to their room.

“Come on, you need to get cleaned up,” dad said to Kylo, shutting the door. “We have some of your clothes. So you can start feeling a bit better.”

“Don’t want them.” Kylo said, still standing by the door, leaning lightly against the wall. He slowly started to slide down the wall and Han had to lunge to catch him. Still, he let him kneel on the carpeted floor. His shoulders started shaking and Rey was frozen.

Instead of pushing anyone away, Kylo accepted having his parents around him. But her feet were stuck until he finally looked at her.

She quickly ran to hug him, feeling his hot face against her shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

There were no other words. They were stuck right then.

“It’s okay, Rey. It’ll be okay. I’ll get us out of here,” he mumbled against her neck. It was like his voice hadn’t changed. Those words were the same ones that he’d said to her when they got out that day.

Slowly, she stepped back. “I know you will.”

She let dad take him into the bathroom, forcing him to his feet. The only thing that she could do was turn to mom and let her sobs finally emerge from where they had been stuck in her chest.

-=-

He looked up from the floor, his eyes still slow and heavy. “Dad?”

His father sighed, kneeling next to him. “How are you doing, kiddo?”
Shrugging, he took in the hotel bathroom. It was bright and clean, just like the bandages that still covered his arms. It all still smelled like the hospital. The cleaners had just scrubbed it down again. He noticed the hurried and missed spots.

“What do I do, dad?” He focused on the spot in across from him, beyond his father’s head. It was going to grow into mould if they didn’t clean it. It was going to get bigger and bigger and the wall would rot. He’d seen it happen. He’d been able to create a hiding space in a rotten wall, filled with stolen food and things that could be used for weapons. He should have used them sooner. If he’d done it, he would have been out sooner. Fewer parents would be angry with him. Fewer people would want to come after him and Poe. He’d created this. He made him be gone, like the rest of them.

Han leaned over, gripping his face. “You keep going, son. You do what you’ve always done since you came back to us. You keep telling them to go fuck themselves and prove them wrong.”

He could feel the tears twinning on his cheeks. “How do I do that without him?”

Between his blinks, he saw his father cry for the first time in years. He was drawn into the feeling. Someone else was mourning him. Someone else felt something.

“Ben,” Han said, letting him go to sit across from him on the warm tile. His back covered up the mouldy tile. “This wasn’t your fault. George will make sure of that. He didn’t do anything wrong, neither of you did. When you’ve had some sleep, now that you’re out of the hospital, you’ll find the answer.”

He wiped his nose, the itch from crying growing too much. “That’s not what I asked, dad.”

Han shifted his legs, folding his hands over his knees. “The last five years, he was another son to us too. He’ll always be. I’m sorry I missed the beginning. I mean, I saw the signs before you went and did, well, when you went out and busted a head. But I never thought this would be the end…”

His father paused to look up at him. Kylo felt his eye start to twitch again and his father moved to sit beside him, along the wall of the too-big, too-clean yet not clean washroom. He leaned against Han, closing his eyes. His father had always been there with him when he was there and he was just too blinded by rage to see it. When he was alone in the closet, crying for Rey, Han had been there. He sobbed again, remembering the cruel words that he’d said to everyone.

“I know that things weren’t perfect, but don’t go digging up old hurts and trying to undo an argument. It happened. Agonizing over it won’t bring him back.” Han hugged him again. “What I’m saying is that he’s gone for all of us too. Someone took him from you and you’re going to be pissed off for a long time and I won’t fucking blame you. George doesn’t blame you and we’re here for you. Punch a few holes in the wall at home. Break a few plates. But you’re not alone in this. You’ve never been alone.”

He wanted to pull away. He wanted to feel angry then because the damned mould spot was staring at him again. But he was drawn back down to numbness. “But now I am alone.”

“No, you’re not.”

He slumped against his father and managed a weak nod.

Han lifted him from the floor and motioned for him to take off his shirt. The bandages scratched at his arms. But he wanted Han to see how they’d stitched him up this time. All of his old wounds had to heal in silence. Now he could just peal off the cotton and show how much everything was
coming down on him. He stripped down, letting it all go. He complied, just wanting to go to sleep.

He was six again, having his father help him so he could take a bath. His hands wouldn’t move right because he had been too excited from the day. Han put his shirt aside and held his hand. He didn’t look at the angry, hateful stitches that arched up his arms. He patted his shoulder as his hands steadied to take off his pants. Turning on the shower, Han stepped back to meet his eyes.

Kylo realized it was the first time he was looking down at his father rather than up.

“Showering won’t take away his memories, Ben. Let them set in and figure them out instead,” Han said. “Should I leave you alone for a bit? To get cleaned up?”

Shaking his head, Kylo turned away. “Just don’t look at me. But stay here. Please.”

His father shut his eyes and Kylo could finally strip down and get in the shower.

The water hit him like a thousand small cuts.

He wished that they would shred him open so he could wash down the drain too.

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The police were there all day after Kylo got out of the hospital, talking to him but also her. Agent Jinn wasn’t asking them questions; he just sat there with Kylo. Rey just wanted to go home. Kylo asked about the cat and then asked for his psychology notes so he could start studying again.

The day after, Kylo was gone. He didn’t answer his phone. It would just keep ringing. Dad went to look for him and she stayed with mom. Part of Rey didn’t want him to come back, to stay where he was and let all of his pain consume him.

But then he would be out of her life. She selfishly wanted to keep him.

When he came back to the room in the afternoon, he just blankly told them that he went to the gym and he had to keep going, to keep moving. His eyes weren’t his when sat down on the bed and took a long drink of water.

And the world kept swirling into chaos.

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Kylo just stared at the boxes that were brought back to the house and then went upstairs to his room. Han and Leia looked at her with heavy eyes and she followed after him.

They’d found some drug dealer connected to Poe’s father and a drug debt. He was dead, overdosed, they said, the day after the murder. Kylo screamed about how wrong the police were. The man who they found dead in an alley wasn’t the person responsible for this, despite finding some of the things missing from their apartment: one of Kylo’s journals, a knife from their kitchen covered in his blood. The cat’s collar. Just not the ring. That was the only thing still missing so it
couldn’t be him. He couldn’t have just pawned it. They were wrong and needed to talk to Agent Jinn.

Even when they told him that it was the truth, Kylo’s eyes were filled with doubt at the news. He didn’t believe that it was something like that. It was too simple. He wasn’t done fighting the world.

And Rey had to follow him down that road because he was dragging her along with him.

-=-

Rey had to take care of Poe’s brothers during the funeral. It was embarrassing. Why did they have to have the funeral there? Why couldn’t they just take him to Florida and leave them alone?

They sat in the front row. It wasn’t like grandpa’s funeral because she knew the person in the casket. She didn’t need to be told when to cry or how to feel. She held onto their hands as she sat between them. Kylo had his arm around Mrs. Dameron as the service started.

He hadn’t eaten the last week.

Mom and dad had to force him to talk to his professors about how to proceed with his courses. That was the only decision that he’d made as they packed up their apartment. He was coming back in the fall. Hux had a spare room. He was going to keep going. When he wasn’t silent, he was just angry. She couldn’t calm him down.

But now they were finally home.

And Rey was wearing her least favourite black dress to say goodbye in.

He looked like grandpa in the casket. He didn’t look like himself. He wasn’t even smiling. If there was one thing that Poe did best, it was smile.

Rey held Fredrick and Nicholas’s hands tighter when the prayer ended and Kylo had to go up to speak. He had been angry during the funeral planning, saying that he wasn’t reading anything from the fucking bible because God didn’t exist. There was no God, no devil, no heaven or hell. There was just the fucking shit that everyone did to everyone else. He had told the priest to go fuck himself and then stormed off. Then he came back and apologized, his knuckles tattered and bruised.

This part had always confused Rey. She’d looked up eulogies online and talked about them with Ahsoka and Dr. Windu. Did all of the other kids get them? Did their parents really have to stand there and say all of these things about them? It didn’t make sense. They were gone. How was this supposed to make anyone feel better?

Kylo’s eyes weren’t focused when he stood beside the priest, the same one that should go fuck off. Rey was again really glad that they never went to church. All of this was too weird. But Fredrick was starting to cry so she had to reach down to hug him and missed what Kylo was saying.

“…but we were just stupid kids. Kids who didn’t know any better, but ended up together. But then when we grew up, he became clearer to me. Who he was wasn’t just someone who liked to talk and joke and always take my food. He was made up of feelings. Those were the parts that made us love him. Those are the parts that I will hold on to. I shouldn’t be standing here because I don’t
think that I can ever match those feelings. The five years that we had together were about growing up. He grew up being happy and not afraid. When his brothers were born, he knew that they wouldn’t have to be afraid either. When I close my eyes, I can still hear him telling me not to be afraid. That tomorrow will fix everything.” Kylo paused, his voice stilling. “For him, there is no tomorrow. But I think that we can make a tomorrow for him. And I don’t want to let him down.”

Kylo didn’t cry. He just stared off into the distance. He folded the paper in his hands and went and sat down.

The priest started talking and all Rey wanted to do was to reach out to him. But she held Nicky’s and Freddie’s hands, doing her part too.

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He was rifling through one of the dozens of boxes that clogged their basement. He’d been drinking most of the day and a thought had brought him down to look for one of his journals.

Why did it have to be down there? Why was everything underground?

“Hey, son, what are you looking for?” Han’s voice was instantly grating on his ears.

“One of my journals,” he mumbled, moving aside another stack of books and paper. “The one that they found at that fake crime scene wasn’t the only one that was missing.”

Han folded his arms. “Well, it could have gotten mixed up with his things that his mom took. Maybe call her and ask?”

That was a month ago. He hadn’t been thinking for a month.

He shook his head, sighing. “No, because I packed those boxes and remember exactly what I put in them.”

He slammed his hands down and glared. He’d been forced to pack up their entire lives together into dozens of boxes and send them away to be packed into another basement and ignored and forgotten.

“Ben, I know what you’re feeling and…”

“You don’t know what this feels like,” he hissed. “He meant so much to me and I just put him through hell. He didn’t deserve this. He deserved to be happy and I just…what’s the point of loving anyone? Loving anything? And why couldn’t the fucking doctors just let me die too? Why can’t you all just stop picking me up from the floor and let me fucking go!”

“Ben,” Han’ voice peaked. “You know that I’m there too. We’re all there.”

He ignored him and kept digging.

The notebook and his ring were still not there.

They’d been robbed but the police were still useless, blaming another killer who couldn’t have done it.
Hux handed him a beer. It was the first time he’d left the house alone since June, when he started going back to the gym. But it was late July now. The world needed to keep dragging him along. Sitting on Paige and Hux’s couch, he was still floating in a haze. But he was allowed to go out of the house now. He took the medication. He talked to people. At least to them, he was getting better. Inside, he knew that he was rotting, but if he just kept moving then one day he’d be able to figure this all out.

“We’ll take care of you, man.” Hux said. “It’ll be okay. Do you want us to keep the cat?”

He shook his head after taking a long drink. “The cat belongs to Rey now. She’s taking care of him.”

“Still, I mean, if you change your mind.” He shrugged. “How are you doing?”

He didn’t answer the question. “You don’t have to help me move in. My parents will bring my stuff.”

“Sure. That sounds good.”

How long was he going to be broken? That’s the question he wanted the answer to.

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Late August meant Kylo should be going back to college, but the silence had hung over them all summer. She just had to look at his arms and know how bad things were. But he was surfacing. He was spending time talking now, but always looked at her with haunted eyes. Still, studying helped him think about something, anything else. She’d spent her days with her friends, especially Ahsoka and Dr. Windu, talking about her feelings and how to be okay. The social worker still wanted her to find more stability, to go stay with Luke and change schools. Have a fresh start. Even Agent Jinn didn’t look at her the same. Everyone would make her change the subject away from Kylo, trying to make her focus on who was really gone.

Standing out on the porch, he reached for her hand and she just stared at his outstretched palm until he lowered his arm.

She’d just come out there to ask if he wanted dessert.

They hadn’t talked all summer.

But it was time.

“Are we ever going to be okay again?” she asked. “Can you ever forgive me?”

He turned and frowned at her. “What did you do wrong? You didn’t kill him.”

“No, but I was mean to him. And I can’t say I’m sorry to him, but I can say it to you.” She shifted
her weight and tried to lift her head but his eyes were too heavy. She looked at her feet again.

“The only thing I can do is keep going. I’m…I’m done being stuck. Done trying to hurt myself,” Kylo said, shaking his head. “For him, for you, for myself, I need to keep going. If I don’t, then all the time that we spent together would be meaningless. I can’t do that to him. I know that he died because of me; the cops are wrong. And I need to be in a place where I can figure it out.”

Rey bit the inside of her lip. “That’s going to take a long time, though.”

“I know.” Kylo stood and looked down at her. His face had thinned and his eyes still held tears that he hadn’t shed yet. “But it’s all that I have right now. And if you give up on me, then I’ll have nothing. And I’ll be gone again. I don’t think I can ask you again to never stop loving me. But please, please never stop loving me. And I think that you should go live with Luke for a while. This summer has been hell and you’re not getting better…”

Gripping the railing, Rey looked at her hands. When Kylo was eleven, he had already taken care of her for a year. She didn’t remember that year, but he did. He carried so much within him. And all of that made her love him more. But right now, he was fractured and broken.

“I’ll never stop loving you,” she said. “And I love him too. Still.”

His eyes squeezed shut and he shook his head. “We both loved him in a different way.”

She knew these parts. She’d heard them. She’d seen them. “Don’t talk to me like I’m a kid.”

Leaning against the railing, Kylo sighed. “That’s not what I’m doing. I’m trying to make it clear. So we’re both thinking the same again. Like we used to do.”

The world levelled in Rey’s chest. “Are you going to leave me? I don’t want to go live with Luke and hear about how messed up I am all of the time.”

“If we don’t send you away, are you going to run away again?” He snapped and then dropped his head. “I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve that.”

He never asked her about that night. Liza came by to apologize and Kylo had been silent, but still accepted her hug and Rey knew that he was thankful that she had taken care of her.

But he never talked about it.

He was only talking now because he was going to move away and they wouldn’t be together any longer.

“Why did you want to leave me?” She asked, her voice weak. “Why are you always trying to get rid of me?”

His head dipped lower. “That’s not what I’m saying. That’s not what all of this was about. The plan was always for you, Rey. I was allowed to have other feelings along the way. But I’d always come back to you. Maybe going away and being far away from me will help you because all I do is ruin lives and get people killed. Keep loving me, but you need to get away from me for a while and get better yourself.”

He left her on the back porch, going inside. He didn’t slam the door. But he still left her.

He wasn’t in his bed when she went upstairs and she didn’t have the strength to go downstairs.
Chapter End Notes

Warnings: References of past rape, abuse, m/m sexual content and major character death.

I'm still not happy with this chapter but it's over 50 pages long and I can't agonize over this forever. The next chapter will flush out more of Kylo's thoughts and healing, along with Rey moving forward as well, and then we'll be back on track. There will be softness coming up so if you make it through this and don't rage quit, I'm going to stop punishing everyone eventually.
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

Rey and Kylo start their drive towards being apart, but old ghosts still haunt them. Read author's end notes if you're rejoining this story or want more details.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

They either left the next morning or didn’t.

Just her and Kylo, leaving for some dumb new school in the middle of nowhere in Michigan with Luke. She still didn't know him. He was just a part of a family that she wasn't related to, other than being thrust into Kylo's arms after she was born. They weren't her blood. It was never her choice.

Nothing was.

She hadn’t bothered reading any of the colourful pamphlets — filled with happy smiling children — and had left them on her desk. She’d move them around occasionally to make it look like she’d read them. But she hadn’t. It felt so empty to decide something that had already been destined for her by everyone who claimed to love her.

Rey had the final word, but it made her uncomfortable. Even if she stayed, Kylo would be moving in with Hux. There wasn’t space for her there. Nothing was the same anymore. It made being angry all of the time easier to explain. Even when she spent time with her friends all summer, swimming or riding bikes or just hanging out and talking, she’d always have to come home to a house filled with feelings. Talking with Ahsoka or Dr. Windu was getting better as long as they avoided talking about him. She was tired of everyone pretending that they were doing this for her. If they were being selfish, she could throw it back at them with quiet anger and unsettled grief.

Trying to forget it all, she sat with Rose and Finn, playing a board game in her room. Her bags were packed but everything could go back in place in the morning if she changed her mind.

Kylo has offered to play the game with them after dinner and she had just glared at him and shook her head.

He was trying to talk to her more. He wasn’t as sad anymore; he was just blank. Ahsoka said he was rebooting, restarting. But Kylo had dealt with death before and had let it wash away like the blood from his hands.

Everyone told her to stop being so hard on him. And it made her ache inside to realize what she was doing to someone she loved so much, which made her even more agitated.

“Your turn,” Finn said, nudging her. The dark-haired boy had looked at her with sad eyes the entire night. It wasn’t really what she wanted, but she was going to miss him if she left. He’d always try to suggest something to do that didn’t involve thinking. He’d made her a list of dance videos and they watched each one. He even sat there with her as she tried to perfect the moves. Those had been
the good days of the summer.

And now there was just this.

She was enrolled in both schools. She could still say no.

Nodding, she pulled another trivia card and tried to sound as light as she could as she posed the question to Rose. Kylo wouldn’t have understood the game. It was never his thing.

And she’d have to spend the next three days with him in a car if she agreed to leave the next morning. She wanted more time with her friends to finish making her decision.

Rose got her question right and the next turn was hers. Rose looked so happy to get the silly bit of trivia correct; she was smarter than she was, but Rey didn't care about it. Not really. Spending time at Rose and Paige’s had been less pleasant than hanging out with Finn. Paige was distant to her, other than to watch her carefully as she ate. It got annoying so she drew back from the Tico house. There were too many eyes watching her everywhere and they didn’t need to be from her friends.

Breathing in and out, Rey ran her hand on the game box. Maybe she should have just called her friends and asked them to play it that night.

Mom and dad talked with her about it a lot. But Kylo seemed to just accept that it was something that had happened and ignored it because he never asked her about it. He would quietly snap at her whenever they said more than four words to one another but other than that, he was just blank. She wanted him to be madder at her, to confront her. Instead, he’d just blink away any argument and turn quiet.

Mom would make excuses for him. Dad would just look sad.

Getting away would mean clearing her head from all of this.

But leaving her friends?

Now that it wasn’t fully her choice, she wanted to cling to them and overlook their faults, how mad she could be at them.

“Rey?” Finn’s voice jolted her. “Maybe we should just talk or something instead. Watch some dance clips or something else you like.”

“You’re kind of distracted.” Rose bit her lip. “It’s like you haven’t been really here all summer.”

“Someone died, Rose,” Rey said, narrowing her eyes. “It hasn’t been a normal summer.”

Finn touched her arm. “Yeah, but you don’t really talk about him.”

Rolling her eyes, Rey flopped back onto her floor. She didn’t want to talk about him but still used him as an excuse. Swallowing that guilt was almost routine by now. Breathing. She had to breathe.

“A lot of people have died. Why does he get to be so much more important than all of the other kids?”

Both Rose and Finn inhaled at her tone, the bitterness rolling off of her tongue with minimal regret. She had to ignore the spark of feelings within her telling her that she was wrong.

“I don’t know, Rey.” Finn sighed. She could feel his brown eyes on her and forced herself to look away. “We only knew him for a couple of years. But you used to like him…”
“I was only pretending,” she answered. “For Kylo.”

“You’re lying.” Rose’s voice was soft, but it still made her sit up. “You always talked about the future with them and stuff like it was really going to happen and…”

“Things changed Rose. Kylo started picking sides and…”

“Did he really? I mean Paige is busy all of the time at college and I know that she still loves me.” Rose was just making herself sound stupid with the comparison and Rey scoffed. “Okay, don’t get mad at me. I know that he’s not your brother.”

Her body felt rigid. “I want you guys to go now.”

“What? Rey, come on…” Finn started but Rey was already picking herself off of the floor to go get Han and Leia.

Maybe she’d be better off in a place where no one knew whom she used to be.

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“Ky?”

Sometimes the corpse would talk to him, taunting him in his dreams with ghostly whispers that were only a hollow reflection of the past. He would turn his head, dead brown eyes desperately looking to him for comfort that Kylo couldn’t give anymore. The sound would always linger, shaking into reality until he woke up.

Dreams weren’t supposed to smell.

They never had before.

Kylo was shaken awake by the same desperate feelings that had been clouding his sleep over the last few months. They felt like years. He’d tried to drown them out at first with rage and desperate hatred, only buoyed back to life by his mother and father. Rey had lurked beside him, only taking his hand when she felt like it. Then, when he rolled back into depression, it turned alcohol and sleeping pills and digging through his old life. But on the good days, he got more trust. Substances were awful and he didn’t need them to turn numb. Independence was more important. As he righted his mind, in the last month, he finally made the full turn towards the numbness of talk and therapy. He found solace in focusing on the two things that shone through the darkness: get a career helping others and getting Rey to be better than he’d ever been. Than she’d ever been. She wasn’t four years old anymore.

Gripping his pillow, he stared out into the darkness to avoid seeing the ghosts that still resided within him and wouldn’t let him go.

In the dreams, he’d always be the one holding the knife, seven years old and staring into Poe’s haunting eyes, waiting for Snoke to push him forward to find out how warm he still was inside. It overlapped with the reality of finding him, holding him, screaming at his loss. Now, it all intermingled with the past; the part that Poe had helped chase away had come roaring back in his absence. The feeling of the blade sat heavy in his hand even as he tried to wish it away by clutching the pillowcase. It was soft and smooth, not hard and callous. The death was in the past,
despite how it lingered in everything that he did, digging up old wounds that had never fully healed. He had just glossed over them with a bandage that had been harshly ripped away from him.

Be grounded. Touch something, smell something, look at something. He was real and breathing. His hands were there and real. And he hadn’t killed anyone in seven years.

He had to keep telling himself that.

Rubbing his eyes, he rolled over and checked the clock. 3 a.m. He was starting the drive with Rey to Michigan that morning and they needed to at least make it to the hotel that they booked across the border. He needed to sleep but had been pulled into consciousness that he didn’t want or need at that moment.

He stared at the empty side of his bed. He smoothed the wrinkled sheets, letting his head tilt until he couldn’t look at the spot anymore. He rolled over to the other vacant space beside him.

Both sides were empty.

He’d lost both of them in one way or another.

And it was his fault, no matter what excuses others tried to make for him.

Annoyed at himself for dropping back into selfish tragedy, he left his bed.

He hadn’t been comforted moving home; he'd just went there because he had nowhere else to go. His room hadn’t changed. Neither had his room.

It wasn’t like the bitter reminder when he came home the first time. Now, he could see through his parents’ grief from a different height.

It was never about him. It was about them hoping that he would come home.

The difference this time pushed him forward. They knew that he was dead, so why keep the memories hanging around?

Rey’s door was closed and he raised his hand to knock, but then pulled away. He’d been trying not to run to her for comfort, hoping instead that soft looks and gestures would make her realize why he had a hard time speaking over the summer.

She wouldn’t talk to him. She just suffered with him there, staring at him until she could leave the table at dinner to sit in her room and talk with her friends. She’d hang around with Paige’s sister and her other friend, Finn. They’d both look at him like he should be dead until he started to believe it and needed to leave the room to sit in his closet until he felt scared enough to be alive again.

He was a grown man. He had a life to get back to. Continuing to wallow and hurting her were making it hard to focus.

The pieces were there. He just had to put them back together again.

And she had to do the same.

She still hadn’t accepted that she was not being sent away because he was being selfish. It was a fair thought, he scoffed to himself while still looking at the ‘Keep Out Kylo’ sign on her door. On the days when he could find a spark, he’d look into the information that Luke had sent him. There
was more help for her there with the program and the doctors; she hated structured school even though he had found solace in something normal. It hurt him to realize that he hadn't told her enough about how everything worked in the world; he thought he'd done enough and he'd failed her. An alternative environment might help her find her interests and herself. If George hadn’t calmed down the police, which he’d never be able to thank him enough for, she would have been taken away from them, he was sure. He still didn’t understand it all and his months in a fog hadn’t helped his family make many decisions that had to be made. But the family in California, her father’s parents, didn’t want anything to do with her or them. Where was she supposed to go? He knew that his parents hadn’t told Rey the full truth and he hadn’t been able to either.

He didn’t want her to feel more alone.

Turning away from the door, he went to his parents’ room instead.

“Mom?” He didn’t bother to whisper.

Leia sat up and his father stirred, reaching for the lamp.

It was pathetically routine.

“Ben? How are you feeling?” Leia squinted, reaching for her glasses. “Come here.”

His legs were carrying him to their bed at the first syllable. He sat down and his mother put her hand on his leg.

“We can still go with you.” Han cleared his throat. “It’s a long drive. We can take turns and make it a family road trip.”

That was the original plan when they first started discussing the new program with Rey. She accused them of being self-centered, just wanting to spend time with her and then send her away in order not to feel guilty about it. It was hard to talk her into accepting that it really was what was best for her. A wrinkle of festering teenage anger crept up his spine about the entire thing: she should get to decide what was best for her and they were making it for her by forcing her hand. It was unfair and he hated it but was too numb to give her his voice in protest.

Going with her by himself was what finally got her to agree to go. She had stormed downstairs only a few hours ago, demanding that her friends be taken home and she would do the stupid program.

He could explain his thoughts along the way.

Or at least he hoped that he could.

Shaking his head out of his feelings, he took Leia’s hand. “I need to do it. She needs to be able to talk to me and I need some time alone on the drive back. George is in Detroit. I’ll be able to talk to him.”

Leia’s hand was firm in his. He hadn’t rejected her caring that summer; it made his old self stir in his chest at the thought. Her voice had been something to guide him through the darkness when Rey wouldn’t speak to him. “It will be good to see him.”

He thought again about all that George had done for him. He had taken time off work to stay with them first at the hotel and then for a short time when he came home. And then again for the funeral. And then again, for several hours, when Kylo had called him ranting in the middle of the night after the police had informed him that the killer was some drug-dealing junkie who was equally as dead. And again, when he was still trying to hide his meds; that was another awful
phone call. After talking with George, seeing him and holding his hand or at least hearing his voice, he gave into what was happening: the way forward was with the FBI and he needed to follow it. He reluctantly got him the case file, forcing him to accept that it wasn’t someone else other than another dead man, who’d pawned their shit for drugs. The ring wasn’t missing, it was sold and lost for heroin. Rey running and Poe dying were a brutal coincidence. He replayed trying to feel for a pulse and finding only an open wound, and sought out George's words inside. It was definitively not something that he had done. But the nightmares told him differently. He lived that day in his own untrustworthy mind as if his rage had finally consumed him and he’d acted out: the arguments, his own clouded thoughts about his feelings about sex, the idea that no one else could have Poe but him. Living with those thoughts sent him into silence, keeping him from speaking with Rey or anyone for stretches of time that he’d never get back.

The shame of seeing her summer be stolen from her made the urge to stay quiet grow larger. He had to fight through it for her and him: she had to find herself away from his grief.

The fact that she couldn’t talk about him made it all ache more.

“I didn’t want to take a sleeping pill,” he admitted. “I felt fine when I went to bed. But I need to drive so I didn’t want to risk anything.” He was studying her nails, how she still took the time to get them done. It was one small favour that she did in the rare moments that she had to do small things to make herself feel better. He was still having a hard time being kind to himself. Working out felt good; he could at least do that. His father drove him to the gym, making him get out of bed and do something around June. They’d eat lunch after, making random small talk about baseball. It became predictable and after a month, he could go on his own. After meeting with Hux and hearing that he had a place to go in the fall, it made being distracted easier. It helped make July turn into August as time kept pushing forward.

Leia hummed an agreement. “That’s probably a good idea. You can sleep here if you think it will help.”

It had helped before, he heard her say in his mind.

The idea that he’d fallen so easily into having someone who needed him, who always wanted to be around him, who he would put himself in risk to defend, hadn’t been lost on his therapists or in the group sessions.

Drifting in his thoughts, he nodded. The lamp blinked out and he shifted to rest alongside his mother. He heard Han grumble and shift at the intrusion and it almost made him smile. It was quiet, but having someone hold him, hearing another breath beside him, finally lulled him to sleep.

But his last thought was about how he was going to fix this feeling. Being cast back down into helplessness was the last thing Poe would have wanted. And the second-last thing that he would have wanted was to have Rey struggling to surface under the weight of his unhinged emotions.

There were no dreams now. It was just drifting black until he thought he was dead.

He woke up to Bee purring on his chest. As he blinked awake, finding his breathing and reality, he was almost about to give into thinking that he was back in the apartment and he could roll over and see him there, smiling at him. Still, he pushed through the fantasy when he smelled the lingering scent of his mother’s perfume.

Eying the cat, he looked over to see Rey resting beside him, watching him sleep.

He was never angry with his parents about how they didn’t check on her that night. He had always
hated it when they would come into his room to watch him sleep or move Rey when he couldn’t protect her. He wanted her to feel secure, but also to have her own space and world: have friends, have sleepovers, know that she was going to be okay if he wasn’t there. Why he couldn’t do that for Poe was an aching wound that wouldn’t scab over because he had been proven right. Even though his therapist had pressed on him that it wasn’t his fault, he agonized over it. Kylo trusted Rey, but he never truly trusted Poe. Maybe.

As the thought bled over him, Rey gave him the hint of a smile, like she was almost back to who she was and could be if he wasn’t a black star at this point. “Mom and Dad said I should be here when you woke up. They’re making breakfast and checking the truck.”

Nodding, he started petting the cat but kept his eyes on her. “I just want you to get better. You know that.”

She frowned and bit her lip. “I haven’t tried to run away again. I promise I won’t.”

“I wouldn’t be mad if you tried again. We both have…too much to think about.” He looked up at the cat, scratching behind his ear. He should say something to him, but couldn’t find the right words. He was just a cat, so he turned his focus to Rey. “I just hope that you don’t ever feel like you have to try to leave again.”

Sitting up, Rey inhaled and dropped her head for a second. Her look from before faded. With her gentle fingers, the ones that he had denied would ever grow long and nearly adult but would instead stay in their childhood form to comfort him forever, she reached out, stroking down the jagged scar down his left arm.

It wasn’t like touching his scars when he was fourteen. Someone else had caused those. These were all his.

They had healed nicely but still stood out to anyone looking for them.

He didn’t even remember doing it when he woke up into the hospital. He wanted to blurt those words out to Rey at that moment, to destroy the tension between them. He needed to tell her what had been pressing on his mind, but he couldn’t. Instead, he just let her touch drive his memories. The world had blurred into a red haze: Rey was dead too. He’d lost everything. He had to see and smell death, feel it on his hands, and know that the same thing had happened to her. He was a useless protector because he had been driven into other interests. Life was easier in a solitary house where survival was the only option.

The police had tried to calm him down, gripping at him and dragging him from the questioning room. He had started to forget where he was, who he was. He was fourteen and Snoke had killed Rey and he had escaped without her. He was a worthless leftover who had helped slaughter so many people who he had been cruel to, telling them that his and Rey’s survival was more important than their painful tears over their parents, homes, dogs, and friends.

He had only pretended to breathe into a restrained calm, to fool them into trusting him.

They’d led him into a break room, somewhere away from everyone else, giving him water and trying to get him to relax. Then they’d left him, searching for Victims’ Services or anyone who he could talk to. He knew how it worked. He’d spent a summer at a small police station. He knew how long it took to get anyone to do anything that they didn’t want to do.

The pressure of being alone had gripped at him then, dragging him down until he needed to break.
It was a painful itch that numbed his arms and legs, spreading cold throughout his body.

Breathing just meant that Snoke had left some part of him alive only because he needed to do it himself.

There was a breadknife in a drawer. It was like they left it there because he was guilty of not being able to protect everyone he loved.

He remembered holding it, wanting the numbness to go away. He felt his heartbeat again as he sunk the blade into his arm. He was able to breathe again as he pressed it in harder, carving into his wrist towards his shaking hand.

The numbness had eased as he took it to his next arm. He was weak in his hand now, spiking his anger. The feeling was endless and he could have drowned in it. How could he feel anything if he was already dead? Killing himself didn’t matter because he was just a shadow, standing in the doorway between life and death.

If Rey was gone, he knew which way he had to push himself.

It was a pang of bitter guilt that he was reminded of every time he looked at his arms or any piece of the life that he thought he had: he gave into the darkness not because someone he loved was dead. He wanted to be dust because, in his mind, she was gone and his future vanished with her.

It was a betrayal.

“Don’t try to leave me again either.” She frowned, lightly, then sat up. She picked up the cat, her cat now, and his claws clung to his t-shirt. Touching his chest, she untangled the last one. She left him alone without another word.

The start of a very long day began in his parents’ bed. But at least he woke up with her.

He wasn’t going to let Rey give up on herself. And he had to find a way to get through to her in order not to give up on himself.

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They had only been driving for an hour when Rey decided she could punish Kylo in different ways than just being quiet: she was seized by anger into bitter childishness.

Kylo tried to talk to her, asking her how she felt.

She responded by putting on her headphones and turning the music up to max. She’d do that to Finn on the bus when he would say something that annoyed her or when he tried to hold her hand. He’d finally give up and whine that her music was really bad.

Kylo’s face twitched. She could see it out of the corner of her eye and started singing along, but missing every other word. That also worked on Finn, driving him up the wall.

Slowly, Kylo’s hand reached forward to turn on the radio. The volume gradually climbed until a debate about tax reform rattled in the background of her pop song.

Yanking out her headphones, she pouted at him and he shrugged but turned off the droning talk.
Huffing, she moved into the backseat, to keep Bee company in his kennel. She purposely kicked Kylo’s seat. At least they were taking dad’s truck. It was so much bigger and she could move around freely.

He responded by turning on the radio again, this time at a reasonable volume.

Back went on the headphones, this time emphasized by quick kicks to his seat, whatever kept him thinking about what he was doing.

They stopped for something to eat.

Rey just stared at the food. Kylo ate and she kicked the bench beside him under the table each time he tried to take a bite.

Rey waited until they were back on the highway before complaining that she had to pee.

The cycle repeated for two hours, neither of them cracking in the process of silently trying to annoy the other into breaking.

It was the longest time that they’d spent together in a long time. And Rey was starting to enjoy trying to make Kylo yell at her, to feel a real emotion.

Rey finally instigated a staring contest, sitting and looking at Kylo without blinking.

He caught it out of the corner of his eye and quietly turned his head to meet her gaze, his eyes shifting from the road and oncoming traffic.

Cars were coming towards them in the other lane but he wasn’t looking.

His hand could slip.

They could die.

Her breath quickened. Kylo never put her in danger.

Her head snapped away, blinking. “Look at the road.”

He actually smirked, looking back at the road. “We’re fine. It’s okay.”

She heard him whisper something at the end. She squinted at him as he returned his focus to the road. “What?”

“I said I won.”

She groaned, folding her arms. “You cheated. We could have died.”

He made a light sound in the back of his throat, almost like a scoff. Then he seemed to crumble from the inside out. His face transformed and he put his hand over his mouth, strangled sounds leaving his throat that made her face him again. At first, she thought he was crying, but it didn’t take her long to recognize that he was laughing. A reluctant giggle left her throat; she couldn’t remember the last time he laughed and it brightened her mood. She started to share in the laughter, looking at him with bright eyes. He smiled at her, letting the laughter turn into chuckling.

Maybe he would turn around right there and they’d go home and everything would be fixed. Maybe he realized that sending her away wouldn’t help and he just needed to be around her more. Maybe…
“He would have loved that,” he said, looking at the road with a distant smile.

Her grin lingered but she fist her hands in her jeans. Of course, it was about him.

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They stopped at a hotel and both of them were exhausted. It was late, but Rey still sent him out of the room so she could call her friends.

But having a lighter moment with her had lifted his mood. He felt less tense after breaking the silence and hoped for more progress now that they stopped moving.

To be fair, he also needed some time alone.

So he wandered around the hotel. No one knew him here. He could slouch or hold his head up high and intimidate people. He was a stranger and could be anyone that he wanted.

He sat at the bar and watched baseball.

No one cared who he was.

He zoned out and just watched the late game until it ended and he had to stare at highlights. Even if there were different winners and losers, every game was always the same. Every season had the same highs and lows. The distraction was in the repetitiveness.

A memory of catching a baseball on the beach in Florida flashed in his eyes, then morphed into his jersey being ripped off his chest.

Not tonight.

He paid and left, hoping that he’d given her enough time alone.

Rey was lying on her side, watching her phone. Quirking his head, he tried to smile at her when she met his eyes, but she shrugged it off and went back to whatever she was looking at. She turned away from him and the motion settled heavily in his chest.

Giving up wasn’t an option, he forced himself to think. They had saved each other once before; it could happen again.

-=-

The falls were giant and roaring. And Kylo wanted to look at them, to make a short stop and do something other than watch highway roads signs roll by, so Rey had to follow after him as they stopped across the border. Last night in the hotel, he had at least tried to look at her. But she wanted to think about something else, so she kept watching dancing clips all night. And that made her realize that she hadn’t asked if they had a dance programme at this new school.

She moped after him down the path, going by the other tourists who were gawking at the wisps
and curls of water droplets being driven into the air by the water.

She stood beside him and he folded his arms, taking in the coolness that surrounded them.

“I always wanted to come here.” He looked down at her and his mouth quirked into a smile. “Do you like it?”

He was pretending that things were like they were before. His question sounded just like he used to do but he wasn’t the same. She wasn’t the same. Her heart broke a little at the thought that she still wanted to be cruel to him.

“I guess.”

What’s wrong? He dared to use their old language again, driving the hurt deeper.

I’m tired. The bed was uncomfortable.

Mine was okay.

He wanted things to be like they were, but there were too many things in the way. He had pushed her away, never explaining why. He had ignored how she was feeling, going after his goals blindly. And the biggest thing in the way was him.

“Can we go now?” She glared at him and turned away.

“No.”

She turned and narrowed her eyes. “What’s the point, Kylo? Why did you take me here.”

“Because I wanted to show you something that I always thought was amazing. And it’s like you don’t care. It’s like you don’t care about anything and if that’s true, if everything is just meaningless, then you really need this help, Rey. You can’t be like me and…”

“It’s not always about you!” she snapped.

“It is for you, Rey!” he countered, raising his voice, the first spike of emotion she’d heard in a month. “All of this misery, everything that you’re feeling? It’s because of me. Why do you think I was trying to put some distance between us before? That was about you learning how to be yourself.”

Her gaze hardened. “Then why didn’t you tell me?”

“You wouldn’t listen every time I tried.”

Pursing her lips, she glared. “Because I didn’t want to be away from you.”

The anger in Kylo’s face twisted into pain and she heard him mumble, “Poe was right.”

It made her stomp her foot. “I just want to go. I don’t want to talk about him right before you leave me alone again.”

Rage flared in his eyes. He could still feel things; it amazed her for a moment. She was pushing him again and it was a bittersweet release for her.

Then the look faded and he shook his head.
“You still can’t talk about this.”

“Neither can you.”

He blinked at her, standing up to full height.

His face not revealing his thoughts, Kylo stepped away from her and took two strides forward. The mist still swirling around then, she felt her heartbeat quicken as he put his hands on the railing; his eyes never left hers as he swung his leg over the metal bar.

“Kylo, stop!” she lifted her voice to say, to shout over the roaring water around them.

He kept staring at her, taking his other leg over. He was standing right on the edge, a narrow one. His face broke when he let go of the railing to balance on the threshold.

“Then talk to me!” he shouted. He stood up straighter, his feet so close to falling. How could he do this to her? What was he doing? Panic raged in her heart as her mouth quivered.

People were looking at them now and she ran to the edge, reaching for his hands.

“Please, Kylo, please don’t jump.”

He rolled his eyes. “This isn’t about me right now. It’s about you learning how to talk about these things and to talk to me again from a real place. Not as kids. Not how it was when I was with him. But who we are now.”

Standing up straighter, she heard the gravel shift under his feet. He kept his eyes on her and he couldn’t see how close to the edge he was. Rey was afraid to reach out her hands, to keep him from falling. She might push him accidentally. In the distance, she heard someone shout at them and it knocked her out of the silent moment of fear: Kylo was putting himself in danger to force her into talking.

“Okay! I’ll tell you. Please come back to me.” Warm tears spilled down her face as she spoke. Relief spread over her body as he easily climbed back to the other side. Even though the yelling was coming closer, she wrapped her arms around him and he led her away.

In the truck, in dad’s truck, she sobbed openly as fear still rattled in her chest. He couldn’t die. He couldn’t die. He couldn’t leave her too. Kylo had put her into the passenger seat and then climbed in to pull her onto his lap to let her weep against his chest.

“I miss him too,” she cried. “I miss them all. I miss everyone and I don’t know what to do anymore. I can’t think in school. Someone will say something and I’ll just get so mad and then no one will understand. And I couldn’t talk to you and Ahsoka was mad at me and I felt so alone. Like everyone was trying to control me. I wanted to leave. I just wanted to run away and go to my grandparents because maybe they’d understand it. If you were too busy being in love and getting married then I needed a new family. And then it all went away and now I just want him to be back and you to be happy again. And I want to take back everything that I said to him but I can’t and I don’t understand why.”

His arms tightened around her. “I’m sorry you had to keep this in for so long. I’m sorry for not telling you before, about everything. You should never have felt that way and I shouldn’t have been selfish.”

Sniffling, she shook her head. “You couldn’t stay home forever.”
He kissed her hair as he cradled her. “I need you to be better, Rey. That part is selfish. I can’t keep being pulled in so many directions, worrying about you because I can’t be there. We have Han and Leia, Luke and grandma. We have our friends. We’re not alone anymore.”

“I just want to be okay and be me again,” she whispered, leaning in closer to grip at his sweater. “Will this place make me better? Maybe no one can if you can’t.”

Sucking in a long breath, he hugged her. She could feel his breath by her ear. He still smelled like him. That part was the same. “We’re not there anymore, Rey. We haven’t been there for seven years. Let’s take something from the world. I’m so tired of having things taken from me because of it.”

“I do miss him,” she said, then swallowed more tears. “I miss how he hugged me. I miss how he gave me a nickname. I miss how he made you be more real. I think I got jealous because it wasn’t me.”

She finally felt a hot splash on her neck as he blinked. “You both helped me. Everyone was always helping me and I wasn’t helping anyone. I was just…me. And I’m selfish, cruel, and manipulative.”

Sitting back, she wiped at her eyes. “Who told you that?”

“In therapy,” he answered, weakly. “I started to read between the lines. I made him do things. But he did the same. So I don’t know.”

Swallowing, she shook her head. “I don’t think he ever did anything that he didn’t want to do. When I talked to him, before I got sad, I just knew how much he loved you. And I loved you too. But that was when everything made sense. And then I don’t know what happened.”

His eyes shone as he looked up at her. They had a schedule to keep. They couldn’t sit there forever. But she wanted to. She could feel how his strength was coming back to him. How his emotions weren’t just dialled back to zero. She touched his arm, running her hand down his bicep. She didn’t want to touch his scars, but he seemed to think that way and turned his head away.

“I didn’t want to leave because he was gone. It was because I thought you were.” He glanced back at her, slowly letting out his secrets. “I could mourn him. I couldn’t deal with losing you.”

What he’d said slowly settled in her heart, shattering her lingering anger over what he’d done. “You just wanted to be with me?”

“Yes.”

His face shifted from lingering pain to pure misery in an instant. “So maybe you were right. Maybe I never loved him enough.”

He squeezed out his tears and his hands reached up her back to pull her into another hug.

“I never meant that,” she admitted. “I just wanted to hurt you into coming back to me.”

He still nuzzled her hair, filling her raw emotions with a burst of new feelings. He had no one now but her. If she didn’t untangle her mind, where would he be? They’d done this to one another but she hadn’t been in the world long enough to understand where they both would be in the next few years. She wanted to give up on his promises, but they were still too tempting. If they were both alone, then they were alone together. Like they always were.
“I still didn’t love him enough.” He finally let the words out of his mouth in a tearful whisper. “You need to remember that. If…when…when you get into a relationship, if things feel desperate all of the time…talk about it more.”

“Like we’re doing right now?”

He sat up and gave her a tearful smile. “Like we’re doing right now.”

She held his eyes and watched as he breathed. He’d been stuck for months, not able to talk to her because she had been blocking him at every turn. This was an opening. Watching the rise and fall of his chest, she put her hand on his heart like she used to do. “I love you.”

“I love you the most.” His reply was different but still made her smile.

As they finally settled, with her in the backseat so Bee could eat and drink and be out of his kennel for cuddles, he met her eyes in the rear-view mirror.

The drive suddenly didn’t feel so long. And being alone didn’t feel so frightening.

But she could still change her mind the next day.

Chapter End Notes

I guess there are no warnings for this chapter except for the standard ones in the tags and the fact that Poe is still mentioned here. I had to split this chapter into two because it was dragging and I haven't updated in a while because this was damned hard to write. So it isn't perfect and I'm not satisfied, etc. Thank you for continuing to read this because it's a hot mess. There are like five deleted "scenes" from this chapter that I just had to cut so if it feels weird it's all on me fam.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Rey and Kylo reach Luke's and are met with an unexpected obstacle.

Read chapter notes for warnings (and a bonus.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rey was setting down her suitcase in Luke’s guest room, trying to clear her head. She was still full from dinner, the last one on the road. They had run late but it was only after seven when they got there. She'd smiled more, enjoying having Kylo look at her and talking like they were both two real people. It made her feel like eating for once, remembering how much she liked spaghetti. But the room looked okay; there was a large closet and the bed was bigger than the one that she had at home. A thick quilt sat at the foot of the bed. Grandma had made it. Thick red and blue threads intersected into patterns that she couldn't imagine making herself.

She was thinking about the last day of the drive, finally being able to talk to Kylo again.

She saw the deep pain in his eyes when she told him that she ran away because she felt alone, that nothing could fill the hole that was growing within her. He deserved to feel that way, even though it hurt her to accept that those emotions could ever exist in her heart. But he understood. He'd stripped off his own cloud of grief for once and just plainly gave in to her.

He pulled to the side of the highway and she could hear the other cars rushing by them. It was a quiet tempo that she wanted again inside of the silent house; she wanted it to dwarf the other two men shuffling in the next room, deciding what to do with her.

Still, after talking with Kylo and feeling his heart, the ache that she had felt when she was alone with him had started to recede. He had reached for her hand and it felt warm and gentle, like he was almost back. Sitting in that truck, beside the highway, still filled her senses.

That’s when he confessed, in a low and shaky voice, that he’d thought about running away before as well. He’d thought about killing himself long before, a long time ago. But he’d always think about her at the last minute, or finally realize that he’d been thinking about her the entire time and just let her voice be drowned out by his own selfish pain. And that he knew how she felt and that, even through his fog, he comprehended how torn up she must have felt by his flailing actions in the spring. He’d taken her for granted. Just hearing those words made it easier to focus on why she needed to be away from him for a short while.

Maybe he had to learn how to miss her too.

Bee purred against her leg and she knelt down to grin at him. She was able to take him. Of all the fake choices that everyone pretended to let her make, taking him had been one that felt real.

She ran her fingers along his soft, orange fur and sighed. He must miss him too. He was lonely too.
But at least they had each other.

They needed a litter box. The hotel solutions hadn’t been good for him and the car had just made him nervous.

She hopped up, moving towards the half-closed door, ready to open it and ask Luke about where they should put it when she heard Kylo shout. It made her stop and put her arms around her waist. Kylo was angry. It made her tense and hold her breath.

Shakily, she crept forward along the carpeting, letting her feet drag as she moved.

“…what do you mean a year? It was supposed to be until Christmas. No one told me that.”

It was still Kylo’s voice, raised but fading into an angry, lower, tone. She peered through the small gap in the door. In the distant kitchen, down the hall from her room, she saw Kylo stand to glare at Luke. She couldn’t see him. He had seemed happy to see her, excited to take her to see the school the next day. Now, Kylo was angry with him.

She needed to know why.

“We didn’t tell you because you need a break too. And you’re so stubborn that you’d push it too quickly. We know you, Ben, and we know what you’re going through…” Luke’s voice was also low and she had the strain to hear him. She nudged at the door, kneeling down to avoid being seen.

Kylo scoffed, making her smirk. He hated not being in control just as much as she did. “Yes. Everyone has said that like they were also kidnapped, raped and tortured and forced to kill children for seven years. To be treated for PTSD and still insist to go to high school because no one dared to tell you that maybe, just maybe, getting what you want isn’t the most important thing. And now, right now, to know what it’s like to find someone that they loved killed with his throat cut because you went to the gym because that’s what you always did on fucking Fridays and then have to think that the most important person in your life was killed the same way. No one knows what I’m going through, Luke, even if most of it is all my fault. The feelings, everything, Rey and I are finally reconnecting right now. We’ve finally, I don’t know, started to get beyond my fucking mistakes. I didn’t agree to this and I don’t think she will either. We need each other right now.”

Rey was still digesting the words when Luke spoke again.

“No, Kylo, you just want her to keep needing you.”

She watched Kylo turn to shove Luke, heard their feet scuffle against the kitchen linoleum. She was about to open the door, to tell them to stop, when Luke pushed him back. Kylo flashed back into her view and he had his shoulders set for a fight. She forgot how he looked when he wasn’t dully dumbed by heartache.

“You know I’m right,” Luke hissed. She could finally see him now, how he stared Kylo down. “Have you really gone a day in your life, this new life as Kylo or whoever you think you are, without having someone needing you or wanting to help you? You had Rey. You both had that blinking language that no one else understood. And then you had that poor boy, who also just wanted someone to love him. Your mother and father are exhausted from doing everything for all three of you. And I can’t even think about what you’ve done to that FBI agent. You know this, Ben. You’re not stupid.”

Rey shifted away from watching them to sit beside the door, pulling her knees up under her chin. No one ever talked to Kylo like this. No one ever yelled at him except her. And Poe. She bit her lip
and tried to stop her heart from beating so loudly so she could still keep listening.

Kylo was silent, but she could hear the distant sound of him shifting his weight as the floor creaked. He was thinking.

“I’m not stupid. And I’ve had more than enough therapy to know what I am. And I just keep burying it because I don’t want to deal with it.” Kylo must have had his teeth clenched. The words came out in short exhales. “And I just hurt everyone by doing that.”

“Then, maybe, this year will give you time to think about what you do to other people. Especially her. The ringer that you’ve put her through…I should have helped Leia and Han more,” Luke said, then sighed.

“Why didn’t you?”

Rey lifted her head and turned back to look through the door.

“I had my own shit to deal with.” Luke’s words settled thickly in her ears. She felt a rising pride in Kylo as she watched him glare down at his uncle.

“You know that, one day, my mother will tell me what you’ve been chasing. It hasn’t happened yet, but I will find out. And you won’t be so fucking mysterious anymore.” She could feel Kylo’s anger raise the hairs on her skin. “So why are you here now, reaching out to my Rey?”

“Because she needs someone who at least knows how to pretend to be an adult,” Luke shot back. “And, yeah, Leia will tell you everything because you always get what you want. It’s like how the Earth will one day get burnt up by the sun. Stop using people, Ben.”

“That’s not my name,” Kylo’s voice dipped as he spoke. “He’s died too many times. He died before Rey came and then died again. Let me be this if that’s all you care about.”

“No,” came Luke’s quick reply. “What I care about is her. You can leave right now for all I care. And I don’t want to see you or speak to you for a year. And you are not allowed to call her or text her or have any contact with her. You can’t ruin her like you ruined yourself.”

Kylo stumbled two slow steps back and Rey had to grip her hand to her mouth to stop from sobbing. A year without talking? A year without knowing how he was doing? He could push her away, but he always came back to her. No. No, this wasn’t fair. This was hurting too much. They’d just started over and now it was ripped apart again.

Kylo’s lips quivered and he dropped his head. His eyes met hers through the door and tears finally spilled down her cheeks.

_We need to do it._ The blinks were distant, but she could still read him.

She turned her head away to avoid replying messily. The stinging in her eyes made it hard to focus.

But he was right.

“Let…let me tell her. So I can say goodbye.” Kylo’s distant reply made her finally scramble away from the door. She settled heavily on the bed, her hands shaking so much that she couldn't make them sit still until she tucked them under her thighs, her still too-fat thighs.

Kylo’s footsteps were approaching, but she still heard Luke’s distant voice say, “It’s only a year, for Christ’s sake.”
A year was everything. A year meant twelve periods. A year meant not knowing who he was and what he was doing. It was a year without telling him if she was getting better or not. She'd watched Kylo and Poe fall in love in less than a year. It could happen again. And it gripped at her throat, knowing that he'd be lonely, looking for comfort that she couldn't give. It was a panic that made her sit up straighter, taking a long breath as he grew closer. She wanted him to stop and turn away. To argue more. To tell Luke that he was wrong and that they were going home because this was bullshit.

Still, Kylo’s hand nudged open the door and she met his eyes and sobbed. The look had shattered her. He couldn't leave her now. He should fight against it. Yet, he shut the door with his large palm and looked at her, raw and open like the boy who had saved her so long ago rather than the man that was still struggling to understand.

“Do I really have to stay here?” The words were desperate from her lips. “For a year without talking to you?”

He breathed in and wiped at his eyes. “This isn’t what we thought it was.”

She felt the last of her strength wash away and sobbed. “I’m sorry I didn’t reply to you for months. I always felt nervous to text you back. I’m sorry for being mad. I’m sorry for saying that I hated you and him. Please, please, Kylo fix this. Save us. Save us, like you promised.”

The distance between them already felt endless. And it was about to get so much larger.

He looked down, then up to meet her eyes. “I caused this. I let this happen. Just wanting to be normal got in the way of thinking about you. I pushed you away and now I’m getting what I deserve. And you're hurt again. You should have never been hurt by me, Rey, but I keep doing it. I need to break another promise to you right now, Rey, but it’s the last one I’ll ever break.”

Tears rippled in his brown eyes and she shot out her hand, needing him closer to her. She’d seen him broken, hurting, and everything else in between before. But, now, reality was washing onto shores that she couldn’t fight against anymore. His anger from before, making her talk, was blown away because there were always powers greater than them making decisions that they were too blind to see. Too blinded by one another.

He stepped forward and took her hand, sitting down heavily on her new bed. At least it smelt like grandma and, in some way, it would still hold him too.

It had all come on too hard and too fast.

They had taunted and tortured one another, playing with the idea that they would never be separated. But Rey knew in her heart that Kylo wanted her to get better. She wasn’t broken; she just needed to figure out what wasn’t working. And he needed to be sad in his own world. The bubble hadn’t burst. It just needed to sit still for a time.

But that time would take too long.

She cried again, not wanting to let him go so easily. “Can you make a new promise?”

“Anything,” his husky voice answered.

“In a year, when I get out of here, that you’ll come and get me and we won’t ever be apart again?” She tried not to sound like she was forcing him to do anything. She just wanted to hear the truth. She was so broken down by his lies; she hoped that he heard what she meant.
He pulled her closer, pressing his lips against her hair. His forehead brushed hers, like it always used to do when they were there. He knew. “I promise, Rey.”

In his arms, she tried to find her strength. “You need to get better. Not just for me. But for everyone.”

He sat there, silent for a moment. His shoulders tensed and he pulled her tighter for a moment. “I know. And I…I won’t let you down.”

They sat for what should have been forever, but it only turned into a few minutes and then he had to go.

Chapter End Notes

So I spent a half an hour crying to Unchained Melody and realized that I should share my writing playlist to this (ughhh don't dox me):
https://open.spotify.com/playlist/70YTRr8NmeZBEgQ2S4dR40

Please excuse the random Swedish songs. And how it's tragically unorganized. And for basically every word I've ever written of this.

And also how short this chapter is, but the next two chapters will be longer, following the year deadline that we have been presented with here. I'm going to a wedding this weekend so I'll be working on the fucking HAPPIER chapters while there.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Kylo deals with a year away from Rey. And how he felt about Poe.

Read end notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A year. A fucking year.

Kylo sat outside of the hotel in Detroit and just stared at the dashboard, repeating the same thought that had pounded in his head the last few hours. It was midnight by the time he got there, but he hadn’t realized how long he’d been driving. The numbers were staring at him. The nearly-empty gas gauge was what reminded him that he had just driven with only rage to guide him.

For Rey, he had to do this. If this was some twisted, cruel part of the program, it must be for the best. He never trusted his doctors, but had to put whatever faith he had left in hers. He still wanted it to be a lie or misunderstanding but it was hard to see through truth and lies anymore.

He had to manage it, for her.

But the urge to destroy himself wouldn’t go away. It roared in the back of his ears every time he touched on moving forward.

It had been clear at the falls. Now it had just been fogged away, crushed against the rocks like everything that he'd ever had or will have.

The empty reality rattled in his chest as his jaw started to hurt from clenching his teeth too hard.

He remembered bits and pieces of driving and just thinking about swerving into the next lane and obliterating everything. But a small voice in the back of his head started to scream at him that he couldn’t hurt other people, dragging them down with him.

Sorrow finally won out and he snatched up his phone. He still hadn’t changed the background. Poe and Rey were still smiling back at him and his hands were shaking as he pulled up his contacts.

Rey’s number didn’t even ring. It was the distinct chirping of being blocked. Luke had taken her phone and done this. He clenched his hand and wanted to crush the device.

He dialled another familiar number and shut his eyes.

“Hi, this is Poe Dameron’s voicemail and I’m only doing this because Kylo made me. Just text me because I’m never going to listen to this.” Then, in the background, he heard his own voice distantly say, “Why did you do that I...” followed by the dull beep.
He hit dial again.

And again.

He did it until he sobbed after the end of the message. “I miss you. Tell me what to do. Please come back. I can fix this. Please.”

He hit end and wiped at his eyes, finally ready to make another call.

He was pathetically making desperate phone calls to exhausted girls and ghosts. It was finally time to get answers.

His father answered after one ring. They’d been waiting up for him. They knew this would happen. How dare they? “Ben? Everything okay?”

“Why didn’t you tell me it would be for a year and that I couldn’t talk to her?” he spoke through clenched teeth.

“What? Slow down. What did Luke tell you?” His father legitimately sounded confused, but it could be a bluff, like saying they were going for ice cream and then leaving him alone for long enough to lose his life. “Hold on, let me get your mother up.”

He could hear himself breathing, but not much more.

“Ben, where are you? Is George with you?” Leia’s voice joined Han’s. She seemed panicked, afraid for him. She should be. “Tell us what Luke’s done.”

Wasn’t it what they’ve done? This wasn’t their fault? He rubbed his tired eyes and tried to steady himself.

“I don’t know what Luke has done. You talked with the people at that place. Did they say anything about this?” His voice was neutral, tumbling into numbness. “Did Dr. Windu say anything about this? We weren’t prepared and I’m...” He trailed off, looking at the few people on the street. It was an average night for them and it was entirely unfair that they could just stay out late and enjoy life. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Oh, honey. We should have come with you. We’ll fly you home. I’m going to call Luke right now and get this sorted out. Please, please, Ben, don’t hurt yourself. Get some rest and we’ll take care of it. Okay?” He heard his mother get out of bed, shifting the phone as she moved. “Ben?”

He rolled his eyes, determined not to embrace the anger that was still tempting him. “I’m in Detroit, mom. I just have to leave the car and someone will take care of it for me.”

“Well, at least you still have your sense of humour,” Han said in the background, but there was no wit in his voice. “Give George a call. We’re going to figure this mess out. Okay, son?”

“Fine.” He hit end on the call and tried to find the energy to go inside. He wanted to break his phone, destroy it, but then he’d lose the numbers that he’d never bothered to commit to heart. He was as bad as everyone else. And his body ached from driving so far and for so long, but he couldn’t move.

He’d booked a room at the same hotel as George. He probably shouldn’t have done that, but it had felt normal at the time. He’d texted him the details of his stay and Kylo had taken it as an invitation. But now, after Luke’s all-too-correct accusations, it seemed creepy and unnecessary. Poe would have said that if he’d been there. And he would have probably suggested maybe
somewhere down the block, but still would have quietly accepted where they’d be staying even if he had been uncomfortable and strained by it all.

Had he really been that cruel to him?

Inside, he managed to check in. He managed to park the truck in the underground garage. He managed to get into the elevator. But he did it all living in a fantasy scenario of having Poe there with him. How he’d have taken a handful of the candy from the desk, pocketing it and forgetting about it until he did the laundry and it would turn out to be a giant clump. How he’d have picked the parking spot, because some numbers were luckier than others. How he’d have hit all of the other buttons on the way out, dooming whoever really needed the elevator to have to stop on every floor. All of it would have been endlessly annoying. But he wanted to feel that itching sensation again, of having to glare as Poe would grin at him until he couldn’t take it anymore and would reach down to kiss him.

Instead of going to his room, he knocked on George’s door.

Anyone normal would have called ahead of time. But he was just using others so that was his excuse.

George answered, still in his suit and holding a folder. “You got here a little late. Come in.”

He shook his head, hoping he didn’t look as dejected as he felt. “It’s been a really long day.”

Both beds were still made, but one was covered in folders and files. The laptop on the desk showed photos of a bloody scene. Beside the computer were two wineglasses. One was empty, unused. The other was half full.

This was George’s life and one that he still wanted for himself, but the finishing line kept getting pushed back.

“Hm,” the agent sighed, turning to fill both glasses. “Have a drink with me and look through some of these. What prescriptions are you on right now? I’m just looking out for you.”

“As long as I don’t take a sleeping pill, it’s fine.” He wasn’t lying for once. He didn’t want a drink but didn’t want to turn it down either. “Thank you.”

He accepted the glass and George frowned at him. “I can see that it didn’t go well with your uncle.”

Sipping at his glass, he turned to open one of the folders. “What are you working on?”

“I’m consulting on a case. Three pre-teen girls who didn’t know one another, all from different races and backgrounds, were found dismembered in an abandoned house. We at least have DNA, but the processing is taking time. So I’m retracing the steps, finding witnesses.” George sat down on the other bed and Kylo nodded. “I was talking to their parents all day, so I can say that it’s been a long day for me as well.”

“What did they say?” He kept looking through the folder, wondering if the statements were in there in rough form. Instead he got the school photos of one of the girls. A smiling brunette with amber eyes stared back at him until he looked up at George. “Were they kidnapped first? They could have known who did it.”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out.” George sat back and loosened his tie. “I can really only stay for two more weeks. I don’t like having a ticking clock, but this is the way it is sometimes.”
Kylo looked around the room for a place to sit and chose the floor beside the bed. “You can do it. If you have DNA, it’s better than nothing.”

“Exactly.” George nodded. “Now tell me why you’re avoiding talking about what happened with Rey. She hasn't called me lately and hasn't been answering my emails.”

He took a long clunk of wine. The taste reminded him of Poe’s sloppy kisses on the couch, his mouth still having the lingering taste of alcohol that night after Hux’s. It felt like a different life, not something that had just happened that spring. Not being able to find the ring meant that it might not have ever happened.

“I’m hoping that it’s just a lie,” he started, stopping to take another drink. “Luke said that I’m not allowed to have contact with Rey for a year. Either he’s a fucking liar, or that fucking place has insane rules that they hid from me or I missed them because I’m an idiot.”

George’s greying brows furrowed. “I don’t recall that ever being a part of their process. I can make some calls in the morning for you.”

Luke was right. He was just waiting around for people to do things for him, to make them do things and solve his problems. If Poe had been there, he would have fought harder against what Luke had said. Maybe that’s why he felt so powerless in that situation. His backbone was gone.

“No, my parents said that they’ll find out what’s going on. You’ve done enough for me these last few months. You have other things to worry about.” His voice was flat. His glass was empty and George stood to offer him more. He accepted, hoping that it would help him sleep later. “But what if it’s a good idea? That’s the part that I keep thinking about. We stopped at Niagara and I just lost it. I hopped over a fucking guardrail and forced her to admit that she missed him too, to talk to me, to tell me why she ran away. But all I could think about was why doesn’t she miss him too. Why was that so important to me? Who cares if she misses him too? It’s her life and I just keep dragging her through mine. Maybe she’d be better off for a year not having to hear my fucking whining.”

“It’s…it’s worth considering.” George shifted off the bed to sit across from him on the floor. It was exactly what Poe would have done. “You were trying to put distance between the two of you before, both with your reluctance to go home and getting engaged. You wanted her to have independence and instead she took it as rejection, running away the first chance that she got. We are getting her the help that she was screaming for now. But Kylo, it’s crucial that she also deals with her grief. That’s why it’s important. Both parts.”

“I still think that someone else did it.” Kylo dared to meet his eyes. “I know I saw the evidence but…”

Exhaling, George reached out to put his hand on his knee. “I’m sorry that I don’t agree, but I do understand why you’re thinking this way. How are you feeling?”

“Shitty,” he shrugged as the hand withdrew. “I wasted all of Rey’s summer by not being able to talk to her. My parents had to move all of my shit and I just wasn’t there. I can’t go an hour without thinking about him. I miss him so fucking much and just see him dead in my mind all of the time. Just how he looked. How I held him. How I couldn't fix it, one last time. His eyes...he was so afraid.”

“I wish I had known him better.”

Kylo managed to smirk. “You intimidate him. He’s always worried whenever you’re around that he’ll say something wrong or weird. He always gets quiet and just stares at you. I have to tell him
that it’s fine all of the time.”

The wine was gone and he felt exhaustion finally start to settle over him.

George picked up his glass, standing and stretching. “I think we can talk more about this tomorrow after you’ve had some sleep. I’ll take you to your room.”

He groaned, flopping his head back. Another mistake. “I left my bag in the car.”

Kylo was again reminded of how much he asked from others as George led him to his room down the hall and made a call to send someone to get his things. He sat and waited with him as a hotel employee took his keys and then quickly returned with his black bag. It was only when Kylo had stared into space for five minutes that George said goodnight and that they’d speak again tomorrow.

He was in a hotel room again. They all looked the same. He let the memory roll over him again of that first kiss. Everything would have been different if he hadn’t kissed him back, but then he would have never gotten to run his hands through his hair, feel his arms around him, have a life with him, despite how short it had been. He knew now what it was like to trust someone enough to see all of his scars. Poe had only been a few weeks from fourteen when this all started, during that awkward span of time between their birthdays. The first time they had sex, he’d only been sixteen. And the last time, he was only twenty.

“So fucking unfair,” he said to no one.

Forcing himself to get up and get ready for bed, he tried to find more of the happier memories rather than tormenting himself with the bad. He brushed his teeth and thought about being on the beach that summer in Florida. How Poe had teased him the entire time he was putting sunscreen on him. *You’re not going to tan, you’re going to burn.* How they built a sandcastle like children and then stomped on it. They had napped in the sun after swimming for an hour, finding a free spot to lie together and pretend that they were alone.

Looking at himself in the mirror, he knew he wasn’t that person anymore.

The heartache of losing someone made it hard to think about ever moving on to someone new or even thinking about being with anyone ever again. At least he’d always have Rey, or at least he hoped that he still had her. Whoever his heart was drawn to next would have to be a galaxy of impossibilities: unearthly patient, beyond determined, and unfathomably confident.

*Attractive would also be nice.* He heard the thought in Poe’s voice and smirked, finally leaving the washroom for bed.

It was dark and he was alone in a new city.

Wanting to fall asleep to a good memory, he numbly started to stroke himself and thought about the last time that they’d made love. It had been slow and easy, both of them bracing for the distance that was supposed to only be between them for the summer. He thought about Poe’s mouth, how he would gently bite his lip, asking for more in the motion. His hands would still ask for contact, making sure that Kylo wasn’t afraid or wanted to stop. The memory of the curve of his erection as it brushed against his when they both were naked finally made his dick twitch in response. He’d always close his eyes when Poe prepared himself, but he’d slowly pump himself at the idea of what was coming. When Poe would reach for him, offering him lube, he’d look down at him again. He always wanted him; even when they fought or argued, he wanted to share this with him.
He was hard now, the first time since then. He could still conjure up how freeing it was to allow himself to be turned on by someone. The gasp that Poe always made as he entered him, holding his legs apart so they could face one another, ghosted through his mind. And then when he was inside him, filling him and loving him, he’d moan loudly and tell him how *great* it felt. It was a sensation that he’d never know again, but he still had his memories.

His hand matched the ghost motions in his head, remembering how he moved his hips, driving himself faster until he’d reach a perfect rhythm to get them both off. He’d always come first, but Poe would never be far behind.

Reliving Poe’s orgasm made him come. Hearing his breath catch and seeing the shape of his mouth change as he brought him to release. The sensation surprised him; his own breath caught in his throat as he stained the hotel sheets with a strangled cry.

Guilt washed over him, preventing him from leaving the bed to clean himself off. He justified sleeping with damp sheets as fitting punishment for masturbating to such a precious memory.

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His phone was vibrating and he blinked awake, angry that he’d forgotten to turn the ringer on last night. He’d been too busy jerking off to think practically.

Not recognizing the number, he still answered with an annoyed tone. “Yeah?”

“Hi.” It was Rey and he sat up. “You don’t have to hang up. Please don’t be mad at me, Kylo. I’m using my new friend’s phone. Just don’t tell Luke.”

Rubbing his eyes, he looked at the clock. It was almost noon. “How is it? Are you okay? Have you talked to mom and dad?”

The questions came out rapidly. The words *I miss you already* were supposed to come out but his mouth went dry when he tried to say them.

“They said that they’ve been trying to call you and are really worried. I think that you should call them right away.” She lowered her voice. “I thought you hurt yourself too. I had to call you to make sure. I don't want to be here if you're gone.”

“No, not this time.” He sighed. Everyone would think this way about him for the rest of his life. “I was just asleep. I'm sorry I made you worry. I wouldn't do that to you, Rey. I was driving all night and I just...”

“Are you okay?” Rey asked, cutting through him. He should be asking about her and she was taking the time to ask about him. “Mom and dad were really mad at Luke. My new therapist is really mad at him too. Nobody is making us not talk. I yelled at Luke a lot because I hate it when people lie to me. I miss you, Kylo. But everyone here is so nice...”

“Except for Luke.” He closed his eyes, biting his lip. “So, you don’t want to leave?”

He wanted her to say yes. He wanted her to say no. He was torn in two again.

She took a deep breath. “I think...I think I need to try this, Kylo. It's different here - all of the kids
are like us. Really, like us. I used to think that every kid had a real mom and dad and...and they
don't. Other kids have been hurt like us and I don't know what to think. I want more time to think,
but Dr. Casterfo wants me to try but not for you, just for myself.”

“He’s right,” Kylo said, then sighed, knives cutting into his heart. “I don’t want to go a year
without talking to you or seeing you, but maybe Luke is a little right too. I hate myself for saying
that. Remember how I used to say that I never wanted you to hate anything? Just love? You're
allowed to hate because I hate so much about me. But as long as you don't hate me, I'll be okay.
Remember…remember when we first got out? How fast that first year went? This…it won’t feel as
long.”

He heard Rey sigh again. “I hope…I hope you’re right.”

She put her hand over the phone, she was talking to someone else.

“I’ll write to you,” he quickly added. “Luke can’t stop that. Steal the mail key and get it copied.”

Her voice was back in an instant. “And I’ll write to you too. All of the time.” There was a small
smile in her voice; he could hear it. But it quickly faded with her next words. “I have to go. We’re
going horseback riding. But I miss you so much already and love you.”

“I love you too, Rey. I love you and we'll see each other soon, okay?” His eyes started to tear and
he tried to blink them away. “I promise I’ll be better, Rey. I promise that this is the last time I mess
up like this.”

“I…I hope so. I don’t want to say goodbye, but I have to. Please come back to me, and I’ll come
back to you. Goodbye, Kylo.”

“Bye.”

He saved the number. He knew himself well enough to know that he’d be calling that number at
some point.

There were fifteen missed calls from his parents.

They could wait until he had showered.

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“But what about your second wife?”

George openly grinned, reaching for his wine glass. “There you are. I was waiting for you.”

“What?” came his dumb reply. Dinner was long over and they were chatting over wine on the
agent’s hotel balcony. Kylo had spent the entire day in bed, watching sports highlights and eating
room service, until he went to the gym for an hour before showering and then meeting with
George. He’d spoken with Han and Leia several times, insisting that he was accepting the situation,
as bitter and cruel as it felt. Rey needed to heal. He’d still get updates about her and could pour his
thoughts out into words that he’d have time to think about rather than his gut-punching
recklessness with talk and actions.
But George was nearby and he felt less numb since he left Rey in the care of his wayward uncle with the threat of no contact transformed into a decision that they chose to make rather than an order from above by that cruel asshole. This was something that they both wanted in order to heal. He had to keep that in the back of his mind; pin it like one of the notes on the wall that he used to have at home.

It was a welcome distraction to sit with George both last night and this evening. They’d gone over the work that George had done that day over dinner, then slowly drifted into old memories again as night fell around them.

“You lived with me for six weeks. I was waiting for questions.” George had had a good day. They had narrowed down where the girls had been taken: a corner store with a camera. They had video of a suspect. Things were moving forward.

Kylo reached for his own wine glass. Agent Jinn was looking out for him, taking care of him. Fuck what Uncle Luke said. He didn’t know him. “The office door wasn’t locked. I went in there when I couldn’t sleep. It started to make sense.”

“Oh,” George said and sat back. “Explain it to me, agent, why do you think I favoured my second wife over my first or third?”

Swallowing, Kylo latched onto the challenge. It meant talking about anything else other than what they had dredged through that evening as discussing breaks in the case transformed into his miserable thoughts again. He was confidently buzzed enough to give an assessment. He’d already heard his own life thrown in his own face last night and today; he’d already wept about everything possible. He could turn this around into being a human and not a walking shell. He could dare to give George his own perspective.

“She’s the only one you didn’t have a child with, but you still,” Kylo paused, suddenly worried to keep going but pushed forward, “you still have her picture on your desk. The others are just of your kids.”

He looked up, awaiting approval. He got a grin and could take a drink again.

George looked almost distant; for once it was another person slipping away into a memory. “She was almost a child when I married her, hardly twenty-one and I was forty. I shouldn’t have done that. It only lasted a year. But that was a good year.”

“I had five years,” he softly said. “And now they all have to be good in retrospect.”

Smirking, the agent took another sip of wine. “My first partner, when I was a field agent, died suddenly. It wasn’t work related and wasn’t expected. I was partnered with him for three years and we worked well together but always antagonized one another to see who was better than the other. There were arguments, there were periods of silence. And then I had to pretend that it was all smooth and painless for the sake of his memory.”

Kylo slowly swirled his wine. “He threatened to break up with me once when I was eighteen. I never told anyone how much that hurt and how afraid I was. So, I made promises that I didn’t keep. And he still stayed with me, even as I kept pushing him into things that he didn’t want. We just needed each other and now I need to find out who I am without him. And I will, I have to. Snoke can’t win after all of this time. It’s something I have to do for myself. And also for him. And Rey. Most of all now for Rey. But I’m afraid of the same thing for her. If she doesn’t figure out who she is and what she wants, and where I fit in, then she’ll end up in the same situation and will have to keep starting over again and again.”
“And that’s exhausting.”

“Exactly.” Kylo smirked in response then chewed on the inside of his mouth. “Why am I worth anything to you anymore, George? After all of this?”

The grey-haired man frowned, then sat up. Sometimes, Kylo forgot that it had been over seven years since the first time that they’d met. He took a long sip of wine, making him wait. “You’re worth it because there’s a strength within you that I still believe in. You lived through a terrible ordeal that I think will give you great insight, once you’re old enough to be away from it and understand it from a new perspective. This tragedy, losing someone who gave you stability in one way or another, can’t be ignored. I’ve always been honest with you. Even though I understand why you wanted to hurt yourself, I was disappointed. But I do understand, Kylo. I went down that road too, thinking that she was gone as well. That shows I’m also not perfect.”

“Will…will that prevent them from accepting my application?” His mouth was suddenly dry, watching another dream about to be snatched away from him. The psychological exam terrified him. He was the exact opposite of being mentally stable.

George just leaned back and sipped at his wine. “Someone could lose that paperwork.”

He exhaled, shakily. “I don’t know what to say.”

“I have another thing for you to think about.” George met his eyes and Kylo felt nervous already from the tone. “Take this semester off. Come stay with me for a while. There were still be time.”

“You don’t think I can handle it?” He wasn’t offended. He was more than prepared to accept that he’d be a mess for longer than he wanted to be.

“Oh, I think you can. But whether or not it’s healthy is something to consider.”

“I’ll think about.”

He wanted to ask why he would do that for him, dive deep into this connection, but instead he just finished his wine and excused himself for the night.

-=-

He didn’t accept George’s offer, but started to wish that he had the second he left Michigan. He had spent the drive back thinking about all the reasons why taking a break was a good idea. After one day at home, spending time trying to converse with his parents, he had packed the last of his things and left for his new home.

And the place he drove to was their old apartment instead. He had parked and was about to go upstairs when the realization shook him.

He was in a terrible mood by the time he got to Hux’s.

Turning a new key in a new door, he was berating himself for not being able to let go of all of this.

Hux was making breakfast when he came into the kitchen. He jumped when he said hello. He was just wearing pyjama pants, his hair sticking up at all angles.
“Jesus, I thought you weren’t coming until tomorrow.” He turned away from the pancakes and still seemed to be shaking himself awake. “Everything okay?”

“No. But it’s the way it is.” He folded his arms, shaking his head. “I couldn’t stand my parents for another day. I just wanted to get this over with. I’m going to get some sleep.”

Hux was nodding, almost too quickly. “Yeah, probably a good idea. We can go to the bookstore later and get ready for next week.”

Kylo stared at him. “Is Paige here?”

He was scanning the table, noticing that it was set for two. But Hux was shaking his head. “Guess I kind of thought that you might show up. If you’re hungry.”

“No, it’s fine. Maybe I’ll have something later.” Not wanting to confront his friend, Kylo retreated to his new room, but noticed the door to Hux’s was shut.

Closing the door to his room, he sighed. Leia had actually listened to him and set up the room exactly like he wanted. He’d taken Rey’s old bed from their guestroom. He didn’t need anything bigger. His desk, his television, all of his books and journals, it was all there.

And sitting on that desk was a picture of the three of them from the day when Rey exploded at them, the day after he proposed. He didn’t even remember the picture being taken. Poe’s hand sat on his and he was smiling brightly, despite how hungover they both had been that morning.

He let the picture stay there and went to bed.

-=-

“Hey, man, how’s it going?”

Kylo had been staring at his hands, in the locker room at the university gym. It was his first week back. Everything shouldn’t make him want to tear up the progress that he’d made in his head, but it still did. Getting back to the gym would fix some of that, to stop him from just wanting to be in bed all of the time.

“Hey Arthur,” he looked up to say. “Spot for me today?”

He came there already changed but needed to take a few breaths before going out on the floor. Arthur had just walked into the room, greeting him like it was any other day.

“Yeah, sure, just do the same for me,” he said, pulling off his shirt. “Hey, um, I’m sorry about your boyfriend. I read about it and I didn’t see you but…at least they found the guy, right?”

Kylo pulled on the cuff of his shirt. “They did. His dad was into some shit and it just caught up with us. Some guy got hired to settle a debt and then stole some of our stuff and OD’d. That’s all it was.”

He turned his eyes away, but he could feel Arthur still looking at him as he changed. He knew that the other man had his work-out clothes on by now, but still couldn’t look at him. He didn’t believe what he’d just said but it was easier to tell people the lie rather than the truth he was creating in his
“Kylo, I…” he started and then paused to take a breath, “look, are you okay?”

Glancing up into the other man’s blue eyes, Kylo shrugged. “It’s been a long summer. I had to switch apartments, and the funeral and everything…”

The last thing he wanted was Arthur to sit down beside him on the bench and it still happened. “Sounds shitty.”

He managed a light chuckle. “Tell me about it.”

They sat in silence for a moment before Arthur slapped his back. “Come on. Enough of this shit.”

For once, Kylo had some respect for people who were so cut off from their emotions.

-=-

Kylo snuck into Hux’s room, carefully navigating around the mounds of books and paper and discarded clothes. He looked long and hard at the picture of Paige beside the glowing clock radio on the bedside table and believed that her eyes were telling him to feel better.

He couldn’t sleep.

Again.

So he curled up next to Hux, careful to be close to him but not touch him.

He breathed in and out and was almost asleep. The warmth beside him calmed him. The breathing kept him thinking that there was someone else with him: Rey was safe but away, Poe was dead but still haunted him.

He felt himself nearing peace. In his tired state, he reached over and put his hand on Hux’s hip.

Hux groaned, rolling over and glaring at him. “I thought that we talked about this. Wake me up and we’ll talk. You can’t just come and sleep in my bed with me like everything’s okay when it’s not.”

Shrugging, Kylo sat up. He tried to keep his annoyance from his face because he was almost asleep for the first time in weeks. He scrambled for an excuse. “I was too tired to talk.”

Their eyes met in the muted darkness. Hux had dealt with so much the last month. He would have been kicked out by anyone else. Still, his friend kept his promise as Kylo tried to get his life back to where he wanted it to be. Since Luke had cut him off from Rey, Kylo had been drawn more towards any sort of comfort. Her letters to him showed her progress, and his to her showed how stuck he was, looking for a solution to his weakness. And if it was his roommate, that’s what it had to be.

“Come on.” Hux shifted, pulling him into an embrace. “It’s going to just take time, Kylo. Rey’s doing better. And so are you.”

Shaking his head, Kylo sighed against the other man’s chest. “Can I just sleep here for a bit?”
“What time is it?” The tiredness in his voice managed to register through Kylo’s stupidity.

He swallowed. “Just after three.”

Hux pulled back and held his eyes for a moment and relented, flopping down on the bed. “We have class at eight. So if you want to talk, I can be awake for fifteen minutes. Then I really need to sleep and so do you.”

“Don’t want to talk.” He shook his head and turned over, staring at the wall in the darkened room.

Hux’s sigh sounded like it came from the deepest part of his lungs. “Of course you do.”

The other side of the bed shifted and Hux stood. Kylo heard him putting on his robe, the hanger clanging against the back of his bedroom door.

“Come on, Kylo. If I’m not allowed to sleep, then we can at least talk.”

Kylo waited only five minutes rather than his usual fifteen to follow after his roommate.

At least this balcony was on the tenth floor and their door had a code. He had panicked in the second week after moving in to Hux’s old apartment. They were too close to the ground. He called Han and couldn’t breathe at the thought that it would happen again. So they moved, breaking the lease, and lived further from campus in a high rise that Hux hated but Kylo felt safe in. And it cost too much but he paid for it all. That was all he could think about as they stood and looked out towards the river. Hux glanced up at him and handed him a cigarette as he lit up his own. This was a bad habit that he didn’t want to get used to. Neither was crawling into Hux’s bed whenever he couldn’t sleep.

Taking a long drag from the cigarette, he shifted his weight against the cold. They hadn’t even had a frost yet but the air was still colder than was comfortable.

“I don’t want to sound like your mother but, fuck, Kylo. It’s October.” He leaned back in the plastic balcony chair that creaked against his weight. He looked at him, long and hard. “And it looks like we’re both skipping tomorrow.”

Kylo shrugged, rubbing his arms. He was just in his boxers, staring out at the street. “I’m not. I have that presentation tomorrow and I’m nervous. That’s the only reason why I did what I did.”

Hux didn’t believe him. He just leaned back. “It’s a good presentation. You don’t need to be worried.”

Earlier that evening, they’d gone over their work together. They found one class together that matched both of their majors: introduction to childhood psychology. Kylo took it to have his best friend with him, but also to understand what Rey was going through.

He had stopped trying to think what had happened to him. He just let the memories come in waves that knocked him down and then picked himself up again.

“Look, Ky, we’ve talked about…”

“Don’t call me that,” he snapped, smoke snaking up his mouth. He exhaled, harshly, into the night air. He took in the rest of his cigarette in one harsh inhale.

Hux met his eyes for a moment and then looked away. “Sorry.”
“No, I…” he shook his head, inhaling again and then snubbing out the burning end of his cigarette. He reached out and Hux handed him another one. He leaned over and the redhead lit both of them a new light. He sat down in the other chair, letting his leg bounce next to Hux’s knee. “I’ve stopped dreaming about him. What does that mean?”

Resting on his elbows, Hux took another long drag. “Maybe it means you’ll finally take down that fucking murder wall from your room. No one else did it, Kylo. He was my friend too and you haven’t given me a second to grieve. I’m never allowed to talk about my feelings, about what I’m thinking. Things are happening in my life too. You only talk about school or Rey and then you stay up all night and need to crawl into my bed and…”

Kylo leaned over and kissed him. It was a quick meeting of lips, but he had no feelings behind it. He leaned back, his cheeks burning as Hux glared at him.

“If you weren’t my friend, and I didn’t love you, and didn’t know that you’re all fucked up right now, I’d punch you in the face for that.” Hux’s eyes softened and Kylo saw tears glimmering as he turned away. “I’m not going to tell Paige. Because if I did, she’d actually punch you in the face.”

He wanted it. He wanted someone one to hit him, beat him, throw him on the ground and kick him until his ribs broke. He wanted someone to break him open and carve out all of the hurt. It had been sitting inside rotting for months. He avoided going out, knowing that he just wanted to cause a fight and watch the whole thing burn down. But if he did, he’d lose everything. Getting a police record would destroy the future; he just wanted to watch the moments implode in which he risked it all in previous instances of self-destruction.

He could still cling to the future. He saw a future, for him and Rey. George had promised him. They’d be safe. Move to Virginia or Washington. It was only three and a half years away. No more being apart once he made it through this year. No more being in separate places where anyone could hurt them; they could be together and he could keep her safe and she’d be whole again. She’d help him; she had to.

“I didn’t feel anything.” Kylo said, leaning back to smoke again. “If that means…anything.”

Hux sighed and snubbed out his cigarette. “It didn’t the last time that you tried that either. And it won’t ever. He wasn’t…I mean…you guys had what you had and it wasn’t healthy most of the time. You’ve said it yourself. He was afraid to leave you alone and then you twisted it and couldn’t leave him alone but I…but I also saw how happy you both were when things were good. And I miss that part of you and him. So please let me talk about this with you and…” He turned away as he trailed off, frowning. “I’m really tired right now. It’s almost 4 a.m. We need to talk about this later, when I’m not exhausted. I can’t let you agonize over something that you’ve already figured out just because you like to torture yourself verbally to avoid cutting yourself.”

Snatching up the cigarettes again, Kylo lit himself one without offering it to his friend. “I just miss him, miss loving him. And now I don’t know what that means anymore.”

“It means that you need more time and to stop punishing yourself.” Hux shook his head, standing. “Wake me up at seven so we get there on time and can actually find a parking spot. And make coffee because I’m going to be tired.”

Nodding, Kylo let Hux go inside and sat out and froze for a few more minutes before going in again.

Crawling into his own bed, he let the nicotine cloud his head as he swam in memories. It was the first death he had nothing to do with.
George had convinced him of that, threatening his own career in the action.

It had been planned because he wouldn’t be there.

That’s all it was.

Forcing himself to stand, he looked at his wall. It had grown since he’d moved in to this new place. Every bit of evidence that he got from campus police. And the local police. And George. It was layered over his notes from his own case, finding where the children were taken from. There was a pattern there of how they were taken that he could link to Poe’s murder. He was going to figure it out.

Everyone who looked at it told him to stop.

And he had to.

*You need to get better. Not just for me. But for everyone.* Rey’s words burnt inside of him.

Still, he wanted to cling onto the past for a little while longer. He had used him and his love, forcing his way through arguments until he got what he wanted and then he hadn’t been able to protect him. Then, he turned Rey into an angry and heartbroken girl who felt alone.

Suffering was what he deserved for a little while longer.

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He heard Liza shift out of his bed and groan and reach for her clothes.

Regret shuddered heavily on his still-closed and still-drunk eyes. He’d managed to toss the condom, hiding it at the bottom of the trash. He stared at it for too long, nauseatingly digesting what had just happened. He ran the faucet, not wanting her to hear him vomit. She didn’t. But he couldn’t look at himself in the mirror before he’d stumbled back to the warm body in his bed and passed out until she woke him up just now. He smelt like her. He wouldn’t be able to undo this and make her scent go away.

“Hux is home, I just heard him,” she said, grating on him further. “Do you want me to creep out on the balcony or something?”

She’d just come over for coffee, late on a November day when she was in town for an art show or something that weekend. They’d kept in touch, since Rey had dragged her back into his life. It was mostly Kylo who texted her. He trusted Liza only because of what she’d done for Rey. And she was also too stupid to figure out what he wanted. He’d forced her to stay for drinks and dinner. And then the loneliness took over and now he was waking up like this. He’d felt how wrong it was, but it was dulled by alcohol as he fucked her. He’d been so afraid for so long and he wanted to kill the worry and pain. It was a strange, foreign feeling being inside someone else, especially someone he could hurt. His hands wanted to wrap around her thin throat, to hear her choke. But he didn’t. He just remembered coming, cleaning up, and passing out. This was a temporary solution to his aching heart.

The sun wasn’t even up yet. He reached out his hand to try to get her to come back to bed and drown out his mind.
“No, he was at the bar. Let him pass out and then…then you can go,” he managed to say when her flimsy hand brushed his. Of course she’d be useless. She wasn’t him.

Touching her again burnt like the desperate mistake that it was.

Liza, still smelling like fruit and freedom, pulled away to shake her hair. She shimmied into her pants and underwear in one motion and stood beside his bed. “We’re not dating. I don’t need that right now. And neither do you.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Why would I date you?”

“Because we just fucked and I don’t know, Kylo, it seems like you want to marry everyone that gives you an orgasm? And that’s not me.” Liza looked at him just as she did in high school, bitchy but now with better eyebrows.

“Did I ever ask that?” He was still dealing with sleeping with someone else and she had to throw this at him. Why did he even reach out to her? She was always such an empty idiot.

Slowly, Liza took a breath and took his hand properly. Maybe she did have a thought in her head. “Okay, I came here today, tonight, whatever, as your friend. And maybe I was just the tiniest bit selfish because, God, I’ve wanted you since junior high. And I…” she seemed to be reeling in her almost-empty head. Still, she pinned him down with a furrowed look. “Was this your first time with a girl?”

*Shut the fuck up, Liza. Get out, Liza.* He wanted to shout those things, but he didn’t.

His eyes gave away too much, because she smoothed his hair.

“Hey, Kylo? You were really good, just so you know.”

He rolled his eyes, then frowned. The old fear, the one that had put him into the spiralling desperation that he had with Poe rose in his mind to haunt him again. Maybe his hands had slipped, like they had wanted to. He could have done so much to her; he had wanted to and it made him want to throw up again. “I didn’t hurt you?”

Liza snickered. She took it lightly. Of all of his mistakes, this one would burn hard for a long time. “No, no way. I mean, your hands…you were so kind. I don’t know what to say other than kind, but it doesn’t cover everything that you are. And I like it when guys take charge. Foreplay, fine, you didn’t know what you were doing, but I wanted you so that was totally okay. Maybe work on that next time. Oh, we can be fuck buddies and I can totally show you.”

The words made him shudder and he swallowed, hard. “No, that’s…fine.”

It was quiet in the living room. He’d heard Hux’s door shut a few minutes ago.

“Look, Kylo, we can still be friends and talk. I can tell you why teenage girls act crazy. I take back what I just said because the look on your face just told me that this was a big mistake and it’s my fault. But it doesn’t mean you have to cut me off. We can talk. Just with clothes on, maybe?” Liza was fully dressed now, folding her arms across her chest as she looked at him from beside the bed. “Especially about how you’ve got a wall with maps and pictures and his face looking at your every night.”

“Yeah, sure,” he said, finding words that he could say, then turned away. “Good night.”

She huffed and left.
“Who was here last night?” Hux asked as they drank coffee and watched television the next morning, both nursing hangovers and trying to cure them by watching nature documentaries.

He must have seen her shoes, those awful boots with too-high heels.

“No one,” Kylo answered.

Hux just shook his head. “Just don’t do it again if you’re not serious.”

That was easy enough for him to say, thought Kylo. The distant breakfast setting surfaced in his mind, but he let it go in favour of watching a lion tear apart a gazelle.

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Rey didn’t want to see him at Christmas. She wanted to come home, see her friends and parents and dog, but not him. Something that Casterfo had told her had forced her to make the decision, he reasoned. Her letters told him how much it hurt her and how she was afraid for him, but that it was something that she needed.

It was an unnecessary distance. But it kept helping her get better, he had to keep accepting it and letting himself be washed forward in the undertow.

He had mostly coursed through the semester. He missed days by just wanting to stay in bed; that hadn’t happened since high school. His grades weren’t where they should be, but he could do better and more next term to recover. He was mostly taking full-year courses. He had to be better and more focused. Rey’s last letter had reminded him of that; she was excelling, liking what she was learning. She had friends. He was walking around like a ghost, waiting for someone else to swoop in and fix him when he was the only one that could do it.

Going to Florida and seeing Poe’s family for the first time since the funeral would hopefully help him onto the track that he needed to follow, one that led away from him.

The semester had been hard. He’d constantly run into Poe’s friends and he’d have to avoid them until it hurt too much to keep his panicked actions under control. He said hi to Allison one day and agreed to go for drinks. He got drunk and made an advance on her and she struck him in the face. He deserved it. And at least they stopped trying to talk to him. Maybe he should suspect them after all.

Packing a bag and going to Florida for Christmas seemed rational when he started making the plans but now, standing in the airport and waiting for his cab, none of it made sense. In his suitcase were gifts that he’d found when he went through their things long ago, when he was packing or looking for his journals. Poe must have found something special if he was already Christmas shopping in the spring. But there were packages for his brothers, his mother, and him. All of them were wrapped; they had one roll of Christmas wrap in the house and he must have used up the last of it. And since Poe couldn’t keep a secret, or at least one that excited him, Kylo felt the weight of
the gift to him press heavily on his chest when he’d first found it and now was steadying himself in preparation of opening it.

The last thing that he’d ever get from him was about to be undone.

He’d been gone for more than half a year.

The distant fights and arguments had faded long ago. Sometimes, he’d pick one and look back at it and laugh at how irrational he’d been.

Poe would have been enraged at the handful of times he’d had drunken sex with Liza. Everyone would be if he’d told them. He’d pick weekends when Hux would be away with Paige and call her. She kept calling it friends with benefits, but for him it was more of having someone to fuck who he did not care about. It made him feel disgusting, but did it anyway. After the last time, he deleted her number, determined for it to be the last fucking time. He’d rather jerk off while imagining having sex with Poe instead. But even those memories were fading with time. The smell of his hair, the feeling of his lips, the smoothness of his hands…it was all getting distant.

Maybe he was going to Florida to say a final goodbye, to put the past to rest and let him go.

It was a terrifying, awful thought.

But Poe would have been proud of him. He was always telling him to let go of things that hurt him, put them in context and think about why he was still carrying around such pain and hurt. They’d have talked about it, rubbing feelings raw.

He didn’t want to shut off his heart, but he had to.

So on Christmas day, he watched Shara, Nicky and Freddie open the last gifts from their son and brother, surrounded by other, loudly chattering family. The boys still weren’t old enough to understand what had happened, but they’d at least have the hand-carved figurines of a lion and a tiger to remember their brother. Shara quietly wept at the shawl. When Kylo saw the gifts, he realized when Poe had bought them. There had been a craft sale on campus the week before he died, some place that Kylo thought people would just be selling sticks that were pasted together and spray-painted with glitter. Poe had accepted his excuse of staying home and sleeping too quickly. That was the reason.

His hands were shaking as he took the card off the top of the package and set it aside. He had to save it to read when he was alone. No one would have cared. There were a dozen people there and he was ungodly uncomfortable.

The only one watching him was Shara.

He unwrapped the box and opened it. Inside was another wrapped box.

He both wanted to laugh and cry as the boxes grew increasingly smaller until he got to the last one. It was a pen box, not ring-shaped but his heart leapt. If it were the ring, then he’d have his answer. He could accept that Poe wanted to give it back to him and was trying to let him go. Logic fled his brain as he snapped it open.

Instead, it was a black pen with his name engraved on it. It was a light, but still well-made pen.

After dinner, he could finally slip off to the guesthouse to read the card. His head ached from speaking only Spanish the entire time. They were either treating him like part of the family or
trying to alienate him. He’d already decided that he didn’t belong there. He’d done the last thing he’d have to do for Poe and that was give his brothers a last glimpse of who he was: someone who was loving, caring, filled with both a joy for life as well as an understanding of its darkness. If they ever tracked him down one day, that’s what he’d tell them.

He had to sit on the same bed that they’d shared those years ago, when he’d stupidly pressed that they have sex without understanding how he’d end up feeling.

He opened the envelope, taking a shaky breath.

The cover was just red and white stripes. That’s what happens when a person goes Christmas shopping when it was almost summer, he thought with a slight smirk.

Written in the usual, messy handwriting he tried to take in every word.

_Merry Christmas, Ky! Yeah, I’m writing this and you’re sleeping beside me and it’s almost summer break. Maybe I’ll buy you a new card the week before Christmas and toss this out, but right now I’m feeling pretty good about almost being done with Christmas shopping!! I didn’t find anything for Rey but we usually pick those out together. This year will be even more important. I know that you’ll fix this. I believe in you. Anyway, I love you so FUCKING much and can’t wait to drive you nuts over planning a wedding. Maybe we can use this to write the invitations? Or maybe we just elope and have Rey be our witness? You hate it when I ramble but I can’t wait to spend the rest of my life with the both of you (when she stops hating me of course but whatever). You’ve actually got a lot of love in you and I’m glad I can have some of it. Whatever forever means, I’m glad I’m a part of yours. LOVE, Poe._

There it was: the last words that he’d ever read for him on a flimsy piece of cardboard.

He set the card aside, and breathed in and out.

His father was right. George was right. Even Rey was right. Moving on wasn’t about forgetting, it was about living a life filled with the right choices that he’d learnt how to make because he remembered.

He’d taught him that he was capable of loving someone, but also how he could use someone.

Even if he never fell in love again, he had to respect those lessons and keep working to be better.

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Going to see George in Virginia over spring break turned out even better than he’d imagined. Kylo could show him his progress, how his grades were improving steadily and he’d already found a supervisor for his thesis in the fall. He’d be taking spring and summer courses so he could graduate early and apply for Masters programmes early as well. Hux was graduating, but had quietly agreed that having a post-graduate degree was something that he wanted as well. His father was back in his life, turned soft by a new wife. If he did a post-graduate degree, he’d have an excuse to stay far away from him for a little while longer.

He’d also fled to Virginia to escape Hux. He finally caught him cheating a week ago. It was one of his TAs, a girl in her late twenties. He’d come home after a lecture was cancelled and saw them. Hux didn’t even bother to beg him not to say anything. He put his head down and accepted what he
was doing was wrong. Hux did the right thing and told Paige. But Paige had been in New York at auditions, crushed and alone.

It was spring break; they were trying to work it out. And Paige needed his bed.

Now, he was sitting with George at a pub frequented by FBI agents and he felt like he belonged. He was away from tearful exchanges, shouting and then proclamations of love. They found new foundations only to have it crumble under the reminder of betrayal, having to start over again.

It was a bunch of mostly men with loosened ties and neatly cut hair, drinking beer and unwinding after a long day.

“Right, the Detroit case,” George was speaking to another agent who’d joined their table and Kylo finally turned his ears towards the conversation and out of the past, “once we knew where the girls had been taken from, it was only a question of waiting for the DNA. We had samples from the employees, but also knew who had access to the dumpsite. With multiple victims, there had to have been planning.”

Kylo nodded. “It was the guy who worked nights at the store, right?

Kylo had been thinking about the case on the trip there. He had put out the statement with more confidence than he actually felt and was nervous for the response.

George actually sat back and laughed. He tossed his head back and gripped his shoulder. “It was! I can’t remember if I told you or not…”

“You didn’t.” Kylo grinned, turning his glass in his hand. “I’m just thinking. Someone who works nights probably knows where to go during the day where there won’t be much attention. He lucked out with the first one and then kept going. Once you start killing, it’s hard to stop wanting that rush and release. It only just clicked now because I’m not a mess, so…”

The other agent, Callum, shook his head. “Why were you a mess?”

He blinked. He kept forgetting that there were other people in the world that didn’t know who he was. “My fiancé had just been murdered and my uncle was forbidding me from talking to the girl who I rescued when I was fourteen. It was kind of fucked up.”

Callum looked from George, back to him, then again at George. His blue eyes grew wide and he shook his head out of shock. “This is him? The Snoke case? I thought this was your son or something. Holy shit, we studied that in the academy! I always thought, I don’t know, that you’d be strung out on heroin or something after all of that.”

George gave Callum a cold look and the younger agent’s grin quickly faded. “Where does that conclusion come from, Agent Gerd?”

Swallowing, the blond man gave him a briefly sympathetic look before opening his mouth. “Well, statistically speaking, we only didn’t catch him sooner because he was always moving, changing ages and genders and never really having a preferred victim. And the fact that most children are abducted by relatives, not reclusive, rapist weirdos who fuck up starting a kid cult because he can’t stop killing them. There was no pattern there, nothing that matched with what we know. So, I was just balancing out the wrong stats with the right ones: most people who survive a mass trauma event as the sole survivor don’t come out the other side looking so hot.”

Kylo took a long drink, eying the other man, as George folded his arms. “I was determined that he did not become one of those statistics, Cal.”
“So, not like Springfield?” Callum must have been drunk or out for a death wish, challenging a senior agent like this. Kylo quietly squirreled away how to act and not act in the back of his head; it would be good for him to know how stubborn he could be in the future.

George’s expression didn’t change. Kylo had read about the Springfield case. It was one that George had worked on only a year before being handed his disappearance, along with the other possible cases linked to similar circumstances across the country. But didn’t Springfield end positively? Given the information that he’d just been handed, it was beginning to sound like it didn’t.

“Springfield is what made me the type of agent I am. Losing the twins because they didn’t get the help that they needed taught me that our jobs don’t stop when we go home.” George gave Callum a hard look and finished his beer. “Kylo, another round?”

He shook his head. “I’m good. Thanks, George.”

Left alone with Callum, Kylo focused on the other young man. “Why did you say that to him? It was just going to upset him.”

If he asked a question, he might get an explanation, both for the other man’s actions as well as what happened. He leaned in closer, hoping to get some secrets. As he moved, he watched as the other man mirrored his actions. He was attracted to him; the hairs on his arms stood up at the sudden realization. It was the first time in a long while that he noticed the tiny movements that betrayed desire. It would have frightened him long ago; now, he slid his food across the short distance between them, settling it between Callum’s shoes.

When the feet narrowed, trapping his between them, his heartbeat quickened. He wasn’t going to sleep with him, no, but being right was an even bigger rush.

“He’s about to get a promotion,” Callum said, leaning closer. “He’s going to be my boss soon so I wanted to get a few more digs in. Do you want to know what happened with the kids in Springfield?”

Kylo let his hand fall off his mug to brush Callum’s before returning it to his glass to take another drink as he nodded.

The agent’s eyes seemed to shift, darkening. He had him now. “They were the only survivors from some death cult. I mean, if you read the case report, they were screwed from the beginning. They’d been indoctrinated and then dumped with foster care. They got kicked out because they were fucking each other when they were like fifteen or something. And where do kids on the street end up? Hooked on drugs or dead. I think that George tracked down the girl a couple of years ago and she’s just gone. He had to take a month off after that. The rumours are that he’s helping the Snoke kid — you — because he lost them,” Callum paused to wink at him. “Just don’t let him know I told you that.”

The words made Kylo rage inside, but instead he just smiled. “Of course not.”

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In the cab home with George at the end of the night, after viciously flirting with Callum the entire evening fully knowing that he would never go home with someone like him, he sighed openly at
how good it felt to have so much more information. He was awkward at times, but had managed to be mostly charming.

“I saw what you were doing.” George’s voice broke his good mood. “That was very good.”

Kylo thought he was about to be reprimanded, but still dared to grin in response. George smiled too and he relaxed further. “He was an idiot. Who knew surviving a serial killer and having a dead fiancé would turn someone on so much.”

George nodded, but then licked his lips. “I’m not the best person to give relationship advice, Kylo, but…”

“I just wanted to know more about the cases. He gave them up too quickly. That’s all that was.” He shook his head instantly. “If the only real relationship I have the rest of my life is with Rey, then I’d be happy.”

George gave him a long look, the one that meant he’d probably figured something out that would take him years to realize. “Then I won’t push it again.”

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Kylo didn’t know where to go on the anniversary of his death.

So he went home.

He’d written Rey a long letter about his memories from the day. Her reply hadn’t come yet. He’d waited until the last minute to go home, just in case the letter came.

He tried to have a balance between the two parts of the day: finding Poe and then his fear for Rey. Both still bled together so it was hard not to know where one started and the other ended. But Rey ran away, searching for attention as he tried to push her away. As he continued to push through his wallowing, he knew that he’d depended too much on the both of them in different ways.

He’d never thank Luke for it, but he was learning to be alone. He was far from succeeding in it, but it was at least a process that he’d finally forced himself to start.

He was twenty-two and was bracing himself to keep restarting his life every year until the end of time because he’d keep screwing up whatever progress he’d made.

They’d grown closer through letters. He’d ask more about her feelings, trying not to take up so much space. He tried not to give advice, only replying honestly. He used tools that he built in class and through therapy. Now that Hux and Paige had almost fixed things, he was closer to them too. He’d even made friends with a few people from class and others from the gym. He wouldn’t say that he was close to any of them in particular, but it made getting through the days easier. But writing to Rey, seeing how her handwriting was improving and her thoughts were clearer now, got him through the darker days.

He knew that she had a crush on one of the boys there. He saw it in how she described her feelings for this new boy. They oddly mirrored his earliest thoughts about Poe; he had wanted to keep this kind, trusting person in his life and make him happy.
Jealously came easy as the letters included more and more about this boy. He was even more thankful that he’d deleted Liza’s number. Sleeping with her again just brought a bad taste to his mouth and made him want to throw up.

Sitting with his parents after dinner, he shook his head. “Sometimes I still drive to the old apartment and just sit there. My therapist makes me write down every time I do so I can spread it out more until I stop. I haven’t done it for a while. But today I did.”

Leia leaned over and took his hand. “I still go downstairs and check his room for laundry.”

Han chuckled to himself and Kylo narrowed his eyes. “Oh, I was going through the liquor cabinet the other day. I found a note from him in the back. Hey Han, your jokes aren’t funny. Guess what’s missing? BYE. I still can’t figure out what he took.”

“We hid it in the garage.” Kylo surprised himself by smiling. “There’s a bottle of whisky behind the bag of fertilizer.”

“When…when was this?” Han sat back, seeming impressed.

“I don’t know. When I was seventeen or eighteen? It was his idea.” Kylo enjoyed reliving the memory of teenage idiocy. “We both took like a mouthful and it was awful. So he decided to hide it instead.”

All three of them were in the garage, looking for the bottle before he knew it. He reached down, remembering how much smaller his hand and body had been when he’d help Poe tuck the bottle in the back of the storage cupboard. It was harder to manoeuvre now in the tight space; it was also harder because Poe wasn’t poking around beside him, asking what everything was in there.

When he’d fished it out, he started laughing. It was still there, untouched, dusty and half-full.

“Guess I need to clean the garage more often,” Han offered him a smile and folded his arms.

It was strange to realize how many other people were grieving him. He’d been blinded by how much his parents actually cared for him. Leia had finally started changing the room downstairs, making it look more like a guestroom and less like a bedroom for a boy who was never coming back, but it still held his echoes.

So they sat down there with three glasses and just talked, reliving old memories. Poe taking Rey trick-or-treating every Halloween until they moved out. How she’d slept in his bed when Kylo was in Virginia, making sure that he was okay. How every Christmas, he’d try to get them to make different things. How he gradually accepted that the people in that house loved and cared for him and then turned more into himself: eating cereal directly from the box or leaving dishes everywhere. Kylo wished that Rey were there too, to hear her memories and thoughts. He wasn’t sure what he’d read in her letter, but it would be something to add to the collection of remembrances that were slowly becoming less painful to go over.

“Well, boys, I need to get some sleep.” his mother finally stood and said. There was a great deal left in the bottle. “You two can take care of that. One last gift from him to us.”

He didn’t want to cry, so he just nodded.

Instead, he moved to sit against the headboard. Sensual memories blossomed across his mind in the motion and he felt himself blush.

Han settled beside him, filling his glass. “What are you thinking about now?”
He swallowed the entire shot. “Personal stuff between me and him.”

“So, that time in the kitchen?” Han looked at him with raised eyebrows and Kylo’s entire face burnt.

It felt so long ago, but it was really only four or five years. Poe had cut school; Kylo had followed him home. That was when the stalking had started, but he wanted to push that aside. Instead, he recalled how they’d had sex on the kitchen island. And then when they came back downstairs after showering to finish cleaning up all of their clothes, Han was sitting at the kitchen table with the hand towel that they’d used to hastily wipe each other off before realizing a shower was the only solution. If Poe hadn’t been there to talk him through the awkwardness and pure shame, he’d never have wanted to have sex or touch him ever again.

“That was my fault,” he said, quietly. He lifted his glass and accepted another refill. “He was having a bad day. I wanted to make it better.”

Han sighed. “When I first came in, I just heard the two of you talking while I was taking off my shoes. How you both talked each other through it. I had no idea what was really going on until I peeked around the corner and then got out of there. It took us a long time to learn what you really went through and how terrifying it all must have been. Whatever he did to help you get through the harder parts, I didn’t thank him enough for. So I just sat on the porch and let the two of you have your, um, moment.”

“We still probably shouldn’t have used the good hand towel.” Kylo tried to joke, to avoid thinking about this with his father. It was not his proudest moment. Reframing that afternoon, it wasn’t as romantic as he first intended. He’d just taken off from school, realizing that Poe wasn’t in class. He found him asleep on the couch, looking miserable. He just meant to make-out with him, show him that he cared and that things were getting easier for him. Poe had pulled away slightly, asking for more than just touches: he wanted to hear that he cared. He’d really only been living at the house for just under two years at that point. He should have been able to come home, relax, and not be coerced into sex in the kitchen, and then have to pick up the pieces after his boyfriend gets scared off from the subject again. He’d never know how Poe really thought about that day because they let it fall away, not really discussing it again.

He had been beyond terrible to him. Even with the good days and softer, beautiful moments, and no matter what his father was saying, he’d never given Poe the space that he needed. And then he gave Rey too much space in the same breath. All of the explosive fights ended physically because that had been his solution. Poe was receptive because all he wanted was to be cared for and only knew damaged and hurtful relationships as reference.

The thought chilled him. He’d been lying to himself again, desperate to get what he wanted while not realizing what it actually was.

Still, Han was talking, not noticing how his head had dropped. He probably thought that he was just embarrassed.

“Yeah, that was probably a bad idea.” Han was slowly sipping on his drink. “I’m sorry he’s gone, son. But you’re almost back on your feet. There’s still a long way to go, but you seem better. When do spring classes start?”

“Couple of weeks. After convocation. I need to be there for Hux.”

Han had said he was not good, but better. He’d take it. It seemed like the entire time that he’d spent on the outside had been getting better but never getting beyond it.
They talked a little about school until Kylo’s head was starting to spin as his version of the relationship started to unravel.

“Was I ever good to him?” The question made his lip quiver. “Will I ever be good to anyone else?”

Han tilted his head, swallowing hard. “We didn’t see everything that happened when you moved. But when he’d call and talk to us, he’d be frustrated but still tried to be understanding. He talked…a lot about how you follow him. If there was anything that we could do. But he’d always change the subject to something happier and then just talk about nothing. We should have done more to talk to both of you about that.”

“But you did,” Kylo answered, his eyes dropping. “And I didn’t listen. Why did I need to be around him so much?”

Han gripped his leg but he didn’t look up. “Don’t be so hard on yourself. We thought that having things stable at home, going to therapy, that all of you would work through it. We sure fucked that up. We let you all down. That’s why, even though I hate it, I’m accepting that having Rey be away from you has helped you turn things around. Even though it’s taking time.”

“It’s…it’s working. I’m working on it. I have more friends now. I do more things. I write to her all the time and she’s…she’s doing better without me than she ever did with me.” Kylo sighed, letting his own words sink in.

“You’re still with her, helping her,” Han reminded him. “You got her out. That was the first step. What happened along the way, we all messed up too.”

“He never messed up with her, other than by being with me.” Kylo looked down at the hand and finished his drink. He toyed with the empty glass, trying to untangle his crooked thoughts. “It hurts more knowing that I can’t fix it with him. But George told me that I can, at least, learn from it. My therapist says the same thing. I’m still terrified that I just taught Rey how to only have bad relationships. I lied so, so often. They both got so mad at me and were afraid for so long to tell me that I was fucking wrong.”

“That’s us too.” Han filled his own glass and then Kylo’s. “Did I tell you that I’m retiring next year?

“If you did, I wasn’t listening.” Kylo raised his glass to cheers his father’s. “I’m sorry.”

What else was he supposed to say?

“That’s another good memory. You and him when I got that promotion that I didn’t want, but took it anyway so I could have more time off for Rey. That threw the rest of those hard-asses for a loop. Your son and his what? Who? Jesus Christ, the looks on their faces when you kissed him…” Han’s words were slurring, but Kylo still grinned at the memory. “Fucking beautiful.”

He was biting his lip, still smirking and Han rolled his eyes.

“So, there too?”

“Yeah, I mean…we were gone for a while…” Kylo trailed off. “I realized that I really loved him that night. Twisted and stupid like it all was.”

“This is all…more complicated than I realized. Sorry for not…prying more before.” Han’s voice deepened, his discomfort growing as he slipped into actually being drunk.
The alcohol was finally hitting him too. “Even if it was like, fucked, or whatever, he knew I loved him right?”

“Of course he did. That’s what he’d always say. And what we’d always see. I guess we missed the other things.” Han finished his glass and offered the last of the bottle to Kylo. He accepted, wanting to already forget this night. “The fact that he’s a boy never really mattered to us. He brought out good sides of you that we’d thought we’d never see again. I guess you both made mistakes with your feelings, but that day in the kitchen, I only listened for a few seconds and it made it clear that you two had something special. I’m sorry that it’s just memories now.”

And those memories were easier to deal with. He understood them better now. He still thought about him everyday, but the tears didn’t come as often. It was a dull bruise that he’d only press on when he was too lost in his own thoughts.

“But I think that it’s a good idea to give yourself more time.” Han sucked down the last drops from his glass and set on the bedside table, pushing himself to stand. He stumbled slightly and shook his head. “Maybe…maybe when…maybe. Okay, you want my advice? Don’t date anyone for a while.”

Kylo squinted then nodded. “Do you need help getting up the stairs?”

“No, it’s fine. I’m perfectly fine.” He watched his father steady his hand on the doorframe. This year had taken so much from them too and he had avoided most of it. Still, Han shook his head. “Goodnight, Ben.”

“Goodnight.”

He had to sit and blink himself awake for a few minutes, trying to untangle what his father had just said to him. The room was still familiar, but he saw the layers of how it used to be. The different posters and different figurines—mostly sports and music—CDs and DVDs, books and everything else that had been packed up and either sent to Florida or lingering in storage. He hadn’t let Poe bring many of his more childish things. He was always trying to make him into a different person and by the end he had.

He settled for flopping over and gripping the opposite cover until he passed out, still desperately reaching for him like he always had even when he’d just started letting go.

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Paige insisted that they go out. But that it would just be her and Kylo.

He was still heavy with realizations from that night with his parents.

It was the week after graduation for Hux, the regular term finally over. There had been an awkward family dinner, Hux’s father and his new wife showing up at the last minute. Kylo sat across from Mrs. Hux and they both glared at them the entire time, earning equally hard eyes in return.

That weekend Paige and Hux would leave for Europe for the summer. Kylo had his schedule full with spring and summer courses and he would have more than enough distractions from being alone.
Paige looked happier now as they continued to work through their problems. During that time, Kylo realized how he’d also taken Paige’s friendship for granted. She had gone from being his only friend, to just being Hux’s girlfriend. Even when they’d hang out as couples, he’d work more on talking with Hux or letting Poe’s hand warm his leg.

He’d tasked her with taking care of Rey and had never really thanked her.

So he went out to a dance club with her, knowing full well that he’d hate it.

“I don’t feel good leaving you alone for the summer,” she said, shifting her weight in line to get in. “Do you think that this is all…a good idea? I think that I’m finally over what he did. So maybe I don’t need two months in Europe with him? Maybe we should be here for you?”

Was she trying to use him as an excuse to stay home? “There are things to see there that aren’t him, Paige. And he still wants to be with you. He made a mistake. I forgave him before, when we were teenagers. I still want you to forgive him, but it’s your heart.”

Hux had explained and cried when it all had come undone. Still, they both wanted to make it work. Kylo had been caught in the middle the last few months, finding himself being the shoulder to cry on. Finding empathy in those moments was getting easier. Finding words of advice remained elusive and hard. On the nights that he spent on the couch, sleep was very hard to find.

They ordered drinks inside and found a quiet corner to keep talking, but the music was too loud and made his chest shudder with every bass note.

He pulled Paige closer to hear what she was trying to say.

“…I think I’ve already forgiven him. I’m just still trying to understand why.” Paige shouted before sipping her drink. “Why wasn’t I good enough?”

He nodded. “I’m sorry I couldn’t let you know earlier. I saw something was off when I moved in but I was still, you know…me…and I wouldn’t let him talk about anything else. I know he wanted to tell me. And I just kept…mourning him.”

“Kylo, I know. I know.” Paige leaned in closer. “I miss him too. He would have been so easy to talk to about this. He hated cheaters. He hated when Allison’s boyfriend cheated on her. He would have shoved Armie off the balcony.”

Kylo was silent, letting his forehead rest against Paige’s. “Maybe if he hadn’t died, none of this would have happened. Hux wouldn’t have been stressed because of me and I would have been able to talk to him…”

Paige shook her head. “And maybe it would have just happened anyways.”

They shared a few more drinks, trying to find other things to talk about. They finally settled on the girls when they were younger and the games that they’d play. How Rey seemed so perfect to everyone that no one believed what had happened to her. And then Kylo hadn’t been around when it felt apart.

So, they changed to Paige’s job. She still auditioned, but was mostly teaching at a studio in their hometown. His ears burnt when she mentioned running into Liza, but the statement happened in passing. He let Paige talk about how she regretted growing distant from her former friend, and what she must be up to, but Kylo kept quiet, just nodding. He only managed to say how much he disliked her in high school to get Paige to laugh.
Paige seemed comfortably happy and relaxed, taking in her third drink. She looked over at Kylo as he was staring at her smile.

She sat back, broadening her grin. “Come on, let’s dance.”

He’d only danced with Poe a few times, mostly alone in his room or their apartment. Now, he was willingly being led out onto the dance floor by Paige after hastily downing the last of his drink.

It was more just rocking back and forth for him, watching Paige hop and spin to the music. She put her hands on his hips, forcing him closer. She was laughing, singing along to a song that he didn’t know.

He’d neglected everyone in his grief.

Paige’s eye shadow sparkled in the flashing lights, reminding him of one of Rey’s happier drawings as a child when she’d first discovered glitter. He remembered how she asked where glitter came from, if it was from some magical animal that she’d never seen or heard about before.

He was smiling at the memory and Paige grinned up at him, putting her arms around his neck. He rested his forehead against hers, amazed at how strong her body was and how it was still so thin. He could feel the muscles in his back, stroking up and down.

She surged up and kissed him, catching him off guard and he dropped his hands to stare at her in disbelief.

His hands fell to her hips as he shook his head.

She looked up at him and he saw her face break for a moment, trying to hold in tears.

“Why can’t I cheat too?” she sobbed.

Not knowing what else to do, he pulled her closer, letting her rest her head on his shoulder. He breathed in her perfume, how tense her body still was. Maybe it was wrong to want them to still be together. It was the last piece of who he had been and he wanted to cling to it, imagining that they’d all still be together and Rey would still be happy.

He felt her sob and pulled her closer.

Lifting his head, he locked eyes with someone he swore was a ghost sent there to punish him.

It was a dark-haired young man who reminded him so much of Poe that his heart leapt for a moment before it came crashing back down. He had different cheekbones, a different nose. When the lights changed, he could see all that. But the eyes, the hair, they all held him in another face.

Snapping his eyes away, he took Paige by the hand and led her away. He made her get a drink of water, watching her dry her tears.

“I’m sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “Let’s get another drink. I’m okay.”

He didn’t want to, but she looked to certain. He sipped at his coke while she downed two shots. Kylo knew what was wrong, but was letting her give in to the familiar self-destruction that always tempted him.

“That’s enough,” he said, firmly, as she moved to order more. “Let’s get some air.”

“What?”
He took her by the hand, leading her outside.

“Tell me what’s wrong?” He asked. “I think I know but…”

Paige was just digging in her purse. “Do you have smokes?”

“What?” He was still shaking the music out of his ears even as it still thumped in the background. “No, Hux always buys them.”

She rolled her eyes.

“You can have some of mine.” The same young man from before stepped into his line of sight on the edge of the street. “Here.”

He handed Paige two cigarettes and she grinned in thanks, then accepted a light for both. Kylo just watched them interact from his distance of a few paces away, out on the street outside of the club.

He just wanted to go home and forget that anything had happened.

Paige returned to him, sitting down on the curb. He grunted as he sat down, taking the cigarette from her hand.

“I didn’t mean to get upset, to kiss you,” Paige said, taking quick puffs of her cigarette. “I shouldn’t have done that to you.”

“It’s all right.” He took in a long drag and then reached for her hand. “I won’t tell anyone. And I’m fine, Paige. I’m worried about you.”

Paige wiped at her eyes, shaking her head. “Armie still wants to get married. He said that he shouldn’t have asked me so early. He said that he cheated because he was afraid. And the other girl pressured him. I don’t know what to believe.”

Kylo shook his head. “If he had been able to talk to me, I would have told him not to.”

“Ky, it’s not your fault. It’s all on Hux. He said he was grieving too but I…it got so messed up.” She squeezed his hand. “I miss Poe too, but I’ve missed you the most. How it used to be when we were kids. Before you were taken, when we were just small and no one could hurt us. And then you were gone for so long and came back and it took so long for you to be you again. But then you were lost again and we just had to stand back and watch it all. Watch you hurting for him and for her. I was never here and I wanted to be. And now my life is falling apart too and you’re just...helping. I can’t believe that you’ve come back.”

Paige wiped at her eyes and Kylo could only blink then reach over and put his arm around her.

“Why are you thinking about me right now?” Kylo asked. “I’m almost okay now, Paige. I’ll see Rey at the end of the summer. She’s getting better and I’m working hard to be better for her. But you need to decide what you want too, okay?”

Paige weakly nodded and stood. “I’m going to run inside and go to the washroom. Then we can go.”

He was left alone. And his cigarette was out.

Another one was offered to him as he was staring at the burnt filter. “Trouble with your girlfriend?”
The man from before stood beside him, still holding the cigarette.

Kylo was drawn into him, wanting it all to have been a dream. So he took the cigarette and motioned for him to sit down.

“She’s not my girlfriend,” he quickly said. “She’s having trouble with her fiancé. They’re leaving for Europe to try to fix their relationship and it’s all fucked up right now. Thanks for this.”

“It’s no problem.” But his voice was different. The curl of hair across his forehead was in a different direction. “Do you live around here?”

Kylo’s better senses kicked in. “We took a cab.”

“But you go to school here?”

He nodded. “Do you?”

“Yeah, and I’m stuck here for spring classes. I flunked a biology course and I need to make up for it,” he paused to extend his hand. “I’m Leo.”

“Kylo.” He shook the offered hand. His hand felt so different. There was nothing there.

They sat in silence until Paige returned and he had his excuse to go. He flagged down a cab without asking and left his new friend.

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Paige and Hux decided to go to Europe after all.

Kylo made it two weeks by himself, focusing on his intense course load and writing letters to Rey that he didn’t send, before he wandered back to that bar.

He scanned the crowd, thinking that it was wrong, but his legs still took him there.

When he found the familiar face in the crowd, he knew without a doubt that it was wrong.

He turned around and left, not looking back.

The next few months were about waiting for late August and finally getting to see Rey again.

He didn’t need to write out a schedule, but he had to make one in his head on the walk home.

No more booze, not for a while at least.

Go to the gym more. Physical things could be solved there.

Write to Rey more, even if he didn’t send the letters.

Next, get perfect grades in all of his courses: three in the spring semester, two in the summer. It meant having an almost full course load the entire summer months, but he didn’t care. It would get him to Rey quicker.

But he also needed to deal with all of that: Rey’s letters were consistent, but didn’t come as often as
he sent his.

He needed to stop barraging her.

That’s what he had done to Poe.

He couldn’t put her through that.

He promised himself that he wouldn’t write a new letter until he got one from her.

Be more balanced, be more normal.

That used to be all he wanted at first. Then, it was all about being wanted and loved.

Now, he just wanted to shut it all off and focus on Rey for a while in his private thoughts.

It was both the easiest and hardest part of his checklist, he realized as he returned to the empty apartment.

He looked at the wall of his room, all of the evidence that he had outlined about all of the other cases, the abductions and where they had been murdered, all of his suspects, finally focusing in on the death in his own home.

With shaking hands, he took down the papers. He folded each one as carefully as he could, taking out the pins that had kept it in place since he’d moved in.

He had to let it go.

-=-

He pulled up to Luke’s house in his rental car, almost trembling. He’d made it. The year had passed by at a pace of starts and stops, highs and lows, but it was finally over. Rey could come home now. He’d read the last report and couldn’t wait to see her and know how she’d changed. He didn’t look forward to seeing Luke to the same degree but now maybe he’d have the strength to punch him in the face like he deserved.

He took a deep breath and left the car.

He could at least lift his head now.

His mistakes hadn’t been righted, but at least most of them were behind him now. He wasn’t going back to it. He’d never forget his relationship. In the end, he could learn from it. Until he decided to let someone else back into his heart romantically, he’d still think about all of the rights and wrongs that he’d done. Poe had made his mistakes too; he wouldn’t forget those either. Love shouldn’t be only being desperately tied to another person and he’d always thought that they had figured that part out. In the bitter light of hindsight, he realized that they hadn’t at all. It was still something that he’d always cherish, but he could be better than his past mistakes.

He’d mistreated Poe and he was gone. He was in the past, but there was a future there for Kylo now because he had been there to help him get to it.

Now, right now, he had his chance to rescue Rey again. That could be his part.
It wasn’t like she needed rescuing. Her letters had told him as much. But he had missed her so much. Not just her old hugs and kisses, but he wanted to feel new ones. He wanted to get to know who she was now. He’d had a year to imagine who she was, but needed to get to the real her.

This was what he should have been focusing on all along.

When he left the car, he expected her to be waiting on the porch.

She wasn’t.

Swallowing, he guessed that she was still packing. He rolled his eyes and knocked.

The answer took so long that his nerves finally took over, chewing on his fingernail as he waited.

The door finally opened. Time to show Rey that he’d made it too.

Chapter End Notes

Standard warnings, past references to an m/m relationship. Basically, don't read this if you hated the Poe/Kylo pairing. The Rey chapter will fill in both the holes and the plot developments here to help anyone who skips this chapter.

Thanks for the comments. I'm not sure that this chapter is right, but if I don't stop writing it, it will just balloon into dust.
Chapter 31

Chapter Summary

Rey finds healing away from Kylo and tries to make a new decision.

See notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rey stopped walking, gripping her take-away cup. Everything leading up to that moment had been a normal day: she’d gotten up early, met her friends for hot chocolate, and talked about what they’d do that afternoon. School wasn’t supposed to start for another week so they had more than enough free time. They could take the bus into the closest city with a movie theatre. They could go swimming or horseback riding. They were normal plans for a normal summer day.

But Kylo was standing outside of her house, smoking.

Kylo didn’t smoke.

She’d forgotten he was coming today. A shiver coursed through her body. How did anything about him slip her mind?

It was like he’d never left her there and all of her time spent talking, healing, and learning about herself was about to shake loose from her body.

Seeing him doing something so foreign made it easier to pretend that he wasn’t there as he sucked on the cigarette before running his hands through his thick, dark hair. His feet shifted, alternating from left to right. Maybe he wasn’t there. Maybe everything wasn’t about to change again.

He’d gotten bigger, she thought. He was growing into his face more. His shoulders and arms were bigger. Why was his body still growing?

Had she grown up at all?

“Ah, so this is him.” Dr. Casterfo stood beside her. He must have been watching how she had tensed. She had felt her body go rigid. He put his hand on her shoulder, trying to soothe her. “It will be fine, Rey. You said he’s been getting better…”

“I haven’t told him,” Rey blurted out. It hurt to get the words out but she somehow said them. “I kept trying to write that letter but I just couldn’t tell him that I want to stay longer, to keep going here. I told mom but not him.”

Shame hit her hard, making her bite her lip. She didn’t want to tell Ransolm either. He’d done so much for her, guiding her and helping her heal the past year. She’d let the nice lady at the office take care of it. But keeping something from him, from them both, had put her in this situation. Now, she had to tell him that she hadn’t been honest with Kylo. It made her mouth taste sour, the
sweetness of the chocolate vanishing.

The blond man pursed his lips then sipped at his coffee. “Well, that’s a problem. Do you need time to think about what you’re going to say to him? Or should we just get it over with?”

Rey swallowed and moved her own feet from side to side. All Kylo wanted was to have her close by again, to be able to protect her. He would sometimes underline that word, making her worry about his thoughts. He’d been studying all summer. He’d been alone all summer. She couldn’t just cut him off again. That would make her selfish. Still, here she felt like she could be herself. She could be in the centre without it getting taken away from her.

She was trying to think of what to say when Kylo turned, spotting her and quickly dropping his cigarette to the ground to stamp on it. He could have at least told her that he’d started smoking. He was always keeping things from her. Had he changed at all? Yes, he had in words. But what about in actions?

He smiled brightly, making her take a step back, towards Dr. Casterfo. It was an old Kylo smile, echoing how he used to be but not how she imagined him now, after being left for a year with only words on a page.

And all Rey wanted to do was run away and hide, avoiding both real him and her imagined Kylo in her head until the end of time.

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Rey finally stopped shaking and wiped her eyes. She took too long breaths and left the washroom. She’d locked herself in there, in the only bathroom in Luke’s stupid house, a half an hour ago. The room didn’t have any of the simple things that her house had that made the rooms feel real: Leia made sure that there were small, green plants, candle holders, and neatly hemmed curtains. Even in Kylo and Poe’s apartment, there were pieces of personality: most of them came from her and Poe, but Kylo had put up a picture of the grove of trees in California there. She never got to ask him why and now that framed piece of where they had been was packed up somewhere in Connecticut. She doubted he wanted to look at it again.

She couldn’t spend another minute crying in this white and anonymous space, so far from home and everyone who she loved. It made it clear that she didn’t know Luke and he didn’t know her either. Why did Kylo want to trust him suddenly? Was he trying to get away from her?

Rage had finally overtaken sorrow. She’d seen how easy it was for Kylo to tap into that side and took it too.

She slammed the door open and stomped down to the kitchen.

Her eyes flared as she spotted her phone in Luke’s hand. No one was supposed to touch her things. If Kylo was there he’d…she sucked in the thought. Kylo wasn’t there. She had to handle it herself. Gritting her teeth, she glared at the greying hairs on Luke’s blond head.

“Why did you take that? That’s mine.” She clenched her fists then shot out her hand, demanding the her pink phone back.

Luke pursed his lips and turned and put her phone into a small safe on the counter, while meeting
her eyes with a cold stare. Her mouth dropped open, not believing what he was doing. How was this helping her? How was this helping Kylo? This just made the suffering feel more real, the distance growing into infinity. He locked it before she could scramble to rescue it from the small prison. She punched him hard in the arm, shouting at him.

“Give that back! It’s mine!” She felt so small and helpless and was without her protector. Why was this happening? “I got it from them. You can’t take them from me right now!”

“I can and I will. You don’t need it right now because we’re going to talk about tomorrow and the rules for living here.” He didn’t smile. His blue eyes burnt into her. “Come here and sit with me, Rey. I need to tell you what’s going on.”

She didn’t want to hear anything that he had to say. She was still forcing herself to understand why Kylo had agreed to this and, in doing so, had made her go along with it. That was what he always did. She could just turn and leave. Kylo couldn’t be that far away; she silently hoped that he was waiting for her, having not driven away after all. She could take this all back and just go home. She still had her stash of stolen and earned money that no one had ever taken from her. If anything good had come out of the chaos of that night, it was that no one really followed how she had planned her escape. Now that she knew better, she could make it work this time.

But then she would have to break a promise. And Kylo had promised to get better too. She needed to reject breaking commitments to something that must be important to them both.

His haunted eyes and silences the entire summer made it hard to be there.

She didn’t want him to be like that anymore but couldn’t make him change back over night by her own will alone. Time was another enemy that they both had to fight.

“What if I don’t want to?” She glared even as he moved to the sofa. His house felt like a hotel or one of the show homes that mom sold but messier, like someone had dumped clothes around the place without changing any of the pictures. “Why does this place want me not to talk to Kylo? No one has ever done that to us before.”

“Oh, that.” Luke sat on the couch and shrugged. He started flipping through a magazine, not looking at her. “They’re not doing that. If you’re going to live in this house, then that’s one of my rules. It’s not theirs.”

That’s all she needed to hear. “Then I’m not staying here or living here.”

She turned and grabbed her jacket and shoes and stormed out of the house. The door slammed shut; it was a clean, firm smack of wood meeting wood. She stretched her neck, hoping to see their car still waiting for her.

But Kylo was gone.

The street was silent. She hadn’t seen much of the town when they arrived but the next house was across a long stretch of green. It really was the middle of nowhere.

And she didn’t know anyone there.

Was he going to hurt himself? No. She was safe now. He wouldn’t do that to her.

Without choices and left alone, Rey put her head down and took deep, long breaths. She’d left her home and her dog, all of her friends and things. She’d left her mom and dad; even though they weren’t her real parents, they were the only parents that she’d ever known. Her protector, her love,
was driving somewhere through Michigan feeling the same as her.

The thought clicked in her head.

They were both alone, but not together.

But they’d always be together there, as the kids that they used to be.

Sitting up, she shook her head. Too much had happened since then. It felt like another lifetime ago and not just seven years.

Kylo had tried. It wasn’t his best, but he had tried to focus on where they needed to go in life and other things kept getting in the way. She wanted to go back to before she felt angry all of the time and when all she could focus on was remembering the colour of one girl’s hair before she died. She wanted to remember what a boy, who must have been about how old she was now, had told her before he was taken down to the basement. She didn’t wanted to remember if she could hear him scream, but he had. He had to have cried out until it stopped in a strangled gurgle. Then, their small shack would fall quiet. It was the silence of death. She hated quiet because it just reminded her of the hollow emptiness of being there, but at the same time it was comforting. It was waking up in Kylo’s arms just before he woke up, reminding her of safety and security.

She had been too small to understand everything that was happening.

But Kylo had.

Her sadness about feeling alone in the world had made her forget that so many children had died so close to her when she was too small to really comprehend everything that was happening.

Kylo’s trauma had surfaced in his choices. He pressed on with his goals of doing anything that helped him forget what he had done. His defiance to continue studying when his school was filled with people who made it hard for him didn’t make sense until she started down the same path. He fell in love and she blamed him for it, when really he was just searching to fill the identical hole that she felt inside of her. And he kept going, trying to mirror what he thought was expected of him.

He had dragged her along with him.

Had she ever really made a choice that was hers alone to make? Running away had been the first thing that she’d really done.

But now she could choose to turn and go inside and try to figure out what was happening.

It’s what Poe would have done.

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She was thinking about him when Luke’s phone rang in the middle of the night. It came from the living room. She hadn’t realized that she’d taken Luke’s room until she was done talking earlier. He really let her speak, answering every question that she had. She guessed that he hoped trust was something he could earn again. But she was far from letting him have that power.
She tried hard to figure out what Luke was doing at why. It just left her feeling more confused until she was too tired to talk anymore. Instead, she curled up with Bee and he licked away the salt from her tears off of her cheeks, his tongue scratching until she giggled. It was a nice reminder that she could feel something, anything else.

Now, she could hear Luke arguing on the phone. His voice rose and fell, but the words weren’t clear.

Tapping Bee, she moved out of the bed and went to listen more.

It took her only a minute to push the door open, realizing whom he was talking to.

She glared at him until he noticed that she was standing next to his fold-out couch.

“I want to talk to mom too,” she said. “Not just you.”

Luke ran his hand through his beard, shaking his head for a moment. Leia’s distant voice agreed with her. “Fine.”

She gripped the phone hard, knowing that he would just snatch it away from her with her next question. “Is Kylo okay?”

Leia sighed, filling her ears with tension before it faded. Mom was angry, not crying. “He’s in Detroit. He called us when he got there. It’s beyond me why he didn’t call right away, when we could do something. We think that he’s with George. You don’t have to listen to Luke if you don’t want to. Oh, sweetheart, we should have come with you both…”

Mom and dad had been through hell too. This was what they wanted too. They couldn’t control Kylo; he was an adult. She had to work with them. Not against them. She’d made this decision to go with this plan for herself, and for them. But what if this didn’t work too? Could something just make sense? If Kylo was with George, he’d be okay. But George had been there when he’d hurt himself before, in the spring.

There were too many thoughts in her head. She just wanted them to go blank.

She finally shook her head. “I think it’s okay.”

“What?”

“I think I can…I don’t know. I just want to talk to him. I need to make sure he’s okay and I…” She felt her hand starting to shake and shook her head. “Would he do that to me, mom? I’m not really gone. Not this time.”

She heard Leia suck in a breath. She imagined how her hair must have been done, how late it was. “Just get some rest, Rey. Try to sleep. I’m going to call him in the morning and make sure that he’s okay.”

“Okay.”

“I love you, sweetheart.”

“Love you too.”

Somewhere, somewhere not there, she was still someone’s sweet pea too.
“So, tell me your story, Rey.”

She’d somehow slept last night. She got up, showered, and put on new clothes. They’d been the ones that she’d planned on wearing that day, but the colours didn’t feel right. She still wore them anyway. Luke walked her in silence to the school. There was only one bus in town. She had to walk to school. She thought about asking if she could have a bike but doubted that Luke would do anything like that for her.

Mom had been trying to call Kylo and he wasn’t answering.

She walked with Luke to the school still hating him with every step. It didn’t look like any school that she’d seen before, but she was still lost in her thoughts, reliving the nightmare she’d had that night. Snoke really had killed Kylo in the basement. The steps up the stairs weren’t him coming to take her to safety. They were the echoing footfalls of her life ending, one step at a time.

Dr. Casterfo cleared his throat so she looked up and shrugged. “I don’t really think I have a story.”

He quirked a blond eyebrow and leaned in closer to her. “Everyone has a story. And putting it in your own words helps it make sense.”

She had to roll her eyes. “My story keeps changing. Every time I think I’ve figured it out, things change.”

Nodding, he reached out to pour her a glass of water. She didn’t want to look around his office, but it felt more like a living room than an office. The furniture was comfortable. There were pictures on the walls, but not of landscapes or the other impersonal stuff that she was used to in therapists’ offices. These were of kids and families.

“Well, I’m here to help you with all of that. And since I don’t know the original, I’d like to know all of the parts.” He paused, sipping at his own glass before he sat back. “You’re not here because your story changed. You’re here because the world around you made you think it did.”

Rey took a long drink of water, studying the man across from her. He didn’t look old, but there were wrinkles at the corners of his eyes when he smiled. She wanted to ask him questions, to get information. But her other therapists got upset when she had too many things to worry about.

“This isn’t a normal school, is it?” It was the safest thing to ask. “There are no classrooms.”

He grinned. “We’re not traditional, if that’s what you’re asking.”

She just had to tilt her head and he continued, explaining how the courses were more open. There was no real schedule, unless she wanted one or they determined that she needed one to help with her progress. There was free study with tutors, group therapy with the other students, and a kitchen where she could create dishes instead of doing English homework. There was dance. She could still dance. But if she didn’t want to leave her bed, she didn’t have to, but he’d appreciate a phone call. Everyone there had a past that led them there; some students had families that loved them, others were orphans like her. Getting better, or getting as close to better as she could, would be the goal for the year. She was reminded of all of the things that she used to love, but had let drift aside because she had started to only focus on hating. The part that made her sit up the most was the promise of animal therapy. She’d forgotten about that too.
"I can ride horses?"

The distant memory of grandma and grandpa taking her to the fair when she was four, riding a pony, and eating cotton candy rose in her mind. Then, three years later, going to the fair again with Kylo and Poe. She could ride a bigger pony that time, waving at them from the ring as the animals circled around in a tight order. When she was in the moment, she remembered feeling content watching Kylo slip his arm around Poe’s waist, smiling at her while still holding him. That memory had twisted in her mind when her anger at their relationship surfaced. But now, it was tainted with sorrow.

She blinked back tears. But Dr. Casterfo didn’t comment on them. He saw them, he must have, but didn’t say anything.

“T’ve found that girls like horses more than math. And boys like baseball more than long division.” He sat back again. “So, tell me your story so we can visit the stables.”

-=-

He didn’t ask questions. He just let her talk.

Her first memories were of Kylo’s face, young but covered in bruises. His hair was long but was still beautiful to her, even as she felt dried blood in the strands. He called her angel. He taught her how to walk and talk, to use the disgusting toilet and keep food in hidden places, keeping her safe and teaching her how to take care of the other children. There were always so many new faces, new names. The names they used, the names he gave them. She learnt what parents were, what family was. How love felt different than pain. But she also got to know what hunger meant, what fear was. How Kylo’s voice changed when he was holding back hurt and injury. Their secret language kept them safe, even when Snoke took her and abused her. The darkness came from being held down and touched, raping her with his mouth and hands. She wanted to bury it; Kylo wanted her to forget it. But then, when he wasn’t alone, he gave her the chance to heal. He was in love. She should have just let him have it because neither of them knew how short that time would be.

Being in the hospital in California. Having pancakes for the first time, learning what phones looked like and how they worked. What a playroom looked and smelled like and what it was like to be clean. These were all still memories sprinkled with thinking that every day was a new miracle.

But to Kylo, they weren’t. He was angry all of the time, fighting anyone but her and Agent Jinn. His kindness was genuine, though. That couldn’t fade even as Kylo changed in her memories. He’d still cuddle her, kiss and hug her, but as he grew up, the way he looked and acted shifted those moments.

She tried not to talk about Kylo and Poe. It still hurt too much. She stuck to how she felt about school, about her friends. She slipped up a few times, but then got herself back on track. It still bothered her how people would police her eating and how often she worked out. Sometimes, she just felt better when she was hungry and sore. Kylo knew that too.

When she got to the part about running away, that’s when Dr. Casterfo stopped her.

“I just want to make sure that you know that you’re not here because of that.” He was repeating
himself. It was a little annoying. She let her face tell him that, but he responded with a simple nod. “Well, maybe it has a little to do with you running away.”

Sighing, she shook her head. “I just wanted it all to stop. I shut Kylo out because it hurt too much and now I have to do it again and…”

“Do what again?” His face got tight and she regretted telling him if she was going to upset him. Still, she kept going. “Luke won’t let us talk. He took my phone.”

She watched rage flash in the previously calm eyes. “That is not part of our policy. That goes against what healing means, what we stand for. This isn’t a very good place to start for you so I’m…fairly enraged right now. I’ll have to speak with your uncle and resolve this.”

He didn’t show his anger other than the slight shift in his eyes, but she thought that he meant it. Biting her lip, she dropped her head. “Kylo thinks it’s a good idea. And now he’s not answering his phone. I just want to know that he’s okay.”

Lifting his hand, he moved from his armchair to the desk in the corner. He watched him shift papers around until he found what he was looking for. He held up the sheet: it must have been her application. “You can call him. At any time. You can’t have too many outside worries when you’re here. The other students, other children like you, and myself included, we all depend on stability. There are mornings when I have to turn my car around and double check that I’ve locked the door, or haven’t forgotten the stove on. Those things seem bigger the further away we get from them. From what you’ve told me, your Kylo will just get bigger the further you are away from him. But, there’s also a chance that we can work together to keep you from having to turn around and check the stove everyday. I want you to find yourself, to be yourself, not just for Kylo, but for you.”

She felt tears in her eyes, but still nodded. He reached out and took her hand and flashed her a grin. “Now, why don’t we go check out the stables and you can make your phone call.”

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She met three girls her age, brushing the most beautiful horse that she’d ever seen. He was tall and broad and black with a white diamond on his nose. He whinnied when she patted that patch of white.

And one of the girls looked just like Anja. Her brother had raped her. And then his friends raped her and burnt her with cigarettes. She had the same scars on her arms as Kylo. Dr. Casterfo didn’t make her stop talking or use other words; the new Anja, the Not Anja, just kept brushing the horse, letting her words flow with her hands.

The other girl saw her father murder her mother and then shoot himself. Her voice was quieter, watching Dr. Casterfo as she spoke.

The third girl was just silent, playing with the saddle rather than speaking.

This was a strange place. It was open, filled with sunshine and fresh hay. But everyone was walking around with ghost pains.

They walked down the path towards the centre of the campus. The buildings were more like small
cottages rather than anything from her old school. She saw a group of boys playing catch across the
grass. Birds were singing above her, but she shut them out. Sound could just be turned off when
she felt like it. Even though she hated herself at times, she still appreciated what she could do. And
it mostly came from what Kylo had taught her.

“Rey, there are many reasons why we end up where we are. I’ve talked to many children and
helped most of them. Sometimes, what we offer isn’t for them. But, I think that maybe being here,
learning about yourself, might show you some new things and let you breathe and understand that
the next part of your story starts here. And I think a good beginning will come from you talking to
Kylo and telling him what you’re thinking.” He took his phone out of his pocket and handed it to
her.

She took the phone, looking at the number on the screen. “What do I say?”

“When you tell him what’s in your heart, doesn’t that always work?”

He’d only known her a couple of hours, but he somehow knew that.

She was staying. She had to. Figuring out how to tell that to Kylo was another problem.

Hitting dial, she closed her eyes.

He wasn’t answering mom and dad, but he picked up for her call. “Yeah?”

He’d been sleeping. He was in a bed, somewhere. He was safe. It was okay.

“Hi.” The word felt wrong but it was the first one that came to her head. “You don't have to hang
up. Please don't be mad at me, Kylo. I’m using my new friend’s phone. Just don’t tell Luke.”

She wasn’t about to let Luke ruin everything that was happening. She saw Dr. Casterfo smile at her
and managed to return the look with a small grin. He was okay, she mouthed. He nodded, then took
several steps away.

Kylo was sitting up, moving around. “How is it? Are you okay? Have you talked to mom and
dad?”

The sound of Kylo’s voice as he woke up always made her feel better. It meant he had slept. When
he wasn’t sleeping or eating, pushing himself to exhaustion until he passed out, his voice was
strained and detached.

But Kylo could also fake his moods. He could pretend to be someone else when he wanted to. He
could be faking being okay to make her feel better.

“They said that they’ve been trying to call you and are really worried. I think that you should call
them right away.” She felt her voice start to shake and let her voice drop. She didn't want to
whisper, but was almost doing it. “I thought you hurt yourself too. I had to call you to make sure. I
don't want to be here if you're gone.”

“No, not this time.” He sounded like there would be a next time, even if he didn’t want there to be.
But then he cleared his throat. “I was just asleep. I'm sorry I made you worry. I wouldn't do that to
you, Rey. I was driving all night and I just...”

“Are you okay?” She didn’t want him to lie to her again, but couldn’t lie to him either. “Mom and
dad were really mad at Luke. My new therapist is really mad at him too. Nobody is making us not
talk. I yelled at Luke a lot because I hate it when people lie to me. I miss you, Kylo. But everyone
here is so nice..."

The other end of the phone was quiet for a moment, until he spoke again. “Except for Luke. So, you don’t want to leave?”

Now, she really had to tell him the truth.

There were new people here, new kids that she wanted to get to know. And Dr. Casterfo seemed to know her already. This wasn’t like meeting therapists when she was a kid. Maz was from the FBI; she was there to help her in the beginning. Ahsoka and Dr. Windu helped in the middle, before things fell apart. Now, it was just like he said. Another part of her life was opening up for her and she wasn’t alone. And Kylo had to figure out his own story at that point.

A year could either drag on for him, or disappear in a flash.

Time was always different on the outside.

She found the words, somehow. “I think…I think I need to try this, Kylo. It's different here — all of the kids are like us. Really, like us. I used to think that every kid had a real mom and dad and...and they don't. Other kids have been hurt like us and I don't know what to think. I want more time to think, but Dr. Casterfo wants me to try but not for you, just for myself.”

She heard him sigh and could picture how he was sitting. He was either clenching his fists or running his hand on the bed. He always needed to touch something or someone when his emotions were getting away from him.

“He’s right,” Kylo finally replied. “I don’t want to go a year without talking to you or seeing you, but maybe Luke is a little right too. I hate myself for saying that. Remember how I used to say that I never wanted you to hate anything? Just love? You're allowed to hate because I hate so much about me. But as long as you don't hate me, I'll be okay. Remember...remember when we first got out? How fast that first year went? This...it won’t feel as long.”

“I hope...I hope you’re right.”

Dr. Casterfo called to her and she turned to answer him. “I’m almost done.

He nodded. To her, he was saying take your time.

“I’ll write to you,” Kylo quickly said when she turned back to the call. “Luke can’t stop that. Steal the mail key and get it copied.”

Of course he wanted to write. He could think more when he wrote, as long as it wasn’t texting. Those, he sent by email. “And I’ll write to you too. All of the time.” She wanted to keep smiling, but hanging up felt hard. It made her swallow and shake her head. If this was going to start, it had to be now. A year. A year would only be hard if she stopped moving. “I have to go. We’re going horseback riding. But I miss you so much already and love you.”

The words would have to linger for a long, long time. Like hugging him for the last time, she had to make the feelings stick and not let them fade.

“I love you too, Rey. I love you and we’ll see each other soon, okay? I promise I’ll be better, Rey. I promise that this is the last time I mess up like this.”

Please let that be true, Rey thought. Please let him mean that like he meant his promise to himself to be more than just a survivor.
She sucked in a long breath. “I...I hope so. I don’t want to say goodbye, but I have to. Please come back to me, and I’ll come back to you. Goodbye, Kylo.”

“Bye.”

And that was the last word she’d hear from him for a year.

But he wrote.

He always wrote.

And it told her, with every letter, that he wouldn’t break this promise.

-=-

It took a month to get her phone back from Luke. She’d come home everyday from the campus, smelling either like the stable or the dance studio, and asked for it and never got it.

She’d make dinner, empty the litter box, and then sat and wrote to Kylo. Some letters she sent. Some letters, she left on her desk. She’d talk to mom and dad on Luke’s phone, making sure that the dog was okay. She was always busy and they sounded happier, like they weren’t working as hard. Dad would sometimes comment on how empty the house was and she would bite back an apology. No one had done anything wrong so she shouldn’t be sorry for it. They told her that Kylo wanted to move and he might have a new address soon. He was worried about how the apartment was too low to the ground. She was just glad that he was holding it together, whatever it was.

They asked about her friends there. Her best friend was Zorii. She didn’t know her parents either. Together, they wondered how different things would have been if they had known them.

She kept working hard not to be sad, but never stopped asking for her phone.

And then one day, it was waiting for her on the counter.

The first person she called was Rose. Every day that she spent with her new friends felt like a betrayal to her friends back home. Every night with Bee meant being away from her dog and he was getting older.

“Rey, oh my God. What happened? How are you? I miss you.” She heard the familiar sound of Rose’s bed squeaking as she hopped up on it. She missed that sound. She missed having sleepovers. She also missed the blue sleeping bag beside Kylo’s bed.

“I miss you too,” she said, sighing. “But it’s great here. I’m...I’m happier now. It’s so weird.”

“What’s weird about it? Being happy? Isn’t that what's supposed to happen?” Rose was chewing gum.

She was right. That’s what was supposed to happen. And she’d never expected it to happen so quickly. Dr. Casterfo was so different; he never looked stressed or tired even when kids would cry or fight with one another. He had a favourite teacup and a perfect spot to sit to watch everyone. During their personal sessions, away from the larger group setting, he didn’t write anything down. It was just a conversation.
Rose started talking about their, wait, her classmates. How Kaydel wanted to try out for cheerleading next year, but didn’t want to take dance with her anymore. She got happier when she talked about Finn, how he wanted to try out for football or maybe basketball. Their teachers hadn’t changed and still gave them too much homework. She didn’t want to tell Rose how she never had homework that she didn’t want. School wasn’t school there. It was more about learning than real education; that’s what Dr. Casterfo said.

After she hung up, promising that they could text now, she went to the living room. Luke was looking through his stack of library books. He never offered to take her there so she’d have to figure it out on her own.

“Thanks for my phone.”

Glancing up from the page, he nodded. “I thought you earned it.”

“Are you still mad at Kylo?” she asked, hoping that the question wouldn’t take away the privilege again.

“He’s kept his end of the deal. And I don’t mind the letter writing.” Luke was back to looking at his book, shrugging her off more than anything. “He thinks more when he writes.”

She nodded and turned away, knowing that he was done talking to her.

=-=

Dear Kylo,

I can’t believe I’ve been here for two months! I think I told you how we don’t get grades here, but my teachers tell me that I’m actually a good artist. I think it’s because I figured out that we’re not really doing art, but it’s somehow really math. I like math! So weird.

I hope that you’re okay. I think that you are from your letter, but I’m still worried. It’s almost Halloween and I think I’m too old for trick or treating. We’re going to have a Halloween party instead so I can still dress up. I think I miss him most around Halloween. It was really a thing that was just for us because you hated it. I still don’t know why you hated Halloween. Can you tell me why now?

Mom said that Lumpy was sick. The next time you’re home, can you check on him for me? Bee caught a rabbit last week and left its head on the porch. It was so gross, but my friend helped me bury him. He’s really nice and said all of the right words. It was like your eulogy for him, but it was just a rabbit. I didn’t want to think about him but I still did. I just want you to know that I’m still sorry that I never got to take back the mean things I said to him. I talk to my friend about things like this and he tells me that it’s important to keep thinking about the future. I can’t take back things in the past. It sounded like something you used to say. I think that you’d like my friend.

I know that you don’t really care about Thanksgiving. Mom, dad, and grandma are coming here. I can’t wait to see them again. I hope that you’ll think of me. Make sure that you do something nice for Hux. Rose said that Paige thinks he’s depressed. You know how to take care of people.

I miss talking to you. I talk to Bee because I know he used to talk to him too. We can take Spanish here if we want, but I took French instead. My friend says that it’s my choice and Bee will
understand me in any language.

I don’t think I want to see you at Christmas. I don’t know if I’ll be able to come back here and live here if I see you again so soon. Is that okay? I want it to be okay.

I still think about being there and we talk about it in group therapy. My friend Zorii says that she remembers the news when we got out. She thinks I could be famous if I wanted to but I really don’t. Nobody should be famous for something like that.

I love you.

Rey.

-=-

Her plane was delayed because of the snow. She felt bad that she kept Dr. Casterfo waiting. Luke wanted to stay an extra week in Connecticut. It felt wrong to stay there without Kylo. She knew that he’d gone down to Florida. And that his next letter would be loaded with feelings and would open up wounds that he wouldn’t let fully heal.

She followed the airport worker from the plane, dragging her suitcase behind her.

It was so dark in December. She wished that she hadn’t been late because it meant less time with her blond teacher.

She got to stay at his house while Luke was away.

When she entered the arrival hall, she was met with him holding a sign with her name on it.

“Look, it’s just like a movie.” He smiled, shifting the paper in his hand. “Did you have a good flight?”

Nodding, she took his hand and let him guide her to his car.

She quietly hoped that she didn’t talk about him too much when she’d been home.

-=-

Dear Kylo,

Happy birthday! I made the bracelet for you in class. Zorii picked the beads but you like black and red so I thought they were nice too. I hope that you like it. If you don’t want to wear it, you can use it as a bookmark.

I haven’t felt angry in a long time but I started feeling sad for no reason last week. I just wanted everything to be the same. I hate myself for being mad at him. It wasn’t his fault and I hope you don’t feel alone. I still don’t understand why you didn’t tell me. It still feels like my fault that he’s gone. It doesn’t make sense and I talk to my friend about it. He tries to make it feel better. I still
think that if I hadn’t wanted to run away, he’d still be with you and everything would be better for you.

I’m taking new anti-depressants now. Do you remember how you didn’t want to take them at first? I feel the same. It really sucks to not feel anything, but I think that it will get better. Next year, I’ll be a real teenager and I really can’t wait. We are going to have a party with the horses for my birthday. I asked everyone not to bring gifts for me, but bring treats for the horses instead. Isn’t that nice? I think it is.

I hope you’re not working too hard. You always studied too much. I think you should still take a break, but I can’t tell you what to do. Or maybe I can. I don’t know.

Thank you for the last few letters. I’ve saved them all. There are some things that I don’t know how to answer right now. I’m doing better, but getting sad or mad sometimes makes it hard to read what you’re writing.

I love you.

Rey

-=-

She knocked on Ransolm’s open door even though she didn’t have to. She would spend time in his office even when he wasn’t there. She’d study or draw, or practice her dance steps. His office was more of a home to her than Luke’s living room. She could bring Bee whenever she wanted. The other kids loved seeing him and hearing his happy chirps. But Ransolm gave him the best pets. When he looked up and saw her, he greeted her, offered her some tea and she took her usual spot on his couch.

“It’s today,” she said, frowning at her teacup. It was her favourite one. She knew that he didn’t give it to anyone but her. “It’s been a year since he died.”

She’d warned him that she might be upset that week. Summer was coming and she was going to spend time at grandma’s. Luke had promised to take her up north to do some shopping. She’d fallen in love with leggings and wanted a few more pairs. There was an outlet store just across the border. Leia and Han were going to take her fishing too. But she’d been avoiding thinking about Kylo for a while. Even worse, she had put off thinking about Poe.

He put his arm around her and she leaned into his comfortable, soft sweater. “I know. I wasn’t going to bring it up. Are you worried about Kylo?”

She shrugged. She hadn’t answered his last letter. He said that he was going home to spend time with mom and dad. She’d talked to them last night and they told her that he was coming. But they always made sure that she spoke more about herself than Kylo or her memories of Poe. Ransolm did the same thing. Even in group therapy, they made sure that she focused on herself. But she couldn’t do that today.

“I miss him. I miss them both.” She hugged him back, looking at her teacup on the coffee table. “My room used to have stars on the ceiling. The last time I was there, when we were packing, they were gone. I don’t know where they went.”
“They live on in your heart. Just like he does.” Ransolm always said the right thing. He was perfect. He took care of them. Last month, when two boys got into a fight, she was sure she’d see him get mad. Instead, he just sat down with them on the grass and had them talk. She was standing on the other side of campus, talking to Zorii and Not Anja, and just watched how he got them both to understand why they were fighting and how to feel better. No one was ever punished there. It was like he wanted them to realize that bad things had happened to them, just not there.

“I had the nightmare again. I dreamed that Kylo killed him because I told him to. I hate that nightmare so much.” She hadn’t told Kylo that in her letters. She couldn’t tell anyone except Ransolm. He was like Agent Jinn, but only hers. She couldn’t wait to give him the picture that she’d painted, to thank him for helping her so much.

“You have to remember, Rey, that your brain is just making sense of what you’ve seen and what’s happened to you. You might be thinking about a time that Kylo did hurt someone. And you know that he only did that because he didn’t have a real choice. Here, where we are now, we have real choices. And if he’s making better ones, then he’s not that person anymore.” He put his hand on her leg and she felt goose bumps rise on her arms. She was suddenly very glad that she wore her new sweater that day. “I still feel bad for all of the people you’ve had taken from you, both for them and you. You remember them. You remember him. You’re doing everything right.”

Ransolm always looked sadder when he talked about Poe. The first time she said his name, his eyes got distant for a moment and then he quickly focused again.

She had gotten to know his past a little. But only so much. She could see the diplomas on the walls, but they were mixed in with the photos of him with other kids like her. The picture that made her feel the best was on his desk; it was one with her. And she didn’t look fat in it. It was perfect.

Still, she had to think about how Kylo was feeling. He was going to be okay; he had to be. He had mom and dad and George. She had Ransolm and Zorii. And Finn and Rose. But they both always felt like there was nothing beyond the void. She wished that she could talk to him but was afraid of reversing everything. Even writing to him was getting harder. Their bubble had floated too high above them now and she didn’t know when it would hit the ground.

“He feels alone sometimes. But he also says that he doesn’t want to be with anyone else.” She shook her head. “I don’t want him to be with anyone else but I hate how alone he feels.”

Ransolm, like he always did, slipped his arm away to sip his tea. He would hold his little finger out when he held his cup. It made her stomach flutter to watch how he moved. “Well, what do I usually say when we talk about this?”

“That we’re not trapped there. And we’re not alone. And I can’t take all of Kylo’s emotions as my own.”

He smiled at her and she had to hold back a sigh. “Just because we feel alone, we never are. Kylo needs to keep working with his therapists to understand that as well, just like you’re doing.”

This was a conversation that they’d had many times. And she could tell that Ransolm was tired of talking about it. He would tilt his head in a certain way and clear his throat. He’d run his hand through his hair and fix his sweater. She thought his blue sweater was the best; Zorii liked the red one. Of all of her teachers, he was her favourite.

“I think he misses having sex.”
Lifting his eyebrows, Ransolm turned towards her again. “Does he write that to you?”

“No, he just writes about working out.”

“Ah.” He smiled again. “Then he probably does.”

In bed that night, she touched herself and thought about that look. As she felt herself getting wet, the look got clearer. The sounds of that night in the apartment mixed into the background as she felt inside of herself, getting more excited by her own hand.

She didn’t expect how hard she ended up crying later that night.

-=-

She tried to reply to Kylo’s letters. She really tried. It was like nothing felt right. Her words just weren’t enough anymore.

Luke commented once at how many there were.

And she was running out of ways to tell him that she missed him, but also didn’t know how to deal with it anymore.

Was she still his angel? Yes.

Was she still his person? Yes.

Was he her only person? That was the part that made her heart ache.

So she avoided answering him and focused on enjoying her summer as he suffered through his course work. He was smarter than his criminology teacher. What was she supposed to say to that? She sent a couple of letters, but none of them felt right.

It was a better hurt than telling him the truth.

-=-

They were sitting in Luke’s living room, still doubling as his bedroom, and Kylo’s leg was bouncing. Loose laundry was lying everywhere and it was embarrassing. Everything that she’d done that morning felt wrong and just seeing him made it hurt more. She was going to hurt him just like he hurt her. It wasn’t fair. The thought made her tighten her hand on her cup. It was empty but she kept it there to remain calm.

“You could have told me.” His eyes were tired, making her feel worse about wanting to stay. “Last month, you said that it was okay. What changed?”

“Nothing changed. Kylo, I feel better here. I still talk with my friends at home, but everything feels better here. Even Luke…” She was watching him as she spoke. He’d got a haircut. She could see it on his neck. He’d been eating more. He’d also been working out. He didn’t look as thin as the last
time that she saw him.

He would be healthy if it weren’t for the pain in his gaze.

Kylo rolled his eyes and she sat up straighter, glancing at Ransolm. He hadn’t said anything since he introduced himself outside. He had fixed his sweater and sat down, but let them have their conversation. But his eyes told her to keep going. She could do it if he was there.

“I thought this was about me getting better. And now we both are. But Luke thinks that we can talk all of the time now so I want to try that before deciding what to do. I can make up my own mind, Kylo.” She watched his face stay blank as she spoke. She had to do this. This was her story, not just his.

“And you agree with this?” Kylo turned his dark eyes to Ransolm, then back to her. His look slowly narrowed in the silence that Ransolm left them. *You have a crush on him. You don’t want to go with me because you want to stay with him.* His blinking was still the same, but the words made her blush.

“I think that Rey has made a decision that I respect,” Casterfo finally said as she sat back, trying to figure out how to reply to Kylo. “And if I understand everything correctly, you still have several years of school left. We’re taking care of her, so I don’t think that you have to worry.”

*It’s not just for him. It’s for me too*, she answered.

Kylo’s frown deepened. “I don’t like it when plans change.”

“I’m…I’m sorry for not telling you sooner.” Rey lifted her chin. “Kylo, this doesn’t mean I don’t love you or need you, but here I’m…”

“I know what it means.” He stood, still holding her eyes, and walked towards the door. “I’m flying home tomorrow. It’s up to you if you come with me or not.”

When the door clicked shut, she was thankful that he didn’t slam it. But it still made her slump down.

“Well,” Ransolm said, taking off the top of his take-away cup to finish his drink, “that went well.”

Rey didn’t know what to say or do.

Hopefully, he’d have the answer soon.

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Chapter End Notes

To say that TROS wrecked me would be an understatement. But I'm trying to get back to writing this again, aside from work and a side project that will hopefully be posted soon (it's not reylo so no one will read it lol but it's related to this fic so who knows).

Standard warnings for this - past every terror imaginable references.

I'm still trying to follow my outline so the next chapter will probably be a time jump. I
start teaching again this month and I'm still mourning my cat, who was put down last month. So the delay isn't just because I *hated* how these characters were treated in the movie.

Thanks for reading. I'm sorry for writing this. I wanted this to be longer but I also wanted to update sometime this decade.
“You’re the last person I want to talk to right now.”

Kylo didn’t even have to lift his head from where he’d planted it on the steering wheel to know that his uncle was sitting down in the passenger seat. He could smell him, smell the old, battered jacket that he always wore. He slammed the door shut and he bit back a scream. He had more control now. He could handle this conversation.

“What? We haven’t spoken in a year. I’m allowed to say hello.” Luke’s voice was instantly grating and he finally lifted his head to eye him. “Has there been a change of plans?”

“Every plan I’ve ever made has blown up in my face so I should be used to it by now.” He knew that he had restraint but it was still an inward battle to keep steady. He needed to push back his rising desire to let everything burn; those old feelings from when he was a teenager were always tempting to turn back to. In his desperation, he realized that he had to open up to Luke. It was that or call George again, wearing down that relationship again. “Rey wants to stay for another year. Maybe she never wants to come home.”

“Hmm,” Luke answered, sitting back and folding his arms. “Well, she hates the house. So that’s not why she wants to stay. She misses her friends back home, but likes the ones she has here.”

He rubbed his eyes, still grounding himself. “She has a crush on that teacher. I had to look at that man and shake his hand.”

“He’s a handsome man. I’ll give him that.” Luke tapped on the dashboard, distracting him. “Look, just because you didn’t get to be a normal twelve-year-old…”

“Don’t.” Kylo’s hands gripped the steering wheel. “Don’t act like I’m comparing us in my head. I realize that she’s going to grow up. I’ve had this conversation before. He…he thought that too, that I was just pretending that she was going to stay small, happy and perfect forever. I’ve had a year to think about all of this. I’ve had a year of pretending that I don’t regret everything and telling her that it’s finally starting to stick. Do you have any idea how that feels?”

“More than you know, Kylo.” Luke’s eyes were firm as he looked at him. “When are you heading back?”

He lifted his head to scowl at the house and its inhabitants. “Tomorrow evening.”

“And I’m guessing you don’t want to stay here for the night?”
“I’d rather drive into the lake.”

So Luke promised that he’d talk to Rey. And where to find a motel and a place to eat dinner.

Kylo already knew that he wasn’t going to eat and would sleep in the car, but he didn’t let him know that.

-=-

Luke entered the house and she didn’t want to look at him.

“He’s sulking in the car. Maybe you should go out there and talk to him.” He hung up his coat and gave Ransolm a nod in greeting. “Did you take out the trash yet?”

It was just supposed to be a normal day and that type of question still matched that feeling. “I did it this morning.”

She wanted to talk to Kylo. She wanted to have her words make sense first. The open spaces and freedom to share her emotions there made it a special place. She already had her mind set on returning there when she was older to help the other kids; bad things would always keep happening to children. And if she could show them that it got better, with hard work and time, she would be doing her part.

But she missed mom and dad. She missed Rose and Finn. She missed her house and her things.

She wanted to weigh out the good and the bad and make up her mind.

Sighing, she stood up. “I think I need to talk to him.”

The other two adults agreed with her.

-=-

Rey tapped on his window as he was texting Hux. He wanted to remind him not to make the apartment a mess. The idea of living alone was only tempting because he’d only have to clean up his messes and people would stop borrowing his clothes.

He nodded and she opened the door.

She was taller, stronger. Her hair was up in a ponytail, setting off her cheekbones. She really did feel better there. Distantly, he still felt the absence of her chubby, childhood face. The first time he fell asleep next to her on his bed when they got home. It was so long ago and he wondered if she remembered it in the same way as he did. Was the world really as amazing as she had made it seem? Were the bad thoughts really not with her from the start?

He’d had help for five years from someone who loved him. He had pushed her away, trying to untangle his own pain and desire to move forward into something that felt worthwhile. Someone took care of him, and he took care of him. Until he wasn’t there for one night and lost everything
except for the girl sitting beside him. She knew this. But did she understand it? The old offer he’d made to Poe surfaced in his mind and he knew what he had to say.

“I have one semester of undergrad left.” He met her eyes, watching her process what he was saying. “I really want to do my Masters, but I can take a break. We can…”

But Rey was shaking her head. “Kylo, you’d be miserable. The last time you took a year off, you complained all of the time.”

“The people I worked with were useless. That wasn’t my fault.” He still hated having to justifying himself for waiting to start his studies. It had made sense at the time and still felt right when he looked back on it: he needed work experience, he wanted to spend more time with Rey and Poe, and he wanted to be somewhere safe. But if everyone else thought it was a bad idea, then he was probably wrong again. “I may have made mistakes, Rey, but I don’t think that was one of them.”

“Then can you let me decide whether or not staying here for longer is a mistake too?”

She was growing up. And he couldn’t hate her for it. “It’s only fair.”

He let the silence grow between them, reminding him of quiet moments when they were still there. When things were quiet, a bad thing had just happened or was about to happen. It had only been over the course of the last eight years that he’d learnt that there was both peace and sanctuary in silences. It was waking up in his room with Rey safe in his arms. It was holding Poe on their bed, smiling before leaning up to kiss him. It was sitting with Rey on the porch, hearing nothing but the wind. No screaming. No threats. The only permanent silence was death and he hoped that it would be many, many years before he’d have to face it again.

“We can have dinner tonight.” Rey reached for his hand, reminding him again of how different she was from the images in his mind. “I’ve learnt so many new recipes.”

“I’d like that.”

She swallowed and he leaned over to hug her, to be welcomed back into the sanctuary of their bubble. “Don’t sleep in your car tonight.”

Managing a small grin, he gripped her back. “I promise I won’t.”

-=-

Kylo didn’t have many happy stories during their year apart. He tried to make them sound more exciting than they were, Rey could hear it. His grades were good. He had some people that he thought were his friends, but rarely spent time with them. But his time with George gave him his favourite memories. His eyes turned alive when he talked about how he figured out things about his wives, about the cases.

“You’ve found your calling, it seems,” Ransolm smiled at Kylo and then turned to her. “Are you proud of him, Rey?”

It echoed the far-away question she’d asked Agent Jinn on the porch of her house, reminding her that things used to be normal and how it felt to do the things that everyone expected them to. It had been easier living in that world.
“I think I am.” She turned her eyes to Kylo, watching him take a few more bites of pasta. Everyone always watched them eat so she pretended that she wasn’t monitoring him.

Shrugging, Kylo took a long drink of wine. “It wasn’t really a calling. Maybe I just wanted something good to come out of tragedy.”

“Then we think in very much the same way.” The other man raised his glass to him and then to Rey. She lifted her apple juice and tried to swallow how purposely awkward Kylo could make things when he was displeased.

He hated Dr Casterfo. He wasn’t giving him a chance.

“Is that why you work here?” Kylo asked, leaning back in his chair.

“Yes. Giving something back.”

Luke had left them alone for the evening and now she was regretting asking Ransolm to come. She hoped that Kylo wouldn’t have that look in his eyes, the one that told her he was figuring something out.

By the time Dr Casterfo wished them good night, she had let her annoyance at Kylo build too far.

“Why don’t you like him? I always tried to like your friends.”

He turned from drying the last plate to stare at her. “Because he’s not your friend. He’s your doctor and your teacher. I’ve been thinking about this all night…”

“You were thinking more than talking.” She watched him return the plate to the cupboard and shut the door, but his eyes were on her the entire time. “You’ve always done that.”

Tossing the towel over this shoulder, he leaned against the small counter. “I’m sorry I wasn’t more polite. I’m not trying to start an argument right now.”

He actually looked calm, making her straighten her shoulders. “You’re not?”

“No,” he answered. “Rey, I’ve had a year to think about so many things. How I’ve treated him and you, mom and dad, George, Luke…I need to be a better person or none of this will be how we want it. I miss him everyday and just thinking that you want to stay away longer…it makes it hard for me to realize that I’ve gotten better because I didn’t have to worry about you. You were safe. You were healing. And now that you don’t need me anymore…”

“I didn’t say that.” She stepped forward and took his hand, making him hold her. “I’m just asking for a little more time.”

He hugged her closely, resting his chin on the top of her head. “Please always need me. I can deal with being lonely. Just don’t leave me alone.”

It was strange that they both had different bodies now and walked in new skin, but just the sound of his voice brought her back to feeling the sun on her face on that day in California. Riding in an ambulance and not knowing where they were going, but as long as he was there they’d be okay. Slipping through memories, she shook her head and looked up at him.

That boy who saved her was still in there. She couldn’t leave him alone. She was supposed to save him.
“Just let me stay until Christmas.” The words were more for him than for her. “I’ll come home at Christmas.”

Finally, he smiled and kissed her forehead. “We’ll figure it out then.”

His eyes lingered on hers, still studying her face. He’d been looking at her differently most of the evening. She wondered if he was also looking for the child that she’d been. She couldn’t blame him because she kept doing the same thing. She didn’t have a clear picture of how he looked when he was twelve; she just had feelings about those memories.

He ran his hand down her cheek and she sighed. “Your hands aren’t as soft as they used to be.”

“I’ll start wearing gloves to the gym.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. He didn’t get it.

Chapter End Notes

i got a bit of inspiration today so here's a shorter update rather than a time jump. i'm adjusting the outline a bit, but things are straightening out here. thanks so much for reading and commenting :) it's been great to get your messages and share in our collective grief over *that* movie.
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

Kylo works on finishing his degree, as well as his friendship with Hux.

See notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The term started and Kylo couldn’t let his numbness take over. It was becoming a more tempting feeling than anger or bitterness. Time was just stretching on, pressing on old wounds, always tempting him towards feeling nothing.

But that would be undoing progress that he’d worked very hard to achieve.

Still, he was tired of measuring time in terms of progress.

Hux was insufferable at times and then overly friendly at others. He’d stopped escaping to his room to have arguments with Paige. They still happened, just not as frequently. He would have discussions openly wherever he’d get the call. On the couch. At the kitchen table. On the balcony. The same old suspicions that he was trying to push him away surfaced and he had to ignore them, or at least give it his best to ignore them. When he’d cool down, focusing on his studies, things would be less rocky. They still talked, but they needed to meet on the right level. Stress didn’t help the matter.

Kylo had to fight to deescalate anything that might turn into an argument. They were both tense about school and their lives and futures in general. Hux would complain every other day about how Kylo had conned him into going to grad school. He was miserable. It cost too much. His advisors hated him. The courses he TA’d were worthless and the students were stupid. He’d have to point out facts rather than rip open emotions to get him into a better mood. It was still strange to be the one talking someone out of a rant, but he could do it on his good days. On bad days, he’d just ignore him and go to the gym or library.

He didn’t tell him that Paige had kissed him.

Mostly because Hux hadn’t told her that he’d done the same to him.

High school hadn’t even been that weird because he was only interested in two people in two vastly different ways.

His own courses were challenging enough to hold his focus. His six-week internship was at a youth detention centre. He saw his own anger on the faces of so many teenagers and saw what could have happened to him if things hadn’t transpired like they did. He never got to speak to them; he could only watch them. His responsibilities were to review cases and evaluate possibilities for treatment or release; he had to look at the facts of the case and not get emotionally attached. That was one bad thing that Agent Jinn had taught him. It seemed like there were only two options for
the troubled kids labelled criminals in that sphere. He sat in on group therapy sessions, finding himself oddly at home listening to young people either get through their issues or refuse to speak. He inwardly hated himself for resisting getting help, real help, for so long.

Or finding that help in two people that he’d burnt out.

Many of the stories were of vicious childhoods filled with abuse and neglect from people who were supposed to take care of them. Hearing about being burnt by a cigarette or beaten with a pipe made his old injuries ache, being brought to life by words and the expressions of pain on their faces. It always made him shift in his chair until he had to pretend to take notes to prevent his leg from bouncing. The crimes that the children committed also mirrored his own in one way or another. He had killed someone: his abuser. He had also helped his abuser hurt others, complying out of fear of being tortured more, or having him go after the only shining light in his life. He was an accomplice too when he’d been the same age as many of the kids there. He’d also been raped and hadn’t stopped others from being destroyed in the same way.

So many alcoholic fathers who tormented their wives and children to the point of breaking.

So many orphans and runaways, turning to vandalism, gangs, stealing and prostitution to take care of themselves when no one else would.

And they just looked at him with the contempt for adults that had been baked into them.

It was strange to be graded and evaluated on mostly doing paperwork and reliving his life’s experiences.

He wasn’t allowed to help them beyond summarizing behaviour and making judgements that would be in no way binding. Analyse the actions, look at the crime, understand the perpetrator on paper and in words.

He had no time to grieve the experience. Pain isn’t meant to be compared, it’s meant to be understood from another perspective, Agent Jinn said when he called him one night after dodging going to the bar with Hux and his weird grad school friends. He sat on the balcony, smoking and talking for three hours. George still sounded certain that he’d make the cut, but if he didn’t, he might use his degree for other things that would help others. He didn’t want to be derailed and he rarely made back-up plans, but maybe it was time to start.

His therapists noticed how he wasn’t arguing as much and asked if he was depressed. Depression was the wrong word and it didn’t matter if he was. He took the prescriptions. He kept up with working out. He interacted with the few people he thought mattered. He went to therapy. He didn’t have time to be depressed to the point of emptiness.

His bachelor thesis had to be completed before Christmas.

And that meant Rey would be back at home, where she belonged.

He didn’t write to her, but wrote about her. They talked every week on Friday evenings, when Hux was out. He told her about the kids at the centre and she shared stories from her school. He had to hide his reaction because it was just the same-old, grating sensation of things being unfair. Some children got sent to a perennial summer camp. Others were in a child-sized jail. The things separating them were committing a crime and getting caught, while also either having a family who loved them or having the wrong sort of family. He had to force himself not to think of it as a static, black and white definition. Some of the children at Rey’s school had committed petty or serious crimes as well. Some of the children at the centre did have families who loved them and
worked hard to care for them.

There was no inherent good or bad.

Except for one man.

His proposal to write about Snoke and other serial killers was turned down just as fast as he submitted it. He still fell into a hole of reading too much about him and listening to too many things about him. He forcibly detached himself from the words when his name and actions were discussed. Ben Solo was dead. He died there with him and was not coming back so how he was described didn’t matter. This wasn’t him anymore.

He broke his phone at the gym, throwing it against the wall when one of the podcasts he was listening to tried to explain how Snoke had been abused as a child too.

Getting all of the data put onto his new phone, he didn’t lose anything.

All of the pictures and texts were still there.

But next time, the store clerk warned, he might not be so lucky.

When had he ever been lucky, he wanted to snap. But instead, he just nodded and was more careful about backing up his phone.

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Hux slumped down across from him in the library and put his head down on the table. “Have I told you lately that I hate you for talking me into this?”

“This morning,” he answered, glancing up from his laptop. They were meeting more often in the education library mostly because it was closer to Hux’s shared grad-student office and he was too lazy to walk to the main library. And he had noticed that fewer of his students hung out there. It was an easy compromise. Whenever Kylo got stuck in writing or reading, he’d change libraries. He made sure to take random spots and move at different times. Whoever was following him would have a harder time keeping track. “But I’ll be joining you soon.”

“What?” Hux lifted his head, squinting.

“Conditional acceptance,” he answered, coldly. “I found out this morning. Once my thesis is defended and the revisions are submitted, I start in January.”

“And you sound utterly thrilled.”

He shrugged. He was more pleased than excited. He didn’t want to tell Rey or his parents yet. It would give his parents an excuse to come visit him to celebrate and Rey would have even more reasons to stay away. The last time that they talked had been more painful than comforting. She was a mentor now. She was helping younger children with their work and their feelings. She really liked what she was doing.

And she was still spending too much time with Casterfo.

All of the dirt that he could dig up on him led him nowhere. He’d worked in schools, published
papers, and led a shining life of caring about others. He’d read his PhD dissertation and found it convincing but could find some things to criticize in his own work.

“You’re still going to have time to proofread this for me when we go home for Thanksgiving, right?” He glanced up from his keyboard. He was mostly just pretending to type, jabbing at random keys to avoid meeting Hux’s eyes.

“Of course,” Hux said, nodding before he grinned. “I’m actually proud of you. The amount of shit you’ve been through and you’re actually doing it.”

“One of my plans was bound to work eventually.” He’d spent most of the day reworking his method’s section. And the theoretical framework also needed to be revised with additional sources. And his advisor, a tiny, ancient professor of criminology and psychology who should have retired twenty years ago, wanted him to cut back his three-page rant about the problematic elements in Casterfo’s dissertation. He had talked him into accepting two paragraphs. That would be a task he’d do before the gym one day to avoid breaking his computer.

“I’m being serious now, Kylo.” Hux’s voice made him meet his eyes. “I give you shit but I’m glad we’re still roommates.”

Mostly because he was still the link between Hux and Paige when they were fighting, he guessed, but he returned the comment with a light smile. He also still paid all of the rent.

“Do you want to grab a beer when I’m done?” he asked, breaking the silent tableau that they’d fallen into.

“Absolutely. How long do you need?”

He shrugged. “Give me a half an hour.”

“Good.” He put his head in his arms against the table. “Wake me up when you’re done carving another hole into Casterfo.”

He wasn’t working on that right now, he wanted to argue but let the comment slide. It was more about fixing some aspects of his analysis. His proposal about journaling to both overcome trauma and attempt to predict future criminal behaviour by childhood abuse victims had been accepted. The idea had come to him during the annual therapy session with Maz. She made an off-hand remark about several other patients who saw both success and failure with writing as much as he did.

She had the sources.

And she owed him.

He still came back to her at the end of the day, after all.

It was hard to limit himself to five cases, but he had to. There were only so many days he could go without sleep, pouring over the documents. Everyone was anonymous but he had to tread lightly when it came to identifying where many of the writers ended up. Maz sent him the sources with names and places redacted. And he couldn't interview them and only use her assessments. She almost sounded pleased about being cited so much.

It would have been academic dishonesty to include his own journals. But many of his methodological arguments started out from remembering how he was thinking when he wrote certain things and his reactions to specific events, both past and at that present, and finding an
appropriate academic source to back it up.

The missing journal from the few months when he was seventeen really could have helped him at that point. But he had over a hundred others to choose from and, unlike many of his sources, his hands were always steady. Dropping the argument about handwriting style and the level of abuse had been a painful darling to kill.

He realized his mind was drifting after twenty minutes, shifting back to walking into the old apartment, and snapped his laptop shut.

Hux sat up at the sound, wiping the drool from his mouth.

He managed to chuckle at how he was still blinking awake when they left the library for his car.

They dropped their bags at home and, as Hux changed because his wouldn’t be caught dead in a bar in his TA sweater, he texted Rey goodnight. She was usually heading to bed then.

He didn’t get a reply right away and bit down his anxiety. Reluctantly, he texted Luke. Yes, she was home. Yes, she was fine. She’d been upset with something earlier that day and had went to bed early.

He’d figure out what was wrong tomorrow.

Give her space. Give her time. Don’t smother her.

They avoided the bars that they used to go to and settled for the pub down the street from their apartment. It was within stumbling distance for Hux. And Kylo too, if he chose.

It was a coin flip at that point what he wanted to do.

The first thing that Hux complained about was still setting a date for the wedding the next summer, or maybe the summer afterwards, and what would happen afterwards. Paige wanted to move in together when they were married. She hated living at home and her parents were driving her crazy. She liked the dance classes that she taught, but she could fall in love with other kids there as well. It made sense to Kylo. It would also allow him live alone for the final year of his Masters.

Or, if his parents and the rest of the meddlers let him, let Rey come and live with him.

He hated that he missed the stupid cat too.

“You haven’t cheated on her again, have you?” Kylo asked, finally saying something other than nodding his head. He was provoking an argument there but he was tired and hinging on dragging up old and painful memories.

Hux narrowed his eyes. “I haven’t. Have you been fooling around with that mystery girl again? The one with the boots.”

“No.” His response was ice. “I want to pretend that never happened. It was unfair to her and unfair to him.”

Hux sipped his beer and sighed. “Have you talked to his mom lately?”

“I send her a letter whenever something hits me. She doesn’t write back so maybe she’s moved and hasn’t told me.” He paused and felt himself zoning out and had to pull himself back. “Rey let’s me
talk about him now so that feels better.”

“That’s a good thing,” he said, quirking a half grin. “Does she still dance? Paige wants to know. Her sister quit this year and their dad is pissed.”

It was easier for Kylo to talk about Rey now too. The distance would hopefully be closed soon. Like with his other plans for the future, he was leaning on just having his studies if she changed her mind. She was allowed to change her mind, Han and Leia would say. Dad was retired now so he’d have more time for her, he would try to argue back. They were taking Grandma up to Luke’s for Thanksgiving so he would be spending the holiday at the Hux’s and whichever Ticos decided to show up, depending on how the wedding negotiations were going.

He didn’t want to tell Hux that the constant barrage of wedding talk made his heart ache mostly because he didn’t want to admit that it did.

Focusing more on what she was doing rather than how she was doing, Kylo went through how much she liked being a mentor. She helped make the schedule for the stables. She danced, she swam. She made Luke dinner every night. That comment made Hux roll his eyes and disappear for another pitcher of beer.

He’d been checking his phone all night and there was still no word from Rey.

Control. He could control himself not to call her while he was drunk.

She’d looked so beautiful the last time he saw her. Her body was stronger and healthier, not strained and mistreated. She was learning how to do her makeup from one of the older girls and it had looked appropriate. It had looked nice.

She was growing up. And she didn’t hate herself as much anymore.

She didn’t need him to protect her. She needed him as something more. Friendship was something easy to give her. They shared a past and would share a future but, as hard as it was for him to admit it, it was up to her to decide the shape.

He’d pushed another person in his life too hard to follow what he wanted and put his wants second.

He had three more beers before the words finally left his mouth. “Did you know he wanted kids?”

Hux levelled his eyes at him at the change in their conversation from football. “Kylo, I really don’t want to see you cry right now because then we can never come here again. Just tell me that you told him that you’d think about it.”

“I can’t remember what I said. For once. I just remember him telling me to forget the conversation because he thought I was uncomfortable.” He finished his glass. “Because I was.”

“Proposals will cause that conversation. Believe me. I had the same talk and I know her parents will be expecting something nine months after the day, but they can dream on. Let me get a real job first, assholes.” Hux was also drunk, waving his hand dramatically. “He would have been a better dad than you. No offense.”

“Why would I be offended when you’re right?”

The conversation degenerated into who was better at which games as kids until he felt himself finally click over onto being on the edge of blacking out. He pushed both of their empty glasses away and got up to pay the tab while he was still able to stand. He was just supposed to write
tomorrow and Hux just had a seminar in the evening. They weren’t being that irresponsible, really. It had also been too long since they’d just hung out and he felt good about it.

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His phone was ringing.

It was still dark out but that didn’t tell him much.

Maybe it was dark because he still felt drunk.

But it was Rey calling so he sat up and cleared his throat, hoping that his panic would knock the sluggishness from his voice.

“What’s wrong?”

He checked the clock. 6 a.m.

And she was sobbing.

“Rey, tell me what’s wrong?”

Casterfo had to have done something. He looked at her too intently. The way he’d touched her arm when he was around them still made the hairs on his arms stand straight up.

She swallowed hard before speaking, but her voice still broke. “Why did you send this to me?”

“Send you what? Rey, I haven’t sent you a letter in months, since we talked.” What the hell was she talking about?

“You always lie to me, Kylo. And why did you write my real last name on the envelope? To remind me that mom and dad aren’t my real parents?” Rage poured off of every word, sending his heart racing.

He’d already snatchéd his laptop off of his desk to look up flights to Michigan as he spoke. “Rey. I swear. I didn’t send you anything.”

“You’re such a liar.”

Then she hung up.

When he called back, his number was blocked again.

Staring at the search bar, he could only blink at his computer screen.

What did she want him to do?
References to the usual past events, including Kylo's past relationships. Sorry for that.

Thanks again for the comments so far. Much love to everyone hanging with me on this utter mess. I was going to have Rey's part right after but then this would have been too long. Sorry for the cliffhanger. I'm going to be teaching again soon so work will take over writing but hopefully this won't be lingering that long.

I'm treading carefully here regarding Rey's (*beleaguered sigh*) canon last name(s). In the outline, in future chapters, Rey will meet her grandparents. This was planned a long ago and I don't want to change it. So I'm just alluding to it rather than using it, like I've done before.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

Rey and Kylo feel the fallout of what was sent to her and what it could mean. Read the tags for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Some days it was easier to talk about what she remembered and how she remembered it. Answering why she remembered was always more complicated.

Of the four years that she spent there, she consciously only had about two years of real feelings and all of them involved Kylo in one way or another: Kylo protecting her or teaching her, caring for her or others, or Kylo bleeding and broken and still trying to keep his mind together for her. The dark evil lurking around them, tormenting them, was just a shadow now, but could still strike out to hurt her when she was feeling weak or down.

Now that she’d spent longer not being there, so many parts of her life remained tainted by those two forces, always clashing within her. It had been eight years of living with that and some days were really and truly freer than others. The hardest days were always balancing how they had both changed over time. Would they be where they were right then and there — separated by miles and a deeper form of distance — if Kylo hadn’t been pulled by his own stubbornness?

Getting over her blame and guilt for Kylo often made it hard to focus on herself.

And that’s where Ransolm became her shining star and new saviour.

Even if Kylo was in her life, not just on paper but on the phone and computer, he still loomed larger over whom she wanted to be.

Healing was confusing.

Sitting in group therapy, or in a café with Ransolm, Rey would keep looking for positives over negatives; she had slowly let that become an important part of her thinking. They had learnt that some memories would be there longer because they were painful; no one chose to be raped, kidnapped, or abused. The choice always came from picking the path of healing over giving into the loneliness that they all felt. She’d heard it all before but hearing how Ransolm would phrase it made it sound more real and actually possible. Still, it was always hard to think about why she was allowed to live when so many other children had suffered and died. Her life wasn’t something that happened solely by chance, and she had to remember that her past wasn’t what was dictating her future. How she dealt with what happened would be what continued to shape what was to come.

But there were still some days that she wanted it all to be over with. She felt the same pull towards being in control of her own life that had always been a constant theme for her since she realized that the world was colder and harsher than the fragile bubble that held her and Kylo.
No wonder Kylo always talked about being normal when they first got out. And then he decided what normal meant to him and followed it into abandon, not questioning whether or not he was right or wrong. Kylo saw something he wanted and wouldn’t give it up until it was taken from him. Even if he had started to think about why his life didn’t match the picture in his head now, he hadn’t really diverted from what he wanted: he wanted to be more than his past, and have her in his life.

But the years between them and before them always got in the way.

The term had started out fine for her. But Kylo showing up and then leaving was the lightning strike that had freed some of her thinking. The last conversation with Kylo before he left back for his own world kept her focused; their constant telephone calls kept the memory from fading fully. She had more responsibilities and helping others made it easier to pretend like her story could make the other kids there feel less ashamed or less guilty. She could help fix them as she did work on herself. There were many things that she still felt were her fault. Her parents had died because of her; they had tried to give her a proper birth and had been tricked. Kylo had tried to help her and then she hadn’t been there when he needed her most. Mom and dad had tried their best and she had been selfish.

But then when she would text or talk to Rose and Finn, it wasn’t just going over how her life began. It was more about how she was doing now and when she was coming home. How was dance going? It was going really well, but she wanted to be in Paige’s class when she heard Rose’s stories about how her sister worked hard to help out. How were the classes there? They were fine and she had a lot of free time to digest the material. Did she really get to ride horses everyday? Well, yeah, if she wanted to. Things were fine and close to perfect, but still not.

And Kylo was still doing his thing, but moving forward at the same time. And mom and dad knew that she was being taken care of. Luke still hadn’t opened up to her and would sometimes leave her alone for a week, but she was good at taking care of herself.

Still, her friends were living a different sort of life. They always had. The types of sadness that she knew were only things that they could imagine. They talked about school or movies. She had to hold back how she didn’t get real grades and had plenty of free time to think about how she was feeling. She would talk about how she was doing and they listened, but they didn’t understand why she still had to stay away. Finn would complain about how much he missed her and that she could make the junior cheerleading team if she wanted to. She had to hold back how he hadn’t seen her dance in over a year. As if he would know. He probably wanted her on the cheer team because he was suddenly really interested in football and was determined to stay on the team even if he was just warming the bench.

Her friends were on one side, but Kylo was on the other. Kylo had liked getting good grades. He worked hard for them. He had been there for so much longer and had pushed himself to do something normal.

Then again, Rey would think, he saw how hard he’d pressed everyone around him to stay on that path.

And she also knew that he didn’t accept the facts around the murder that shattered his normality.

He would only mention it towards the end of their conversations. He was back thinking about it again, probably because of what he was working with or writing about. She had a hard time telling him that a lot of the research that he was describing didn’t make that much sense to her, and all of the names and terms were really complicated, but she’d let him talk. He’d always remember what she had brought up during any earlier conversation. He was listening just as much as he was
talking.

He hadn’t been allowed to be twelve.

Her friends were living as normal twelve year olds.

And she was starting to feel frustrated with how her life there wasn’t normal.

It was mostly about how the people in town would look at her when she said where she went to school. As her freedom increased, so did her shame. The man at the post office hadn’t believed it when she first told him. Apparently, she didn’t look like “those freaks” there. She had cried to Dr. Casterfo for an hour after that remark. So he had to explain again how to put herself in other people’s shoes. When was she finally going to figure that out? She could do it as a kid but now, it was just easier to blame other people for not understanding rather than trying to recognize that the world was filled with other opinions, even though some of them were unfair and hurtful.

When a new woman started working at the post office, and she would still go there even though communication from Kylo wasn’t coming in that form anymore, she just said she was Luke’s niece.

Would everyone always judge her? Ransolm didn’t judge her; he saw what was in her heart and what she had to offer to people. She was a good listener and a good friend.

Her confidence would always falter when she started thinking about how people at her old school must think about her. She had just left, after running away. The bullies that had teased her must have thought that they won.

But Ransolm would tell her again that other people’s opinions of her couldn’t hurt her directly. They could only become a weapon if she let herself be sucked down by them, if she let her imagination be twisted by potential expectations.

Kylo thought she was doing better. He wanted her to come live with him again, not to protect her but to be around her again. He wanted to learn more about who she was now. She was sure that she knew him again now; the softness was back. But he could still drift off into conversation, complaining about how much he hated the phone.

As Thanksgiving break approached, Ransolm also saw how she was pulling away from the other kids. She would help in the stables, talk to others about their troubles in group therapy, but she had also asked for more structured tutoring. Rose sent her the syllabuses for her classes at home. She quietly asked to study more of those things.

Maybe this was what it meant to get better. Maybe realizing that pain and hurt weren’t supposed to keep sucking her down was the real sign that she was getting better.

Down days and tears were still there. But the good things that she had started missing when the hole inside of her started getting too big didn’t vanish like they had before. Keep focusing on that, keep working on that. Keep loving dance. Keep brushing the horses and hearing them breathe in fresh air that was quickly getting colder.

Mom liked how she was getting into clothes more. She could make her own but liked doing something with Leia. It wasn’t the same as shopping in real life, but looking up clothes online together was still a shining feeling of connection.

Mom would ask about her friends.
She’d still secretly mention Ransolm as one of her friends.

Kylo didn’t like when she talked about him. She could hear it in his pauses and sighs. But it didn’t matter what Kylo thought. She’d given him support and affection when he fell in love. It might have faded at the end, but it had been clear in the beginning.

Because she felt, at the bottom of her heart, that Ransolm looked at her in the same way that Poe used to look at Kylo.

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Rey opened up the mailbox, the large red one that Luke let her empty every day, at the end of the street. She yawned, fishing out the envelopes and papers, still deciding if she wanted to go to class that day. Her tutor wasn’t boring but answering questions about her English homework would sometimes drag on. How could Kylo focus on this when she couldn’t?

But there were a parcel slip for her. The rest was just a newspaper and fliers, trying to sell them stuff that they didn’t need in the next town over.

Her new dress was waiting for her at the post office. It had to be.

A couple of weeks ago, her and mom found a great floral dress online. It actually showed off her knees. It would have been better for summer but she had so many nice tights now that it would be fine to wear with her winter boots and coat. She imagined what Ransolm would say and hoped that he would like it. She thought about showing it to him when she ordered it, but instead wanted to keep it a surprise. Her face got warm, despite the chill, as she thought about him again.

The light snow crunched under her feet on the path back to the house.

“You should wear your coat, even if it’s just getting the mail,” Luke called. He was still trying to get the coffee maker to work. She frowned at him, shaking her head. Just ask someone who knows how to fix it. She could probably do it if he asked, but he probably wouldn’t bother to give her the task.

She put the mail on the counter and yawned again. “I have to go to the post office before school. I won’t forget my jacket this time.”

She smiled at the parcel slip and Luke picked up the newspaper, shaking it open. It reminded her of dad reading the paper. They must be the last two people on the planet that cared about the newspaper. Picking at the crumbs of what was left of her bagel, she heard the light thump of something tumbling out of the newspaper. Luke sighed and snatched it off the floor.

“This one is for you too,” he said, handing her the thick, white envelope. “At least, I think it’s for you.”

Grabbing the mail, she sucked in a breath. “It’s Kylo’s handwriting.”

It was. The lettering was careful and concise, in black ink. The loops were clean and even. His return address sat in the corner. It was from him but there was a big mistake there as well.

“Yeah, but he knows your last name.” Luke was giving her the look that meant he wanted her to
keep talking, but didn’t want to pose the question about the name on the envelope. “Well?”

She turned the envelope over, looking for any other information. “Maybe it’s something official.”

As far as she knew, only mom, dad, Kylo, and George knew her real last name. It had been changed for years so the thought that Kylo would have to send anything with that name made her stomach tighten.

“He didn’t say anything about it?”

Shaking her head, she tucked the envelope into her backpack. If she opened it right then, she’d have to answer more of Luke’s questions. She didn’t feel like giving into those blue eyes right then. She’d rather look into another pair.

“I’m going to be late.”

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After the post office, she changed into her new dress in the still-dark dance studio. She had slipped on her tights and then the white- and pink-patterned outfit. It sat so perfectly, setting off her chest. It dipped slightly, revealing her collarbone. Eating more meant that she almost, almost had curves. And with dance, her legs were firm and strong. She wished she was taller but that didn’t matter that much.

The bigger girls there, struggling with their weight, were always jealous of her. And it felt horrible to still be seeking perfection in her own body while it was something that they couldn’t control. They would eat out of sadness. She’d find wrappers hidden in the stables and then talk to Ransolm about it. Any time she found someone struggling even more, it was a chance to talk to him personally to get advice.

But it was mostly a chance to talk to him and him alone, to have him to herself.

He was wearing the blue sweater that day, the one that set off his eyes, when she knocked on his office door.

“Good morning, Rey,” he stood from his desk to greet her, like he always did. The knot in her chest always crimped tighter when he saw her first thing in the morning. “Is that new?”

“Yes, I just got it.” She spun, keeping her toe pointed on her outstretched leg. Did he like her legs? “I really like it.”

He smiled, the skin under his eyes wrinkling. “I’m glad you’re in a good mood. What’s on your schedule today, now that you’re feeling and looking good?”

She latched onto the comment and grinned. She had studying with her tutor, group therapy, mentoring, and probably some other things that she was quickly forgetting in that moment. “I’m pretty busy today.”

“Well,” he said, returning to his desk, “if you’re overwhelmed, you can always come and talk to me. We don’t have a session today, but if I’m here, I’m all yours.”
Nodding, she quietly backed out of the room. When she turned, she wanted to glance over her shoulder to check if he was looking at her but didn’t dare.

 Skipping, she went to her classroom to get ready for studying.

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It was only when she got home, filled from a day of talking and hoping to catch a moment alone with Ransolm, that she remembered the strange envelope from Kylo. She could call and ask him what it was, but decided that it was something he wouldn’t admit the truth about at first.

Sitting down at her desk, with Bee on her lap, she tore it open. It was his handwriting and her address, but the last name still made her nervous. Was it something about being there? Did George tell him something?

There were just two pieces of paper. Unfolding them, she recognized Kylo’s handwriting again. It was something from one of his journals. But they weren’t torn out pages. They were photocopies.

Kylo dated every page. This one was from the autumn when he was seventeen.

His writing was always so neat and anything that he’d misspelt was neatly whited-out and replaced. The tiny, curled letters were always evenly spaced. She liked reading how Kylo wrote but not always what he was writing about. When he’d let her flip through his journals, nothing was really off limits, but that changed over time. She’d know which days to skip just by the subject.

These were pages that she never wanted to read.

...I am still afraid of how my body wants more when he kisses me. He always stops when he knows that I want to go too far, but today we found a way to make it work, to make it happen, to keep us together forever. I know that he doesn’t feel different, but I do. I feel like I have started to kill the thing inside of me that Snoke did to me. It has been building for so long and now I can start understanding it all. I am still worried that I hurt him. He has a way of telling me how he is fine and trying to get me to believe it. He’ll smile and brush my hand, keeping me there with him. But I still know that I hurt him when we were in bed. We both wanted this. We were both ready. I remember the rain on the window and how he touched me. I could not panic. I could not be afraid. And I was, but he cannot know. When I was inside him...

She dropped the paper and pushed it away, slamming her hand on the desk and letting out a small whine that didn’t sound like it was from her own body.

The memory of hearing them in the next room crashed into her head and she jumped from her chair. Bee meowed in response to being tossed to the ground. She didn’t care how he felt in that moment.

She could still hear the gasps and moans from the apartment. They were having sex. Kylo had already hurt her so deeply and then he went and stabbed the knife further.

That had broken them apart, all of the lies and intimate moments that he couldn’t share with her but still flaunted in her face. She didn’t have that connection with Kylo. He didn’t want her body but needed his. He didn’t want to take care of her; he just wanted to take care of him. Wanted to marry him. And now he was still dead and Kylo was still thinking about him and not her.
Avoiding the words on the page, she spotted a line of red felt pen on the final page: *I’ll never love you as much as I loved him.*

It was like all of her progress, all of this moving forward and getting away from being there, imploded inside of her.

-=-

She made dinner like a machine, still hearing the sounds in her head. The male voices, getting off. Kylo wanted her to stay away. This was all it meant. Had he found someone else? Was it Hux? They were living together and clearly would hurt someone like Paige to get what he wanted. He hurt Liza by ignoring her feelings. Her conversation that night had told her as much. Kylo was all about feelings but only his own.

Every movement was like she was outside of her body. Drop the pasta into the water. Watch it boil. Mix the sauce. Watch it boil. Every heartbeat in her ears was only broken by two people moaning as one.

Luke coughed. She hardly heard it.

She mostly poked at her plate at first, still thinking about the rest of what Kylo must have meant for her to read. Luke’s suspicious eyes didn’t lead to questions and she was never more thankful for that.

“I’m done,” she finally said. She’d forced herself to eat her entire plate. It all made her want to throw up. "I am going to bed."

She didn’t even hear Luke grunt his reply before she went to her room.

Staring at Bee on her bed, she swallowed hard. “What is he doing?”

Bee quirked his head and purred, turning over onto his back.

She could tell what he was trying to tell her.

She had to wait until Luke was asleep and then go talk to Ransolm.

He’d be able to fix it.

-=-

Luke usually went for a walk after she went to bed. She ignored Kylo’s text and then Luke’s opening and closing of her door. She found a scrap of luck by his stubborn routines.

She had let everything build inside of her, waiting for him to step out of the house before she took her chance and left. She had piled the pillows under her covers and took off, taking the route towards Ransolm’s house. Luke always went in the opposite direction. She’d left her boots and winter coat, tromping through the snow in sneakers with her spring jacket. It wasn’t far. And the
hate in her chest burnt her the entire way to keep her warm.

It was finally not hate for Poe. She had always thought that it was his fault that Kylo did what he had done. He was the one pressing him for sex, or at least that was what she’d thought before. She used to think it was soothing to see Kylo embrace him or kiss him. She knew that mom had told them about sex but never thought that Kylo liked it.

Maybe he had killed him in the end.

Grasping the papers to her chest, she rang Ransolm’s bell.

Shifting her weight, she straightened her dress and rubbed her arms. It was really too cold to be out in so little.

“Rey?” Ransolm was holding a glass of wine, opening the door with a surprised look on his face. “Come inside, you’re freezing.”

She couldn’t speak. Her mouth wouldn’t work. But her feet could and she stepped into his house.

When the door closed, she sobbed.

“Kylo sent me something.” Her hand shot out with the papers in her fist. “Why did he do this to me?”

Ransolm took the pages, but shook his head. “Take off your shoes. Come on, Rey, you need to get warm.”

He stood there and watched as she slipped off her damp shoes and shrugged off her coat. Her arms still felt stiff.

“All I want is to go back to how it was before,” she finally said. “And he won’t let me. He won’t let me forget.”

Sighing, Ransolm silently touched her shoulder and led her into his home. She’d been there many times before but never this late and never for this reason. What had been comforting before now just made her feel empty. The shiny banister that led to his upper level looked dull now. The warm colours of the art on the wall looked pale. Even stepping into his sitting room, the furniture looked hard instead of comfortable.

He sat down, still not looking at the pages.

“Read it,” she said, leaning against him. He put his arm around her, rubbing her shoulder. She knew that the rage would fade when she was near him. He loved her more than the other students, she knew. He spent more time with her than the others. He wouldn’t open his door for anyone else. Even if she wasn’t special to Kylo anymore, she was special to someone, someone even better.

“I’m going to wait to read it. I want to hear your side first and why you came to me with this rather than your uncle or another one of your friends,” he replied, pulling her closer. “And why you’re here at nearly midnight and freezing.”

She out her hands on his leg, gripping onto it. “He sent me something he knew would hurt me. He always wants to remind me that he lost the love of his stupid life and that I’ll never be good enough. If he’s miserable, then I have to be too.”

Ransolm shifted his hands to warm hers. “Why don’t we put this into context, like we always do.
What have you told him lately? Would anything have upset him?"

He’s jealous, she wanted to say. He’s jealous because I have you now and he has no one. “I haven’t been doing anything different. I’ve been telling him I’m getting better. Maybe he doesn’t want that for me after all.”

“Then if you haven’t done or said anything, then this isn’t your fault. This is something that has happened that we will work on. I promise you, Rey, we can work on this together.” His voice was more calming than Kylo’s. Kylo was an adult but still acted like a child; Ransolm was a man, more like Han or George. Kylo was a fraud.

Ransolm slowly let go of her hands and picked up the papers beside him. She sniffled as he read the torturous and betraying words. Her lip started to tremble when Ransolm flipped to the second page. He read silently, giving away none of his thoughts. He was used to reading things like this. He’d understand it for her. And he’d finally know that she could stay there forever now because there was no going back to Kylo.

“What I see here is a troubled, teenage boy trying to understand his own sexuality and trauma. And he clearly didn’t intend anyone else to read this, not even his partner. These thoughts are vulnerable, something he hates feeling. He was feeling lost and found some balance with someone he loves.” Ransolm’s words weren’t comforting. Her hand tightened in response.

“Why would he send this to me if he didn’t want anyone to read it?” Her voice was shaky, making Ransolm turn. “He sent this to me to hurt me.”

He sighed and shook his head. “Maybe he sent it to tell you that he’s moving on and willing to talk about this side of him?”

“Why are you on his side?” She sat up, pulling away from him. “The only person who stands up to him is Luke. I thought that you were supposed to be for me, not him.”

“Rey,” he answered, meeting her quickly tearing eyes. “There are no sides here.”

“He picked a side!” She stood and folded her arms. Her face felt hot and she hated the look that crossed Ransolm’s handsome face. “He wrote that I’ll never mean as much to him as he did. Maybe he’s so obsessed with him and how he died because he tried to break up with him and he couldn’t deal with hearing no and he snapped and killed him. Kylo killed Snoke when he was fourteen. He’s even stronger now and gets what he wants.”

“You don’t really think that,” Ransolm’s voice shifted into his doctor tone, making her anger pump harder. “You need to ask him why he sent this rather than making up a story in your head that makes this the worst situation possible. Think about things outside of your bubble, Rey. You can do it.”

Whimpering, she slumped down on the chair opposite to him. Just last week she had curled up there, drinking tea and listening to music with him and some of the other girls in her group. Even though he was kind to all of them, his smile was the brightest for her. Now, he was finding reasons for her to still trust Kylo.

Rubbing his face, he stood before kneeling down next to her. “I think I should take you home where you can get some rest and realize that there was a reason for this that he can explain and then you can decide how to really feel about it. I’m not excusing him for something that you could interpret as harmful. Really, Rey, this is something personal to him but shouldn’t be for you. You are two different people. What he’s thinking doesn’t need to be your thoughts.”
The angry red ink still burnt her mind. The sounds from the bedroom still haunted her.

But Ransolm took her hand and her thoughts were quieted by the touch and how he stroked her skin.

“He had a complicated relationship with someone he lost not that long ago. Mourning makes people act irrational.” He smiled at her, still holding her hand. “Remember when we talked about grief? It’s a long road. You don’t need to hold his hand the entire way, but you both need to get to the same destination.”

She saw him lick his lips and was sure she could read his thoughts. He was thankful that she came to him. He saw her as something more than her past. That’s what he just said; the future was where he was telling her to go. He was reminding her to have compassion. He was so kind and perfect.

So she leaned forward to kiss him.

It was soft and delicate, proving to him that she loved him.

But when he pulled back, she didn’t recognize the look on his face. “Why did you do that?”

“Kylo sent me that letter because he’s jealous of how I feel about you,” she blurted out, standing next to him. She tried to reach for him and he took her hands, keeping them from their goal. “Don’t you like me back?”

Ransolm shut his eyes then loosened his grip on her wrists. “Rey. Your feelings are misplaced. I know you’re hurt right now. I care about you like I care for all of my students. But my feelings end there. The love I have for you…Rey, I’m nearly old enough to be your grandfather. Please understand how inappropriate this is.”

She’d been crushed by Kylo and now Ransolm was spitting in the dust. “How can how I feel be inappropriate? You tell us all the time that how we feel is important. This is important to me. How I feel about you is…”

“Think about how I feel for a moment, Rey. You’re my pupil. And I don’t feel the same way. You are angry with Kylo, I know, but I need you to think of us both as people with emotions that can diverge from your own. I can care about you as if you were my daughter. And you can’t confuse my actions with romantic love.” He was watching her heart break before his eyes and swallowed. “I’m not saying this to hurt you. I want you to understand.”

Dropping her head, she sobbed. “Why doesn’t anyone love me?”

He tried to reach for her and she pulled back, snapping her arm out of his reach. Everyone was betraying her. Everyone was against her. Luke left her alone. Kylo was wallowing in lost love. And Ransolm…Ransolm thought she was a pathetic child.

“Where are you going?” He followed her down the hall, towards her escape. “Rey, it’s freezing out. Let me take you home. I am really sorry, Rey, but please…”

“No!” she shouted. “Kylo would never let me hate anything and now I hate everything. I can’t be myself without him and he wants someone else. You’re just like him!”

She watched him look down at her, looking tired and old. She shoved her shoes on and grabbed her coat, fleeing into the cold.

Sprinting into the night, she heard him try to follow her, shouting for her to come back.
If he cared about her so much then why couldn’t they just be together? Why did everything always have to come down to her being on the losing side of love?

So she ran.

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“Get up.” Kylo demanded, opening Hux’s door without knocking. “I might need you to drive me to the airport.”

Groaning, his roommate blinked at him. “Is any morning normal with you?”

“No.” He turned and left the room, pulling out his phone. He should call Luke, but he didn’t want to. He should call mom and dad but he really, really didn’t want to do that.

So he called George. He was talking instantly as the other man answered, sounding more awake than he should. Rey, Rey, Rey. He had to get to her.

“Kylo, slow down.” He was knocked back into focus. “I’m at the airport. I was going to call you later to see if we could meet.”

“You’re here?” His panic was lifted. “You can help me?”

“It’s for work, but yes. Let me call my office and reschedule some things. But you should call your uncle and find a way to talk to Rey. By the time I get there, things will be sorted out.”

Fine, fine. “I need to make sure she’s okay.”

“I know you do,” George said, then he sighed. “Whatever is going on, I’m sure it’s a misunderstanding. You haven’t sent her anything. The last time I spoke with her, she was really positive about the future. But you’re both sensitive. Put yourself in her place and I’ll be there soon.”

Why hadn’t George told him earlier that he was coming into town? “I’ll talk to Luke. Maybe… maybe I’m overreacting and not seeing everything.”

“Exactly.”

He watched as Hux sleepily turned on the coffee machine, still frowning at him. He said goodbye to George and hung up before shrugging.

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on now? I got up, I’m making coffee.” His eyes were bloodshot and his hair was still sticking up at all angles. “Did you even sleep last night?”

He nodded, taking the chair opposite of him at their table. “Rey got something in the mail. She thinks I sent her something. I’m going to call Luke now. I need you to do me a favour.”

“I got up. That’s my favour.”

“Don’t be an asshole.”

Hux scoffed. “You are the definition of an asshole right now. Just tell me what to do so I can do it
and decide if I want to go back to bed again.”

“Call my parents. Ask if they’ve heard from Rey and why she might be upset. I only have one phone.” He glared at his friend as he yawned. It was also a lie because he still had his phone in the bed-side table and kept paying the bill. He’d never lose his voice; he wouldn’t let that happen. Focusing on the present, he ignored how childish Hux was being. “I am being serious right now.”

Hux sighed but still stood, hopefully to get his phone. “You need to stop treating me like him. I don’t just do everything you tell me to do, Kylo. But yeah, fine, I’ll call them.”

Gritting his teeth, he managed to thank him before dialling his uncle. He was demanding but Poe made his own decisions.

“You’re up early,” Luke answered, making him clench his jaw so it hurt. “What’s wrong now?”

Did he ever call people when nothing was happening? How could people just call to talk? It felt banal to discuss his everyday life with anyone aside from Rey and Hux. And Han and Leia. And often enough, George. Luke was underestimating him again. But he couldn’t use that anger against him in that moment. He needed to know Rey was okay.

“Check on Rey, please. She called me and is upset. What did she get in the mail?” He wanted him to understand that he was serious and act on it. He didn’t want an argument in that moment. The sun was just coming up and the coffee machine peeped. He was standing in his kitchen in his underwear. But it didn’t feel real at the same time. He had to focus to put himself back in reality. Reaching out, he brushed his fingers against the hot coffee pot. There it was: the pain.

“Some letter from you. I don’t know what it was about, just that she ate dinner like a zombie and you wrote some weird name instead of, I don’t know, the one you share with her? What was that about?” Luke was rambling and clearly not getting up. He put his palm against the coffee pot and grunted. “Okay, okay, I’m getting up.”

He knew how many steps it was from where Luke slept to Rey’s room. He counted them as he heard silence on the other end.

But the doorbell echoing in the background broke Luke’s stride. He heard him turn to the door and sucked in another breath.

“Well shit.”

“Well shit what?”

“Hang on.”

The sounds were muffled now and he finally pulled his hand away from the coffee pot. He was going to pick it up and smash it if he didn’t step away.

“Ben, you’re about to be angry with me. Let me talk to Casterfo and figure out what’s going on. She’s here, she’s safe but has some explaining to do. Give me fifteen minutes. Don’t, you know, kill yourself.”

Then Luke hung up.

Fuck, he hated him.

Hux was shrugging, clicking off his own phone. “Your parents say hi. And don’t know anything
other than it’s early and you wake them up earlier than the stupid dog. But they want to know that you’re okay. Are you?”

Setting his head back, he counted backwards in Spanish until he could speak without screaming. “It’s fine. She’s okay. Luke will call me back and if he doesn’t, I’m calling the police.”

Shaking his head, Hux took two coffee cups out of the cupboard. He filled both of them and handed him his usual red mug. Their fingers brushed and he felt warmth stir in his body and he tamped it down in an instant. He lived in a vacuum without intimacy. He missed the feeling of Rey touching him in the kitchen of Luke’s awful house. He longed for the smell of Poe’s hair in the morning, deep and entirely him. Hell, he even felt a stab of desperation for Liza and her too-sweet mouth at the fringes of his desperation. As the memories arched through his mind, he realized that he truly deserved what was feeling.

He couldn’t unload this on George.

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged at Hux. “I’m not okay.”

“I know,” Hux answered instantly before sipping at his cup. “Fuck, I make terrible coffee.”

“You kind of do.” He let his shoulders slump and he leaned against him. “I miss talking to him when things like this happen.”

“I know you do. I miss him too. You both solved problems similarly, like coming to the same conclusion but in different ways. He had a kinder view of the world. With what you've been through...I get your perspective too. Sorry for being a jerk before. It's just too fucking early. Hey, call Paige. You can talk to her. She gets you. She's always said to me that she's like the brother she never had. You know her family. Fuck, I think if you had dated her, her dad wouldn’t have hated you as much as he hates me.” Hux let him have the contact, slipping his arm around his waist. “I’m just doing this to be your best friend. You can talk to me. Just don’t you fucking kiss me again.”

“I won’t. I promise,” he managed to say. “I’m sorry I woke you up with my bullshit.”

"It's not bullshit but..." Hux rolled his eyes, pulling away. He strode across the kitchen to their living room and sighed heavily at him. “Seriously, man, stop treating me like him.”

“Why are you saying that?” Now he was getting annoyed. He followed him, staring down at him on the sofa. “I’m not the person I was when I was with him.”

Hux fixed his robe and glared up at him, equally annoyed. He shifted his weight and finally sighed. “Fuck it, I need a smoke.”

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Rey sat and shivered underneath the blanket in her room. Bee kissed her cheek, his tongue scratching at her skin.

She’d slept in the stables, crying most of the night. It was only when she woke up that she decided to call Kylo. Her phone was almost dead but crying to him, telling him what he did hurt her, that it finally made her want to get up. She blocked his number and went to get some water.
That’s when she saw Ransolm rounding the corner and tried to run again.

Instead, he took her home.

She wanted to tell him that the horses needed better heating. It was too cold there.

Even sleeping next to the beautiful black horse that she had fallen in love with that first day hadn’t kept her heart from shrivelling into nothing.

“This is what she showed me,” she heard Ransolm say to Luke. “I don’t know what to really make of it but he’s obviously going through something…”

He was making tea instead of calling Kylo back. Good. But he stepped away, the tea pot lid clinking shut.

“That’s his writing but he’s…he’d never send her this. Or maybe he would. All he does is play games and never takes responsibility for it. Okay, I have to call him again. He hates us both so tell me how to put this on speaker because if he did send this, he deserves to feel like an asshole.” Luke paused and she could hear him and his phone. “He is a fucking asshole.”

“I really don’t think that. He’s seventeen here, but writing like he’s much younger. Perhaps you yourself have been too harsh in judging him.” Ransolm’s voice made her choke back a sob. He was still defending him. How could Luke be the only one on her side?


“Then maybe what you know is flawed.”

The phone started ringing and she covered her ears. She couldn’t hear his voice in that moment, still feeling and smelling herself in the stable.

=-=

“What are you talking about?”

He knew he was on speaker so he let Hux listen too. He could be the vindictive asshole that Luke thought he was and Ransolm could go and fuck himself for his bullshit theories and terrible dissertation.

“Do you want me to read you some of it? Kylo, what are you doing here?” Luke repeated. “And then I let him touch me. It was not like it was before…”

He tossed the phone onto Hux’s lap and jolted from the sofa as Luke’s tinny voice kept reading the words, the ingrained secrets of his sexuality being read aloud from the pages of the journal that had been stolen from him.


“I’m not freaking out!” he snapped.

“You are fucking freaking out! Kylo, what is this?”
He raked an angry hand over his face. Follow the evidence. Follow the order. Get his head together. “Luke. I need you to listen to me.”

There was silence on the other end. He looked at Hux and saw quiet confusion turn to understanding. Thank God he still had him as a friend. No matter who he was, he still had him.

He found the strength to keep talking from whatever he had left in him. Rey had to know that this wasn’t him. And that he didn’t blame her for thinking it was him. He could feel hurt later. Now was for her. “Luke. Stop touching that. I didn’t send it. Put it down and put it in a plastic bag. Get the envelope. Put it in the same bag.”

“Ben, you’re never going to be in the FBI, stop talking like you will…”

“Shut the fuck up and listen to me! This wasn’t me. This is evidence!”

He watched the realization roll over Hux’s face and then saw it click. “Holy shit.”


He was only looking at Hux. “George will be here soon.”

“And here I thought you were crazy this entire time.” Hux smirked and leaned over to grab his coffee cup. “You were right.”

He nodded, but shook off the surge of excitement that was rolling through him. “Let me talk to Rey.”

It was Ransolm who cleared his throat. “She’s heard all of this. What you have to say, you can say to all of us.”

He finally, finally, heard Rey’s voice in the background but couldn’t make out what she said. Grabbing his phone, he switched off the speaker and pressed it to his ear. “This is just for her. Please, Rey. Please, talk to me.”

The seconds slipped by and he could only stare at Hux, cradling his phone and taking in deep and long breaths.

And his heart could beat again when the sound on the other end changed. “Kylo, how could you do this to me?”

“No, Rey, this wasn’t me. Remember? Remember what I was so upset about after he died? Not just losing him and all that he meant to me but another part of who I was with him? This is it. This is the journal that was missing. Someone, someone probably obsessed with our case has it. This could be who killed him. Rey, I love you. My soul is yours. My body was his, but you are so much of me that I don’t want you to think I would ever hurt you like this. Please, Rey. We both love him. And this could help us find out who really killed him.” He couldn’t keep his thoughts straight, following threads he couldn’t knit together drifting freely in the air. “This is the man who killed him. Please believe me.”

A ringing filled his ears in the absence of sound. George had to get this evidence. But Rey needed more. He sucked in a breath and forced himself to speak in the black hole that threatened to suck them both into infinity.

“Rey. I love him. But he’s gone. You’re what saved me, what keeps saving me. You’re my heart. But we both owe him something. Without him, I wouldn’t be still standing. I wouldn’t be here for
You if he hadn’t been him. You keep saving me, Rey. The things on those pages were about him, but I…” he trailed off, losing the words as he heard her sob.

“It really wasn’t you?” Her voice wasn’t her. She was broken. She felt alone. Fuck, he should have just made Hux drive him to the airport.

But if that fucker, that asshole who was out for them, had her address, then she wasn’t safe there.

Casterfo couldn’t keep her safe. Luke was a delusional hermit. Han and Leia could at least get their own fucking mail.

“Rey, when I see you, I promise you can read everything I’ve ever written. And I will tell you why I felt like I did. This is…why would you think I would send this to you? With that name?” He tried not to let the hurt bleed into his voice but he heard himself break. He swallowed and forced himself to keep going. “That’s…I don’t care who you think you should be. Just who you are.”

Rey’s soft breathing made him close his eyes, imagining himself with her. “Are you here?”

“Yes, I am.”

He drifted down into the blackness, pulling her into his arms. This was supposed to break them apart. But instead, he wanted it to be the thing that drew them closer.

“I feel you.”

Exhaling into the phone, he nodded. “I always feel you, Rey.”

Who was he without him? He was alone, broken, and starving for affection and how it felt to share a life with a partner. But without her, he had no soul.

“I need…I need to figure out why I thought this was you.”

He bit back the hurt, his teeth finding the soft lining of his mouth until he tasted blood. “I don’t blame you.”

“You don’t?”

An innocent question from a twelve year old. “I wrote those words. If I…if I had been sent them, about someone else, I would have done the same. Where were you, Rey?”

She was shaking her head. He could hear her hair swishing as she moved. “I went to…Kylo, I’m tired. I need to go to sleep. Bee needs breakfast. Remember him?”

“How could I forget him? Does he still lick your eyes to wake you up.”

A long pause. “Every morning.”

He swallowed. “Rey, I need to talk to George. But this, what you got in the mail, it wasn’t from me. I love you. What I did before, what hurt you, I can’t take that back. But I can listen to you now. In all of the ways that I didn’t listen before.”

She was alone now. He only heart echoes in the background. “Kylo, I’m going to sleep now. Maybe we can talk later.”

“We will talk later.”
He heard her sigh. “I want to talk to George when he gets there.”

“He’ll be here soon,” he said, finally opening his eyes. “I will talk to you later.”

And then she hung up. He didn’t get a final word. No final hug in syllables. Just two beeps on the other end of a phone.

Hux jumped up from the sofa the second the phone drifted from his ear. “What the fuck is happening? That’s all you’ve been ranting about! How it wasn’t that guy in the alley. How he took your fucking book. Christ, every time we get drunk that’s all you can talk about.”

Kylo just sat back and looked up at the storm before him and how he could navigate it in the tattered vessel that he had. “Help me make this not about him.”

Throwing up his hands, Hux grunted. “Of course this is about him! George is going to freak out when he hears this!”

“Hux, no. She’s…she got this. In the mail. She’s the target. Imagine she was a student. How would you react?” He had to speak his language. He had to get him to understand. “Tell me how you would deal with it?”

Narrowing his eyes, Hux stopped to pick up his coffee. “You mean, if I knew what she’d been through and all that? I’d get her to transfer schools. Some weirdo is after her and…yeah…fuck. This is for him and her. But also you. Think about that too.”

Kylo kept his eyes on him. “George will tell us what to do.”

Sighing, Hux fixed his hair, finally. “We will never really be adults, will we?”

Shaking his head, he looked at his phone again. “Never.”

-=-

They showered, one at a time. Kylo didn’t want to miss any phone calls. He didn’t care that he was making Hux do what he wanted but he seemed to be along for the ride.

When George finally called, he couldn’t talk fast enough.

And the agent took it all in before saying that he had to talk to Luke.

And that he would be there soon.

Kylo could only stare at the beam of light drifting in from the balcony and how it always held suspended flakes in the air. When he was there, when he only had himself to depend on, they used to be torturous and hopeful at the same time.

Now, they just represented waiting.

“It was stupid to tell them to put it in a plastic bag,” he said. Hux was letting him chain-smoke freely on the balcony and he was taking every chance he got. “As if he’d leave fingerprints.”

“There could still be something.” For some reason, Hux was getting off on this too. It was
bewildering to see him be animating about something that he’d complained so much about. He did miss and care about him that much. “Do you still want me to call Paige? Get her to talk to Rey?”

“Yeah. Yes.” He sucked in the last of one cigarette and then grabbed and lit another. They should be doing seven hundred other things. “At least, get her to hear it from someone else.”

Hux nodded, leaving him alone with the package.

He lit another one after snuffing out the stub he had been sucking on.

Staring out over the city, he didn’t want to latch onto one emotion over another. Rey was hurting. Rey had been hurt by this and he had caused it.

But this also got him closer to the truth that he’d always known.

“I’m so sorry,” he said to the sky, knowing that there was no one listening. Only fuckups and delusional people talked to ghosts and expected them to listen. And here he was, filling both of those criteria. “Tell me what to do.”

In the distance, he heard a wind chime. Across his waist, he felt a touch.

“Thanks, sweet pea,” he said before snuffing out his cigarette. “I miss you. But she needs me too. I’ll fix it for both of you.”

It was all he could say.

And the silence that followed was what he deserved.

-=-

George hated that he smoked. That was the first thing that he felt and realized when he walked into their apartment. He’d tried to blame it on Hux but George always saw through everything that he did.

He was a guilty little boy, sitting on the edge of a fountain again, asking to see his ID.

“We need to get her home,” George finally said, looking from Hux to him. “And we need to get those papers.”

Kylo sucked in his tears. “So you believe me now?”

George rubbed his eyes. He was so tired of his bullshit. He was sick of this case. Why was he still here? Why did he want to help him? “I always believed you, Kylo. But I just wanted it not to be true.”

He felt like a teenager again, whispering to Hux as George made an angry phone call to a regional office.

“That will be you one day, you fucker,” Hux said.

He elbowed him, probably too hard. “It won’t be if you keep telling me this shit.”
Leaning back against the couch, Hux sighed. “Your ego is really the only thing keeping you going. I can feed it from time to time. But this, this shit? We’re in it. Fuck my thesis. Fuck your thesis. I always thought that he got himself killed but now…”

“Hux,” he managed to say. “I want to punch you. Stop talking.”

His friend gritted his teeth and nodded. “Right. Yeah. Um, sorry.”

Despite how angry he was at him, he still put his head on his shoulder and closed his eyes. Rey needed to come home now. And he somehow needed to be more mature and know more truths than he was worth. Someone was targeting Rey. The same person that had killed him was now after her. She had to be somewhere safe.

He felt himself start to nod off and took the chance to sleep as the soothing tones of George’s voice guided him there.

But his last thought was about how Rey must have not slept the entire night because of him.

Chapter End Notes

Some underage shit here, but it's one sided.

I wish I hadn't made this story be about a plot, but here we are. And Ben is still 22 and Rey is still 12. So there is still a boatload of emotions to get through. I am outlining the next chapter as being a time gloss and then we are back to real life with a wedding...
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

Kylo regresses while Rey progresses. See notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

No matter how far he got, he was still weak. Something could always break him.

The thought that someone would kill Rey knocked him off his focus and with everything that happened next, he had a hard time getting it back.

For Kylo, the main thing that was always pointed out to him when he withdrew into desperate moods was that he expected everyone only to think about him. Like with Luke pointing out how he constantly used people to the point of burn out, he knew in his head that it was true. But in his heart, he was too self-centred to actually believe him. He did think about other people. He did care about other people.

Was it selfish to ask others to think about him? Maybe it was.

It frightened him how easy it was to fall into depression when he slipped from the top of everyone’s lists in the painful march to starting his graduate studies. It really was only a couple of months but it felt like a long year when he looked back at it. He knew why he felt the way that he did but lacked the will to pull himself out of it. He guessed he would just drift into it for a while until he could crawl out of it again.

The twisted reality of it was that he desperately wanted everyone to feel his pain, while also hiding it in plain sight. Inside, he wanted to be the centre and, at the same time, knew that it was wrong. Maybe it was all of the rantings that Snoke had thrown at him. He was always at the brunt of everything in those words and then in the punishment that followed. Or was he? Snoke hated everyone who held power except for himself. And his way to have dominance was to hurt more children. But as long as Kylo wasn’t dead, he was still, somehow, important.

When he wasn’t, he felt like he’d lost all control. Had that really been all that had sustained his dead relationship? The thoughts were circular but he gave a different narrative at therapy. There were other pains and stresses in his family and he diverted to them. The only therapist he couldn’t fool was Maz but he had to reschedule an appointment because of tragedy.

Grandma had a stroke just before Thanksgiving. The memories from the last one, one that was minor compared to the devastation of this attack, pulled again at pains from the past. The last time, they’d all been there. Now, he was alone with his parents, watching his mother fall to pieces before his eyes. He’d text with Hux, but only about his thesis. He wanted him to read through the words of the messages and he never did. But at least he was doing what he wanted by reading his work and criticizing it one last time before he had to submit it.
Grandma looked so small in the bed. He half listened to the doctors, mostly lurking in doorways in between going outside to smoke. His fingers were turning yellowish and the smell would never leave his coat.

Rey was coming but a storm had delayed her by a day. They’d talked on the phone and she said that she wanted to say goodbye on her own. It was a jagged stab but he agreed, letting the wound that had been flayed open with the damned letter continue to grow. He’d be able to stitch it back together when they would finally be together again.

Rey had to heal and she hadn’t really talked to him since that last conversation. He had planned out what to say but none of it ever felt right on paper or in his head. And with grandma, there were really other things to talk about. But he had to tell her that he was over him and make it not be a lie. He was dead. What he wrote about him when they were teenagers was sent by someone hell bent on driving them apart. And it burnt him up inside to know that Rey had been so close into falling into that narrative. She had forgiven him and did understand but until she had to, she didn’t want to talk about it because there were more important things than his feelings.

He missed him, yes. But when he’d wake up at night, he’d always turn first to the side that Rey was supposed to at before flipping to the other side.

It always felt like a hurtful betrayal.

If he could just talk to Rey it would make sense. She’d done so much work and good that she should be able to understand him now. He didn’t want to talk to her about his sex life over the phone but he could when they met again.

She was living with Casterfo. She didn’t come home in the aftermath for him but was doing it now for the family. He didn’t trust him still, but he kept her safe in more ways than one. The main one was that he didn’t have to worry about Luke trying to control her thoughts against him. The therapist was oddly on his side and it disturbed him to know that he’d analyzed his thoughts about sex. Another reason was the fact that Luke couldn’t get his own fucking mail; it meant that Casterfo could intercept anything that looked suspicious. He’d agreed to it, but nothing else came to either address. He knew it wasn’t over but couldn’t let the thought rest.

And if Casterfo had touched her in any way, he would crush his throat.

When he got home, back to the apartment with Hux, the first thing they did was get drunk and talk about death. It wasn’t the old way they used to talk about death, both from when he was fourteen and when he was twenty-one. He knew that grandma wasn’t going to wake up, but Leia still clung to hope that she would. It was a glimmer of faith that he didn’t get the chance to have and he knew it was egotistic to think that way. But that didn’t mean that he didn’t fall into the what ifs.

But Rey would get to say goodbye. Grandma had meant so much to her over the years and they were close. He had stupidly thought nothing like this would happen to them again.

Hux had his own world of thoughts about death. His father had cancer and probably only had a few years left. Their relationship had never fully mended and he rambled on about how he didn’t want to forgive him just because he might be dying. He managed to nod and ask the right questions, but wasn’t really hearing him. He forced himself to mirror his emotions, to try to understand how he was feeling instead of what he was saying.

There were daily updates with no change.

He tried to text Rey how he was feeling but changed them into questions about her instead. The
mask had to be on to protect her and keep her strong. If someone was going to take her from him, then she had to be able to fight back. They both knew the harsher side of death, the one that meant someone having their life taken with violence. They were still strangers in the world of a peaceful, numb end in a hospital bed around family.

So he put his feelings into something else. Hux would glance at his wrists daily as the smoking increased and his sleeping decreased. He’d angrily tug down his sleeves to show just scars.

He was smarter now.

He’d started biting his bicep, spreading a bruise that could easily be blamed on something else, something from the gym. He’d slice up his inner thigh when that didn’t satisfy him, finding an old scar that would hide it with time.

Taking that anger at himself for finding release in self-destruction, he defended his thesis to a top grade. Every theory, method, and even typo, he had a sharp argument in response. His opponent was just another student from his seminar group and she looked shaken by the end of the session. But his advisor didn’t see his replies as angry, only well worded. He told him that. Even after he’d agreed to supervise him for his Masters, parting with supportive and encouraging words, he bit his arm so hard that he broke the skin.

And then he just let himself be absorbed into black.

Grandma’s funeral was the day after Christmas.

The first time he saw Rey was a week before, when they awkwardly hugged in her hospital room before one final goodbye. She was slipping away and it didn’t take long.

The only thing that was endless was how his mother sounded when she cried.

They buried her urn with grandpa, but Rey was allowed to keep a tiny tin for herself.

She had asked him why he wasn’t crying. And he told her that he was trying to be strong for mom. In a way he was. Being tasked with so many things to do, essentially taking her place in decision making with Han about the funeral, the house, the estate, was a beautiful distraction from his aching arm. Rey nodded away the half-truth and hugged him until he actually felt tears forming with every embrace.

He could never talk about what he really wanted to discuss. That was a less comforting diversion.

George had found nothing from the envelope. And he couldn’t be there for a while; with only one new piece of evidence, with no known origin, there was really nothing he could do to connect it to the case. Kylo didn’t feel betrayed; it was subsumed into numbness. He just felt respect; at least George could get away when he couldn’t. He pulled away a little from the agent and only emailed him short updates about his grandmother and his grades, avoiding his worries about whoever was still after them. In the background, he knew that George was still working on the case when he had time. He couldn’t keep using him. He had to solve the problem himself. The things he hid were that he had gotten a hold of the crime scene photos from his old apartment and looked at them everyday.

He’d tell both Rey and Hux he was working, but really, he was going to find something that everyone else missed. He’d sit at the computer and pull out strands of his hair, looking over every detail. He’d already been proven right once. It could happen again.

He wanted to tell her how it had taken him so, so long to understand why he was attracted to him. It
was comfortable. That was what it was at the core. He could fuck up. He always fucked up. He fought with him over nothing. He’d argue to get exactly what he wanted: favour. That was the main thing that Rey had grown out of because he needed her to get away from how he could drag people down. Inwardly, he was enjoying letting the feelings fester again. He had been right to push her away even though it hurt them both deeply. And now that they existed only in a swarm of grief, they could hold on to one another and just drift. If he filled her full of fear and his guilt, then she could lose all of the progress that she had worked so hard for and deserved to keep.

She was grieving. She had to readjust to being at home again, back to being with her friends and going back to school. He had to be there to listen to her about those things and needed to keep his worries inside. The rest of his family was the same. Mom was being told to take early retirement and was resisting it, just as stubborn as he was.

Han was used to looking at paperwork but selling off a piece of his mother’s past must have brought up memories from his own parents sudden death. Kylo would sit with his father at night when he was home and sip whisky and just sigh. Han tried to get him to stop smoking and he said he would when grad school was over. His lungs could take another two years of punishment.

Rey accepted not having a real Christmas, or at least didn’t tell him otherwise. There was no special meal or presents but family, mom said, was what Christmas was really about. Rey smiled brightly and nodded along with her. She was home now and, as long as he was around, she seemed to deal with everything with a confidence that he knew she always held within her, despite how rough the last few years had been. She’d hold mom’s hand and talk to her both as her child, but also as someone who understood mourning. Casterfo had taught her some things that he had tried to impart to her, but had been too clumsy to make them stick. Or he’d just torn them up by being selfish.

When the dog got sick on New Years, there were more tears and hurt when they had to say goodbye to him. It had been the first thing that they had got together when they had got home. He wasn’t even nine years old, but cancer was not picky.

If anyone asked how he felt, he had more than enough excuses to sit in silence and pick at his nails, waiting for a moment to excuse himself from the room to punish his arm until it was black.

His mind wouldn’t let him kill the past; but he could still hurt along the way to the future. As long as someone was out to hurt Rey, he couldn’t fully disappear.

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Kylo loomed in her bedroom doorway, looked at them, and then walked away.

“Why does he keep doing that?” Finn asked, narrowing his eyes.

They were playing a video game together. She’d told mom and dad that she didn’t need birthday presents this year either, but they still gave her the new hand-held system. Since she’d been back, she’d seen how Finn had used it to distract himself and kind of wanted one for herself.

“He’s not okay,” she answered, shrugging even though it hurt her heart. “He’s here for spring break but doesn’t want to do anything but try to study.”

“That kind of sucks.” Finn sat up to glance at her screen. “How do you have so many more points
than me?”

Rey smirked. “I keep beating you on the mini quests.”

They kept playing, not really talking. As long as she didn’t hear Kylo’s door close, she didn’t really want to talk about anything serious.

She hadn’t really had time to adjust to suddenly being back in her house mostly because everything and everyone inside of it was different. Mom wasn’t back at work yet. Most of what she did involved trying to sell her childhood home. The last time they had been there, she went through the entire house with her, memorizing every tale from her childhood. She finally learned that she never grew up with Luke. There were no stories about playing hide and seek together or Christmas Eve jokes between children. All of those things came from grandpa. And even though Luke called grandma mom from time to time, it was more for Leia than anything. It was more than she learned from Luke in one and half years of living with him. But she wasn’t really there for him and now whenever she thought about him, her memory was sour.

If it weren’t for Ransolm, she wouldn’t have been able to handle the wealth of hurt in her home. She emailed and talked to him all of the time, still asking about the other kids until he forced her to talk about herself. Yes, she was sad, but she knew that there was an end to that hurt. Everything took time and she couldn’t force it. She’d forget from time to time and cry herself to sleep, thinking about grandma, Lumpy, and how Kylo seemed like a ghost again, but the next morning she’d go through why she had to keep her head up and talk about her feelings. The school councillor was also helpful and she looked forward to seeing Maz again soon. She was going to show her how much she’d learnt from the program and that it could help so many other kids like her.

Finally, she heard Kylo leave his room to go downstairs to tell mom and dad that he was going out. It was just after dinner. She longed to ask him where he was going to make sure it wasn’t to a bar, but she still held back.

Whatever was wrong, he had to tell her.

The backdoor slammed shut and she watched him go over to Hux’s through her bedroom window, crossing over to the next house.

“Oh, I can even weirder now?” Finn sighed, setting down his device. “I thought he, you know, was normal now or something. Normal like you.”

She felt herself blush but still shook her head. “It’s something that I learnt from Dr Casterfo. Kylo thinks that just by moving forward, everything that’s happened will just disappear. He tries to learn from it and I think he will. It’s just hard right now with…everything.”

It was really everything at that point. Kylo was clearly acting during dinner. He made conversation, but it was mostly about how hard his new program was. The days were full with seminars and lab work or teaching and dealing with people. He complained about having to help Hux and Paige with their wedding planning for next summer. That part he at least sounded more engaged about.

But he kept his promise to be home every weekend to be with her or help mom and dad.

She knew he was waiting for something to push him over the edge, exhausting himself in the process.

“Did you really like it there?” Finn asked and for a moment she confused which there he meant. But Finn’s curious eyes made her realize where he was talking about. He’d gotten cuter in their
time apart, looking more grown up all of a sudden. Rose had also gotten taller and had the best smile. They were still her friends and she was glad that they still liked her. No one blamed her for leaving. Even when the girls at school tried to tease her, she tried to understand what might be going on in their lives. It didn’t make the words hurt less, but she could find some relief in knowing that it wasn’t directly about her.

“It was,” she paused, folding her legs under her, “it was nicer than our school. There was no real pressure because we didn’t get grades, but I was just too far away from my family. And now that my family is smaller, I don’t want to leave it again.”

Bee stretched out beside her and she petted his stomach. She knew that he missed Lumpy too. They always got along before she moved. Bee would sleep on top of Lumpy and cleaned his ears. At least she still had him. Dad said he was too old to take care of a dog when she moved away for college but she knew that he still got up too early and only stopped himself when nothing stirred from the dog bed. She caught him having conversations with Bee a few times. Then, when he fell asleep in front of the television, Bee would curl up on his lap.

“Yeah, our school sucks,” Finn whined. “But next year we get to go to the big school, so that will be different.”

Going to Kylo’s old school would be weird, but at least it would be something that they could talk about.

-=-

“I wish you’d stop smoking.”

It was the first thing that she said when he entered his room. It was long after Finn had gone home, but she was up waiting for him. He didn’t smell like alcohol but the burning scent of tobacco still clung to him.

Kylo smirked. It was at least a different expression than the strange, empty looks from earlier. “You sound like dad. And I will. Once I’m done with school.”

She leaned back on her elbows and shook her head. “I think you’re addicted. It’s going to be hard.”

Resting one shoulder against his closet, he snorted. “Do you want me to shower before bed?”

“Yes,” she replied. “I want to sleep here tonight and you smell really bad.”

After rubbing his eyes, he nodded. “Fine.”

He snatched up his pyjamas from the chair in the corner and disappeared. Normally, Kylo would change in front of her. He had never had a problem with that.

They really needed to talk.

Sitting up, she fixed her shorts and tank top. It was cold but when she thought about the last time she shared Kylo’s bed, he had been overly warm. The distance of the memory made her swallow hard and blink back sudden tears. She was thirteen now, thin and as tall as she should be. She still only came up to Kylo’s chest, but when he slouched it was a good height.
She’d told him how much she missed him when they embraced in grandma’s hospital room and he’d held on too tight, saying the same in return. Since then, they had only talked about other feelings and heartaches rather than how strained they both felt around one another.

At grandma’s funeral, she asked him how many funerals he’d been to, if he remembered going to any before he was taken. He said no: he’d only been to the same number as her. He’d only known what to do at grandpa’s because he read about what to do so he didn’t look stupid. Then he stopped talking and hugged her instead.

She knew what the problem was in that silence and it took her almost three months to get to the point in her own head to be able to talk about it.

In the initial shock of the letter, she wanted to push them both away and never think about them again. Even with the comforting from Ransolm, despite what she had done and how it had embarrassed him, she still didn’t believe that it hadn’t been something that Kylo had chosen to do to her. It took an agent from the FBI knocking on their door to get the letter to believe that it was really someone else. Agent Jinn called her to make sure that she understood that it was important she be aware of everyone around her. He couldn’t be there to protect them both, but it was crucial that she focus on herself and her thoughts about the lighter memories from her childhood. He’d try to take care of Kylo and from that, she thought that Kylo would stay on the course that he’d been following.

But it was clear that his thoughts weren’t just about grandma or his studies.

She heard Kylo sigh when he came back into his room, showered and changed. “Better?”

Come here, she blinked.

Sitting down on the bed, he snorted a laugh when she leaned over to smell his damp hair. It’s almost okay.

Just okay?

“Yeah. Just okay.” He almost smelt like himself but the hint of a cloud was still there.

He pulled her into a half hug. He’d pulled up the sleeves of his shirt to the elbows and she let out a light sigh of relief when she didn’t spot any new cuts, just the lingering hateful scars from before. Smoking was his escape, she guessed. And if she made him promise to quit when he finished college, then he could do it. She had to keep pressing on that faith to bring them together again.

“I missed you,” he said, his voice dropping. “I’m sorry for being…me lately.”

“But you’re not being you,” she replied after drawing on her courage. “Kylo, you’re not okay right now.”

After a long pause, he moved away from her to turn off the light. “Do you still need the lamp on?”

She shook her head and the room went dark. She shifted to get under the covers and he slowly moved in beside her. Once she had her head on his chest, she felt him exhale long and hard before he wrapped his arms around her.

“I guess that place really did work.” He kissed her forehead and tightened his embrace. “I’m proud of you.”

He knew so much of what she’d done in Michigan and she knew what he’d gone through while
they were apart. But what he’d been thinking about the last few months wasn’t really clear.

“I’m not perfect.” She turned her head to look at him. “But I want to keep getting better. It’s almost been nine years and I used to think that it would take forever to get older. Now I wish it had taken longer.”

“You’re so beautiful, Rey.” Reaching up, he brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. “But is it bad that I wish you’d stayed small forever?”

She leaned into his hand and shook her head. “No. It’s okay.”

He closed his eyes and she felt him go into his head when his arms tensed. “I can never forget carrying you from that house, away from him. It took so long to get the locks off and to get out. My hands hurt so much and I couldn’t breathe. I kept thinking he wasn’t dead, that I hadn’t killed him, and he would come after us. You were so small and he was going to hurt and kill you and I couldn’t let that happen.”

“I still remember being scared.” She sighed, setting her head down again to feel his heartbeat. “I remember wondering if I was dead because everything was so different and new. You used to tell the other kids that heaven was about light. So I thought that we were dead when we were in the sun.”

“Do you still believe in heaven?”

Frowning, she watched him open his eyes. “I haven’t for a while. I don’t know when I stopped. I still wish I could see grandma again, but at least I got to say goodbye. She’s gone but I won’t forget her.” Swallowing, she had to get to the topic she wanted to avoid. “You know I won’t forget him either.”

He didn’t react. “You don’t want to talk about him. You don’t have to.”

“But you want to,” she answered. “Kylo, I know that something is wrong. I’ve known since November but too much was happening. I’m sorry I waited for so long to say something. You’re not okay and it’s not just school and grandma.”

“That’s not…” she saw him clench his jaw and then he moved to sit up, forcing her up with him. “You know I love grandma too, right? And that I miss her too? And that my programme is a lot of work? Those things are hard too.”

“Kylo,” she whispered, reaching out to brush his cheek with her still childish hand, “you can tell me what’s wrong. You’re not alone.”

“Neither are you,” he answered but she could scarcely hear him. “But I still made you feel that way.”

“I felt that way,” she insisted. “I might feel that way again one day, but as long as we can talk and we have each other, I know that I’ll never really be.”

He started scratching at his arm, darting his eyes away. He was so much larger now than when he was a teenager, but he still moved in the same way when he was feeling guilty or in pain. “I was always supposed to take care of you and protect you and it’s my fault that someone might want to kill you. He found me once and killed him. And then he found you, so I know that he can do it again. If I don’t find him first then…” She felt tears come to her eyes as he looked at her and sobbed, “then he’ll take you from me too.”
“Oh Kylo.” She wrapped her arms around him and he gripped her tight, feeling him shake in her arms. “We’re safe here. Nothing is going to happen to me. Dad drives me to school. I’m always with my friends. I’m safe even when you’re not here. It’s okay.”

“Nothing was supposed to happen to him either,” he mumbled. “I keep hating myself for pushing you away for him.”

She had to look at him. Sitting back, she gripped both of his hands. It hurt for along time. But I think I understand now. Kylo, that letter hurt at first when I thought it was from you. I know that I said that you didn’t really love him but I know that you did. Otherwise, this wouldn’t hurt so much. Whoever sent me that...I won’t let him try to break us. And I’m not afraid of him.

He only stared back at her, dropping his eyes and not replying. He wiped at his face and shook his head. “I asked dad to get a gun.”

“Will it make you feel better if he did?”

He nodded, even if it was just the softest shake of his head. He needed a haircut she thought as he smoothed back his dark locks to meet her eyes again. “Hux won’t let me get one for the apartment. He thinks I’d use it to kill myself.”

“Did he say that?”

“No.”

He was so wrapped up in himself. She hoped she hadn’t waited too long to talk to him. If he was driving himself into a corner over this then maybe she really did have something to be afraid of. George had said the same but since nothing else had happened, she didn’t want to think that it was real. But if it was pushing Kylo into panic, then she had to hold his hand through it. “Let’s talk to dad tomorrow. So he knows what’s going on.”

“I didn’t want you to be afraid,” he said quickly. “It’s been so hard for me, Rey. I have people I can talk to but I can’t say how I’m feeling because no one believed me before.”

“I’m not afraid, but it’s something that we can talk about together.” She touched his face again, finding lines that hadn’t been there before. “Kylo, I’ll always love you. And now that we’re close again, I want to know who you are now, not just who you’re pretending to be.”

He sighed into her hand, then smirked. “I was actually doing better. I hate myself for getting back to this. But I love you too. And I can...we will figure it out.”

“We’re...we’ll be stronger together.” He looked so soft in the dull light from the street. She was always searching for that side of him and felt warmth in her chest at finding it. The way he met her eyes and how he said we showed her that he wasn’t lost to her yet. “I saved you once before, didn’t I?”

“You’ll always be my angel,” he said, then smiled.

Her heart beat quicker at the look and she hugged him to keep him from seeing her reaction. “Can we go to sleep now?”

He nodded and shifted down the bed again. She was back home, back in his arms. She cuddled next to him and breathed in how strong his body was. His mind might have been shaken, but she had to believe that she’d helped start a trickle of his true thoughts that night.
“You can talk to me too,” he whispered. “Even if I’m like this. I’ll feel worse for not listening to you. I did that to him all of the time.”

“I know,” she replied, snuggling into his arms and breathing him in. “And I promise. Sometimes I feel alone too.”

“I’ll listen so we’re both not alone.” He kissed the top of her head, pulling her into their familiar and safe bubble. “I love you.”

“Love you too.” It was just a start, she thought as she started to fall asleep. But being in his arms made it feel okay to know that no matter how many times they started over, they could always come back together again.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Character death, mentions of past character death, mentions of self harm, standard warnings for everything else, especially the darker tones.

I'm really not sure if this chapter flows well but this is what my brain wanted to write so here we are. I think that the key theme for this whole thing is that grief and recovery is never linear. But that could just be my excuse for being a bad story teller? Thanks for sticking with this in any case.
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Kylo and Rey take a trip to California to confront the past. See chapter notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dreams were never neutral. They were either the best of his memories or the shadows of horror and terror. Even as the years pushed him forward, Kylo could still remember so much of being there. Blood was always on his hands no matter how much older he got and how far away the past was. The parts that mixed in between gave him strength, but now he felt like he might have lost that grip for good.

But maybe it was just being home and comfortable that he was given a kind mix of ghosts for once. Soft tones of grass and trees mixed in with sunshine in gentle waves so he could breathe. It wasn’t just dead leaves and dried blood but hope and promises of a future. First kisses and first times meant that he wouldn’t always be stuck in his head, forever trapped in Snoke’s torment and the pain of loss.

Hope, light, and love. He’d forgotten about those things as life got more and more demanding.

Sighing, he hugged Rey as he finished waking up. She was still asleep, and he fixed her pyjamas as he tucked her back into bed, safe and warm as she should be. Letting go of the distant dream of a far-off Sunday morning spent sharing kisses and coffee in the sunshine of their old apartment hurt more than usual as he looked at how peaceful she was, her hair falling over her face. It had been so long since he had the chance to relive what he’d lost without feeling an ounce of regret for how he neglected what he had.

He watched Rey for a few more moments, taking in how she could still sleep after what he’d presented her with last night. Would she wake up with a headache? It would be his fault if she did.

Han was downstairs, already awake and scrolling through his phone. When had he finally stopped buying the newspaper? Kylo shook his head and poured himself a cup of coffee, lurking in loose pants in the kitchen and staring out the back window at the garage.

“We might have found someone to buy the house,” his father said before sighing. “Don’t tell mom or Rey yet. I want to make sure that the guy is serious. He sounds like a bit of a fruitcake but I try not to judge people. It’s the same guy who took the fish.”

“We could still keep it.” He shrugged and rubbed his eyes, keeping his comment to himself. “I could buy it.”

“Ben, you don’t need to do that.” Han sat up, studying him before sighing. He brushed back his hair and tried to sit up straighter. “This has been really hard on all of us. Thank you for stepping up.
I know that you’re struggling and we haven’t been able to be there for you…”

Letting his head fall forward, Kylo grit his teeth. “It’s up to me to be stronger. And I’ve been… drifting. The students hate me. I have to work on that. But I talked to Rey and I think that maybe I can be better. Again. It’s always again and again. But I can handle owning a house. He would have wanted me to buy it. Grandma and grandpa too.”

He wasn’t only trying to act mature. He meant it. Han looked at him for a moment and he felt him take the comment seriously. Still, it was coffee too early in the morning. Nothing was ever solved that way.

“I don’t know, son. It’s just a house. If your mother wants to let it go then we should just…let it go.” Han had a look of reluctance in his eyes, also not believing what he was saying. “When are you headed back?”

“Tomorrow. I’m behind on a paper but I haven’t been able to think straight.” Being aimless and hurting didn’t work with his long-term goals but it was such a familiar sensation that was almost comfortable. “I want to stay longer but…”

“No, it will be good to get back and think about something else for a change.” Han looked so much older now, reminding him that the world was still moving forward and dragging them all along with it. “Look, I know that you said you didn’t want anything for your birthday but…”

Han was already standing as he was shaking his head. “Han, it’s fine. Really.”

Even though he didn’t want to, he accepted the gift bag and the bottle of champagne that it contained. He’d split it with Hux to thank him for not punching him for being so pathetic. He had been but he was just so exhausted that he couldn’t correct all of his missteps. But today at least, after talking with Rey last night, he could make more of an effort to be present and care rather than just pretending to.

And when he went home, driving Hux back with him because he was too lazy to get a car of his own, he felt some of the fog rolling back. It would take time but he had to trust that all of his fears and anxieties were leading him down the right path.

Rey was safe and taken care of. He had to let some wounds heal on their own but he’d made sure that she had stability as he kept searching for answers that might never come.

-=-

Summer came before Rey had fully digested being home again. Spending time with her friends, working hard in school and enjoying it, along with managing her healing meant that time was sucked away from her. And it wasn’t a good or bad thing, really. There was so much in between that her thoughts could be scattered.

Zorii came to stay with them for a week once school ended. It was a week of catching up and comparing notes and introducing her to Rose and Finn. Finn thought she was the prettiest girl in the world and would stare at her until they all got uncomfortable. After Rose left her house in tears one night, Rey decided that they would just have girls’ nights until Zorii had to go back home to Ransolm. But she was also talking about how she was almost ready to go back to her mom and see if she could handle real school. Her step-father wasn’t there to rape her anymore; he was in jail and
she could use that to help rebuild herself. She could be safe and make her way through the world not as a victim but as a survivor.

But when Zorii went home, and it was just her, Rose, and Finn again, things got weird. She started to feel the same looks from Finn that he’d given Zorii. She wasn’t as pretty as her so, at first, she thought that she was imagining them. Then, on one night when it was just her and him playing video games all night, he leaned over and kissed her. They both had blushed and he tried to ask her to be his girlfriend. It was said in a way that she wanted to flee the room but didn't because she was done running. And she was forced to say that she’d think about it, but they could stay friends until she made up her mind. She hadn’t told anyone, not even Rose. It felt like a terrible secret but Finn was just himself the next time all three of them were together, going swimming and enjoying the sunshine. She wore her first bikini, happy to show off her body and thriving on knowing that her scars were a part of her but didn’t define her.

Finn was Finn. But she didn’t tell Rose what happened. Whatever she had to keep to herself was either important or stupid. Either one would taste sour when everyone knew, if everyone got to know.

It felt okay to keep things from Kylo now that she was almost old enough. Especially if they weren’t serious. The things he always kept were too real, too much in his head.

She’d made Kylo cut back on his time at their house in the time leading up to summer. His workload was too massive and he took too much time travelling back and forth. Once grandma’s house was sold, Han suggested that he buy a new car with his inheritance. Of course it took convincing, but he eventually agreed. But they put his old car in storage for her rather than selling it. He wanted to keep it. She could have it when she was old enough and he didn’t have to let it go.

He was teaching spring courses and when they’d talk, she sometimes wondered if he was teaching students who were her age. They couldn’t follow directions and always needed extra explanations that frustrated him. They were supposed to be university students; they should be capable of figuring things out by themselves. He was frustrated but he also seemed pleased to have them as a distraction. He was slipping into an authority role and she could hear it in his voice that he was revelling in his new status.

She’d still text him when she had a nightmare or a particular memory stung harder than usual. She knew that Kylo was trying to share more but would still withdraw on particular days. There were too many dark anniversaries on the fringes of summer’s arrival that it was hard to ignore the silences.

When he finally did come home, she told him that she didn’t want to stay there the entire time. She had been returning to an old idea about the past and whether or not she should let it go. The memories of being eleven with just an address and too much pain to guide her surfaced more and more throughout the spring. She was back in the place that she called home but her old home, the place where she had been born and had lived for the first four years of her life, was forever unknowable from where she was. There were people in the world that might be able to answer her questions.

Next year was the ten-year mark. Next year, she knew that the memories would have faded even more. Even though her moods and reactions were still trained by them, forcing her into tears or frustration, she wanted to think of a day when her entire life wasn’t built on old ghosts.

So she asked Kylo to take her on a vacation.

It had been too long since they’d been in California.
It was the right address. It matched the one that George had sent him after confirming that the house was still under the same name. The tones of the email meant that they were right in what they were doing, but maybe waiting would have also been healthy. If George was firmly against it, he would have flat-out told him. Still, George made it clear to them that surprises weren’t good, both for the family and for the two of them. Going back when they should be moving forward was also something that might hold back more healing.

So why were they both just sitting in the rental car across the street, staring at the house?

Mostly because George was right, except for the fact that moving on meant leaving something behind.

Rey texted Leia again and put her phone down. “She thinks we should just get it over with.”

“Me too,” he answered, not really thinking. He was hoping to see more than just movement in the windows. He wanted someone to come out of the neat and well-maintained bungalow in a tidy and bright California neighbourhood. It was in a smaller city, south of where they had been found. He didn’t have any motivation to drive north and see the grove of trees. They’d be taller now. He was more than willing to wait another year to see how much they’d changed. Everything was always growing, transforming steadily over time. The trees were reaching for the sky but he knew that the roots were growing deeper too, almost reaching the buried fears that were just below the surface.

So many dreams and futures went into the ground there. He and Rey were the only ones that were allowed to walk in the world of the living while everything else was static and underground.

His arm ached. Even as his world levelled out, filled with teaching, researching, and socializing, he liked having his secret release. Hux had noticed once and had spent the next week being extremely agreeable and reliable. His roommate had cancelled plans with his friends to spend time with him until Kylo convinced him that it really had been an accident at the gym and it was getting better. Still, seeing Hux gradually mature put his childishness more on display. Competitive as always, Kylo refused to be left behind and bit back many arguments and petty remarks in favour of more constructive conversations.

But one night he hadn’t been able to hold back being an asshole. He was due to leave the next week, to take Rey to California, and he got a very unwelcome surprise. Hux and Paige had coerced him into stuffing envelopes for the Save the Date cards, sitting in her parent’s basement like they used to do when they were kids. He’d miserably carried out his task, at least thankful they had booze to make the ordeal go faster. When he got to the last page of names, he found another reason to be suspicious of Hux’s attitude throughout the spring. Liza’s name was next to his for the wedding party. Apparently, in her time being bored out of her mind in their home city, Paige and Liza had reconnected. That fucking bitch was weaselling her way back into his life and it was the last name he wanted next to his on any list. This was Spanish class all over again, watching her butcher words and not understand gender.

He left without saying anything and ignored their texts for two days until they apologized for not telling him sooner. He couldn’t quit their wedding over some old high school shit; he let them believe that was the reason for his active aggression. But now he’d have to deal with her smug, idiotic face as the process dragged on.
At least Rey and Rose were in the wedding party. He had vague memories of Hux’s groomsmen being disagreeable assholes so at least he was in good company.

Wherever Kylo went, he could only see his mistakes.

“What if they don’t like me?” Rey asked, pulling him back into the moment. He was there for her and shouldn’t be dwelling on things that he couldn’t change. Hux and Paige had their reasons for making Liza part of the day.

He lightly rubbed Rey’s shoulder. She’d worn a new dress, one that she’d helped Leia make. The bright sunflowers would make anyone fall in love with her he wanted to say but stopped himself. “We don’t have to talk to them. Would it feel better knowing or not knowing?”

She chewed on her lip. “Are we supposed to know everything about ourselves?”

Tilting his head, he looked back at the house. There was an older, but still nicely maintained car in the drive. The lawn was well looked after. There were rose bushes and a neat walkway. It seemed like the place where a real family would live; there would be Sunday dinners and weekly coffee with the neighbours. But his imagination always turned to the hidden things in those pictures. Maybe it was a couple that only stayed together because they were reminded of what they lost. Maybe ritual was the only thing holding them together. There were no kisses and hugs, only duty out of routine.

“I always think about how the other kids would always cry for their parents. And when they would ask about mine, I wouldn’t tell them anything because I hated them for letting me get taken. I spent seven years telling myself that they were awful people, but all I wanted was Leia and Han to find me and give me a hug and tell me that it would be okay.” He swallowed, old guilt dusting itself off in his mind. “Now we’ve been out longer than we were there and I still wonder if it would have hurt more if I didn’t have it in my mind that they didn’t want me. But your parents wanted you, Rey. They wouldn’t have fallen for Snoke’s lies if they didn’t want you to be born clean and safe in a hospital. We’ll never know who you would have been with them, but anyone that doesn’t love you for who you are now doesn’t deserve a place in your heart.”

Her eyes were shimmering when she looked at him. “I’m…I’m glad you’re doing better. I couldn’t have done this without you. Whoever my grandparents are, they’re…they’re a part of me, but you made me who I am. You and our family.”

Was he doing better? Maybe he was just getting better at hiding his troubles and worries. When Rey made him stop coming home every weekend, he found himself surfacing. He’d done more things rather than feel sorry for himself. Despite the hiccup over the Liza situation, his relationship with Hux had stabilized. He talked more with him and Hux, to his credit, stopped making him feel uncomfortable about wanting to talk about him or Rey most of the time. The comments of stop treating me like him were now more in jest than anything. The disgusting and age-old notion that he was demanding and manipulative was always shoved in his face. He didn’t need that for the rest of his life as he dragged himself through the process of moving on.

“No matter what happens, our family is…ours.” He stopped to clear his throat. His urge to feel something other than sorrow was slowly dragging him down. Clenching his fist against his leg, he focused on Rey. “No matter what, Rey.”

She nodded before sitting up and reaching for him, pulling him into a solid hug. “Thank you for bringing me here. Can you…can you wait here?”

Unsure of what to say, he let her go. She left the car and then, after carefully glancing from side to
side, she crossed the street.

And he had to wait, fighting the urge to punish himself for not saying all of the right things and constantly thinking about himself rather than her feelings.

He watched her press the doorbell, staring at her back and waiting. Driving his short nails into his palm, he could see how her breathing increased from the distance. He should have been more comforting, more understanding. He shouldn’t have just talked about himself.

“How many times did you call me a self-centered asshole?” he mumbled absently.

Finally, the door opened and he sat up. An old man with a weathered face and white hair answered. He didn’t look unkind, but he didn’t entirely look like someone warm either. He studied how Rey’s ponytail bobbed as she spoke before snapping his eyes for the man’s reaction.

He could read some of what he was saying but stopped, knowing that he would hear it from Rey. He turned back to watching her instead. She crossed her arms, her shoulders going rigid before slacking again. Dread took him when the man touched her shoulder and gestured for her to come inside.

She glanced over her shoulder, nodding to him.

She went inside and the door shut.

And he bit his arm through his sweater and let out a muffled scream.

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They sat on the beach, just her and Kylo. The sun was setting and it was hard to take her eyes off of the swirls of red and gold to look at the picture in her hands. The faces that looked back at her were younger than Kylo was now, but held her features. At least she had this piece of them, taken when they were trying to get clean and had tried to be around their family again. Her father had reached out to his and the picture showed two young people, building a puzzle together on a kitchen table. It was taken two years before she was born.

“At least I know what they look like now,” she said, breaking the silence.

Kylo kept his eyes on the horizon. “What else did he say?”

When she got back to the car, Kylo was standing outside, nervously smoking. But he stopped what he was doing when she started to sob, holding her so tightly that she thought she’d disappear into him.

So they drove to the shore. She hadn’t said anything, just clutching the picture. The walk across the sand had been hand in hand, Kylo constantly casting careful looks and blinking questions about how she was doing, what she was feeling. Her tears could only tell him so much.

“That…that it was nice to meet me. And he was glad that I have a new family.” She traced her father’s face with her free hand. The other one was on Kylo’s leg. She was sure that they wouldn’t get the cleaning deposit back on the car but Kylo didn’t seem to care. “His wife died two years ago and he’s alone now but…but wants it that way. He just wants to die. He’s lost too much. And
seeing me only reminded him of that. He told me that he’d throw away any letter that I’d send to him and would hang up the phone if I tried to call. He wasn’t mean or anything, but that’s what he wanted.”

“Did he blame you?” Kylo finally turned to look at the picture in her hands before meeting her eyes. *Did it hurt*, his tone intended.

“No, I don’t think so. He didn’t say. He asked…he asked if I liked horses. My mom liked them. She was a nice girl before my father…made her bad. He seemed more mad at him than me.” Her eyes were blurring and she wiped at her eyes. “Why do people…why do some people only see the pain in the world and don’t decide to get better?”

He could only stare at her and she wanted to take back the question in an instant. The white of his scars still peaked out from under the sleeves of his shirt.

“Do you want an honest answer?” His eyes weren’t tearing. They were firm and bore into her. He wasn’t judging her. But he needed to know that she was certain. Looking back at her picture, she lightly shook her head yes.

He shifted his head back to the sunset. It would be dark soon. They had to fly home in two days. But right then, they were there.

“There are as many reasons as there are people in the world,” he started, then started rubbing his wrist. She let him. “I’ve read and learned so much, just trying to figure myself out. I’ve talked to George, my therapists, my instructors, and everyone has a different answer to why someone does something harmful to themselves. I work out too much and probably drink too much. And you know I smoke too much…”

“I still want you to quit,” she interrupted. “And I know you will when you’re done school.”

Quirking his head back to her, he smiled. “I will. I promise. And once I’m done living with Hux, I won’t drink as much either. It’s not his fault but it’s an easy excuse.”

“You can keep working out, though.” She managed to grin, trying to bring back some of the fading sun.

He matched her look and reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. When they sat down on the beach, her head started pounding. With her hair loose, she could truly feel the breeze that was drifting in, spraying them with faint hints of salt.

“I have this small goal of crushing the fitness test,” he said, softness still lining his face. But the look receded. His hand drifted to her shoulder, warming it with his palm. “Rey, I’d never leave you but when I thought you were both gone…it’s still so fresh in my mind. It felt like an endless blackness that kept swallowing me. I wanted to be stronger. I wanted to be better but I was too weak. My heart and soul were gone. Whatever was left of me wanted to go with them. In the moment, there was nothing else but what I was feeling. I knew where I was, but it wasn’t real. It was like I was already gone and only taunting myself by still breathing. We’ve talked about this, you know this. But the choices that your parents made were probably out of pain too. It could be real or imagined, but…we’re all only looking for something that makes us feel like we’re real, that someone loves us, that we’re not alone. Or we’re just looking for something that helps us forget those feelings.”

She longed to tell him that he sounded so much like how he used to be, when he had all of the answers and he was her world. She also wanted to tell him that he sounded like Ransolm. But she
also knew that he would just hate that. The few times that they’d interacted always ended with Kylo being angry or bitter about her feelings for him. But this was Kylo showing that he could be better, that he had learnt so much from what he was studying. When she was a child, this was the boy who would have the answers and soothe her hurt. Despite what had happened, he was still in there. She hadn’t lost him by her stupid mistakes.

She leaned over and hugged him, enveloped in his strong arms. “Don’t ever leave me.”

“I won’t, angel. Not again.”

She sat back and took his hand. “He would have been so mad at you for hurting yourself.”

Kylo snorted. “Of course he would have been. I told him I’d do it. I know it sounds stupid, but I still talk to him.”

“I miss his hugs.” She leaned against him, starting to feel the chill.

“He never got to see this ocean.”

Closing her eyes, she bit her lip to keep from crying. “My parents only knew this ocean.”

Kylo shook his head and she heard him swear to himself. “I’m sorry, Rey. I started drifting again… this is for you and I…”

“No, Kylo,” she said, not moving but feeling his arm come around her. “You’re listening. You’re talking. When we’re in therapy, the best answers come from the heart. I’m sorry that yours is still broken.”

His embrace tightened for a second and she heard him swallow. “Did I tell you I went on a date?”

She sat back and knew that she made a face because Kylo almost laughed at her.

“I didn’t…I guess I didn’t tell you because it went nowhere. Hux set it up, when I stopped being… when I was in a better mood, I guess.” Kylo didn’t look hurt or drawn into himself. He was talking about this because he thought it was funny. She had missed when he would joke about things. “It’s like he had a checklist of things not to talk about. Don’t talk about the dead fiancé. Don’t talk about being kidnapped. Don’t talk about murder. Instead, he just talked about himself and I left. I hope he had doesn’t like people on that fucking checklist.”

She wrinkled her nose. “That sounds awful. But I guess Hux was trying.”

“Sometimes it’s like he doesn’t even know me. I know that he knows what he’s seen but I… he doesn’t understand that I’m not…” he trailed off, closing his eyes to sigh. “He wasn’t ugly, but I didn’t feel anything.”

Kylo was letting her in. He was talking about this. She had to tell him.

“Finn kissed me.”

His face didn’t break like she thought it would. “What did you think?”

“I thought that…I needed time to think. I mean…I’m thirteen. And he’s my friend.” She tried to smile and saw how Kylo’s eyes changed.

“Friends are…a place to start. But…it’s good you told me. Don’t get carried away.” He turned away again. In his silence, she understood what he meant.
Together, they took in the ocean as night swept in. When she started falling asleep, worn down by the day and their words, Kylo scooped her up from the sand and cradled her in his arms to the car. She was nodding off, but also pretending to sleep, finding peace in absorbing him.

His arms were strong but his hair was too long. He needed to get it cut. That was a sign he wasn’t doing well. He used to be more careful with things like that.

She fell asleep in the car, listening to the night fly by as her protector took her home.

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Almost year later, as they both stood and watched George speak at the solemn ten-year reunion amongst the maturing trees, she caught the face of her grandfather at the back of the crowd.

He nodded.

And Rey nicked her head in return.

Chapter End Notes

This is my effort to side step and still include canon. Oh and past references to everything in the tags. I'm slowly dragging us into Reylo territory. Thanks for hanging with me.

Note to past Sarah from future Sarah: You keep forgetting that you wrote this chapter. What is WRONG with your BRAIN?
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Kylo gets a challenge from Agent Jinn, then Rey and Kylo are challenged by Hux's wedding.

Read the tags and notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kylo looked from his computer to his phone. He’d been annoyed all evening by the constant buzzing. Paige, Liza, and even Hux never let him just work and it made him want to toss his phone out the window. It was always about the wedding; there was always some detail that they couldn’t figure out on their own.

They’d been back from California for a few weeks, almost a month. He’d gotten out of spring semester teaching given the task of finishing his thesis. If he could defend in the fall then he’d be free to move on from school and closer to his goal. He’d finished his courses, all with more or less perfect grades in the courses that counted. Now it was going to come down to completing his thesis on time; the work had dragged during the first term but after the haze of recovery, he doubled down on his analysis. Writing always came easy to him but the damned editing was always a challenge. Doing all of that in time would be a great relief. One more thing to strike from the checklist.

The last year had been a blur. But his focus was almost back where it needed to be. Seeing George in California had been a good boost for his confidence, even though it had been brief. Even as they went through the motions of the ceremony, he still thought about the last time he’d been there with Rey. It had been a bittersweet trip. He ached with pride over how Rey dealt with being shut out by her family. But that meant that she would be his forever and he wouldn’t have to share her.

Finally, he found the will to look at his phone.

How soon can you get to Toronto?

It was like George had read his mind, summoning him to contact him.

I am not really busy. He typed back the response. He actually was but this was George.

A different tone sounded. There was a plane booking for him the next day in his email.

Then I will see you tomorrow. Wear a suit. You will be consulting with me.

A thrill close to arousal coursed through his body.

He stared at the message and typed his response.
There was no further reply, but he was instantly drawn onto the mystery of what it could be. Consulting. Out of the country, international consulting. He was really thankful that Leia reminded him to keep up with his passport and not let it expire. It was strange to see how his picture had changed over the year and how thin he used to be. At least his hair had gotten better. It had hid his ears for a long time now, but he had at least figured out how to style it so it was almost not horrible.

He knocked on Rey’s door and had to roll his eyes at the giggling from within before he was allowed to enter.

He hadn’t realized Liza had come by. She was painting Rey’s nails and they both looked up at him, grinning. His anticipation was almost damped by looking at her.

“Don’t you have friends your own age?” he asked, narrowing his eyes.

“Don’t you?” She stuck her tongue out at him and he shook off the look, turning to Rey.

“George texted me. I’m going to Toronto. I don’t know how long I will be gone or what it’s about.” He tried not to sound anxious or excited but he was both at the same time. It was a sensation that he’d missed feeling.

He hadn’t harmed himself in months. He still hadn’t told anyone that he had been, but now that he was recovering, he didn’t feel the need to say anything. His thesis would be his release for the time being, but the temptation of having something else to think about made it hard to control his excitement. Something other than Hux’s annoying wedding.

“Is it a case?” Rey’s smile from earlier faded slightly and she tilted her head. “Is it our case?”

Shaking his head, he had to shrug, trying to tame the wild energy starting to build within him again. “He just wanted me to come. I’m going to pack.”

Still, he glared at Liza one last time before going back to his room. He only had to survive one more month until the wedding and she’d finally be out of his life. He didn’t care if she was Rey’s friend or not. He could actually ignore her when they didn’t have anything that mattered to them to connect them. He could do this for Hux and Paige. He really didn’t have many friends left to lose and surviving the next month was something he really needed to do.

But he secretly hoped that going to see George would give him a further and welcomed distraction from the banality of weddings and school.

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“Didn’t he just see that FBI guy?” Liza went back to painting her toes, carefully dragging the soft brush to the tip of her nail. She wiggled her drying feet and smiled at her. “This is a nice colour. I love your taste.”

Rey liked being friends with Liza. She was older, fancier, and liked helping her pick out clothing, complimenting everything that she thought was nice and keeping her from making any tragic decisions. Being in the wedding party had been exhilarating but also confusing. She and Rose were both too young but Paige wanted them anyway. And Hux seemed to enjoy how much they were annoying Kylo but, in turn, how he seemed to be managing it. Their lives were almost normal,
surrounded by friends doing normal things. She would walk the halls of his high school, imagining how he must have felt in those first shaky years. Holdo would ask about him, how he was doing. She’d smile brightly when Rey could proudly say how much better he was doing, even though he would have hated her describing him like that. But he was. He was more relaxed being home this summer than he had been last year.

Knowing that she could leave part of her past behind in California meant it was easier to think about school and love in her house. The dark shadows could be willed away when life pulsed how it should. She still missed grandma and her dog everyday, but the hurt felt further away. Mom was smiling more. Dad could still be grumpy, but there were always many hugs and laughs at the same time.

“Yeah, I like it.” She tried to smile but returned to thinking about George. “George was a little busy when we were in California. We only spent a little time with him. Maybe he’s worried about Kylo. Maybe he saw something that I’ve missed.”

Blowing on her nails, Liza sighed. “He should bring someone to the wedding. He’s just going to mope around and that’s really boring. Has he even thought about trying to date again? I mean, he’s not getting any deader.”

She really didn’t like Liza talking about them that way but hid her dark thought. “He doesn’t have time, he says. And I believe him.”

Liza flipped her hair, looking like she was about to say something but then seemed to change her mind. “I don’t. He’s just looking for sympathy.”

In a way, Kylo was making himself look more tragic than he was. It had been three years and Kylo was stuck in his own head but not to the same degree he had been; it was only on quiet or sad days that she would feel him go distant. She would always cherish the peaceful times that they had now when she could sit beside him and watch him work through writing a tough or theoretical problem. His eyes would get wide with realization from time to time and he’d type rapidly, grunting to himself in strange satisfaction. Then he’d look at her and grin, the smile hitting her hard. But her thoughts also made her blush and she had to turn her mind to something else. “I asked Finn to be my date.”

Liza was looking at her with curious eyes again. They talked a lot about Kylo, but Finn as well. It wasn’t just because there was so much about Kylo that Liza didn’t need to know about, Rey told herself. Hanging out with him was still nice. He wasn’t pushing her to do anything and she’d sometimes let him hold her hand. Rose was sometimes jealous, but they did try to talk about it. She had a crush on an older boy and was frustrated about not getting enough attention. Growing up and getting over her old feelings sometimes made her ache. She remembered when all she thought about was being alone and felt guilty over those old feelings now that she was fourteen and almost had a boyfriend. Almost.

“I can’t wait for the party. It’s been so much fun to get to know Hux again. He’s actually almost normal. I sort of miss hanging out with them like we did in high school but it’s really weird how different we are.” Liza bit her lip. “Except for Kylo. He’s the same.”

Rey shook her head. “I don’t think he’s the same. I’m the same age now as he was when we got out. It’s been…it’s been a really weird feeling.”

Liza didn’t seem to understand what she was talking about.

They hung out for a little while longer before Liza got a text and had to leave, giggling over her
phone and typing rapidly. It was almost time for bed but since it was summer, she really didn’t have a proper bedtime anymore. Han would sometimes drift into her room and remind her not to stay up all night staring at a screen. Leia didn’t seem to mind if she was awake for too long as long as she got up in the morning. Kylo would stay up all night, writing or typing, and she tried to avoid seeing him look more and more stressed out over what he was working on. There were more moments of tension than sweet smiles of discovery.

She had Bee in her arms when she went to his room.

She wasn’t really surprised to see mom on Kylo’s bed, helping him with his suitcase, basically repacking it.

“He could at least have told you how long you’ll be gone,” Leia complained. “That’s not really like him.”

“I think it’s urgent. He texts when things are…heavy. Leia, I really only need the suit. I can buy whatever when I’m there.” He watched her readjust what he’d just tossed into his suitcase before looking up at her. “Why are you hanging out with that woman?”

“Ben,” Leia said, scolding him. “You were friends with her once. Why can’t you just get along with her?”

He rolled his eyes, still waiting for Rey’s answer. She could only manage a shrug. “I like her, I guess. She remembers when I was a little kid but doesn’t treat me that way. We’re going to make all of the food for the bridal shower next weekend. It’s going to be really fun.”

Kylo looked down at his suitcase and shook his head. “I can’t wait until this over and I never have to spend another second in the same room as her again.”

He was being so stubborn and it bothered her. He at least tried to get along with her other friends, even though his eyes were always suspicious of Finn. He had gotten to have a life and he was trying his best to let her have one too. Part of her was always torn about Kylo moving on. Hux was still trying to set him up with people and he wasn’t accepting the invitations any longer. He would sometimes trick him into a date and he would text her the entire time, pointing out all of the things wrong with the person. He was okay being alone. He had his work, he had his goals. When they’d talk about it, he always said that he had her and his plan. He didn’t need anything else.

Nothing had happened at the ceremony in California other than the normal aches of remembering and hurt of forgetting. Kylo had been so sure that whoever had taunted them would make themselves known again but no one had come, or at least no one they could see. There were fewer parents at the ceremony this year. In the five years since the last event they’d attended, many of them had found new lives in their mourning. Many of them didn’t want to reopen the wound of their loss. She understood, or at least tried to accept, the pain caused by the fact that she rarely dreamed of the children’s faces anymore. Snoke was a distant nightmare that she could shudder through, trying to press forward to a brighter morning.

When Kylo left the next day, she made him promise that he’d tell her everything when he got back. He couldn’t leave anything out. And he said he wouldn’t.

Inside, she knew that one day soon, Kylo would get on a plane and move to a new city. He didn’t ask anymore about when she would come live with him. She had her friends and had to take care of mom and dad. Soon enough, she’d have to decide what she wanted again. If Kylo was strong enough to handle being alone, she’d have to let him.
“What do you think?”

Kylo looked up from studying the crime scene. It was long from being fresh; the bodies were long gone but the echoes of decomposition had made him almost retch at first. He swallowed it down, desperate for George and the other officers not to see. He steeled his face, only scowling when he entered the dilapidated house.

It had been the first real expanse of lingering death that he’d seen in three years. The one from ten years ago also still lurked in his dreams. It was hard not be jolted back into too many old memories.

Everything was still being catalogued, dozens of protective-clothed technicians mapping out the ground beneath the floorboards.

It had all been torn up.

They stood on the edge, looking down at the shallow pit, cut off by gold tape.

The guest badge on his suit coat gave him some confidence to speak his mind. George had presented him to the OPP task force as a consultant as well. They were both there representing the FBI. He was so close to living in a world that had only been a fantasy ten years ago when he slipped on the FBI sweater in the hospital room. Things had been moving too quickly for him to ask how George had gotten him the assignment, but he knew it was short term. He’d be leaving in a week. This was just a taste. He had too much to prove in a short window of time.

They were at an abandoned house on the outskirts of greater Toronto, nearly in Markham. It was an eerie scene that made him understand why George had brought him in so suddenly and without all of the information that he needed. He had to catch up quickly at the meeting that he’d attended with him. George was oddly quiet, letting the Canadian police explain the situation, showing him pictures that echoed his own past so clearly, but from a titled angle.

Not all of the victims were children.

Six bodies: three adults, three children. They were still looking to identify the bodies, but George was certain that they were all Americans mostly because nothing showed up in the initial searches of the Canadian databases; they were going off of dental records. When they extended their search southwards, there were two positive results for known missing persons. That’s when he had been called in to consult. And then, after arriving and seeing the scene and looking through the first pieces of evidence, he reached out to Kylo. Or at least, that’s how Kylo imagined the last part went.

“I don’t like the mixed victim types.” Even looking at the scene hadn’t shaken how there wasn’t a clear pattern he could latch onto; he clung to the desperate focus that solving the problem gave him. There was another hole. There was the lingering smell of death, wood, dirt and rot. He was still too young and couldn’t read all of the signs or recall all of the theories. His mind was racing the entire time and he needed more of the evidence. “It makes it harder to narrow down his motivations, what his goal was. We need more hard information. If the murder weapons aren’t in that pit, then he’s almost out of reach to us for a psychological profile.”

Stepping around the edge of scene, he felt George’s eyes on him as he watched the site being gone
over by professionals. Kylo, despite wanting to get closer and feel and touch everything there, held back. Curiosity couldn’t get in the way of doing things right. He also had to fight against his nerves that he’d said the wrong thing.

“If they’re all American, we have to figure out if they came into the country by their own free will or by force. It could be part of his thrill in keeping them confined and then killing them: he has to bring them across the border. He’s organized but that risk taking makes it very likely we will find him by identifying our victims and looking at border crossings.” George was speaking, folding his arms. “If he brought them across the border and they’re not tourists.”

Even George could be uncertain. Kylo only managed to nod, letting the voices from the other police and technicians fade away as he tried to piece together why George would bring him in for this case specifically. With the adults among the murdered, it wasn’t a copycat of his murderer, his tormenter. There were shorter gaps in the burials as well. He’d seen the autopsy reports: the first kill must have been about a year ago, the most recent only two months. He didn’t like not having right answers or even the right questions.

Exhaling, he had to ask what he was doing there.

George led him into another room, away from the killing floor. The house had been undergoing renovations when the former owners fell into financial difficulty. They let the half-finished home sit vacant in a run-down neighbourhood. No one would have noticed anything strange going on if their suspect had showed up looking like a construction worker, making loud noises that sounded like he was starting the process of finishing the house again. Taking away floorboards or bringing in tarps wouldn’t look suspicious. Neither would a large truck to transport victims or their bodies. Was this just the dumpsite? Could there have been more than one suspect? He had to know more about the victims, see some of the forensics. He couldn’t wait to get either back to the station to look through what they had so far, or take the files to his hotel to dive into them. He was working on a case, a real case. And he was there with George. Why did he have to wait so long to really live like this?

But George seemed to not be himself. In their short time together both at the station and at the crime scene, there were none of the light pauses for advice or gentle words of guidance.

“I asked you here to consult. But also to make sure that this is something you still want.” George rubbed his face and then sighed, his eyes narrowing on him. “You’ve been unfocused the last year and a half.”

Biting back his urge to snap in denial, Kylo dropped his head and glared at the tattered remnants of a carpet. After taking a slow breath, he met George’s eyes again. The look had softened but was still firm. “Of course I still want to do this. All I’ve wanted to do for ten years has been to work with you. I’ve worked hard in school, I’ve gone to therapy, I’ve done…”

“I know all of that, Kylo. I know how hard you can work but I also know you’ve found distractions along the way. When we’re doing this job, we have to put our personal lives aside. I’m afraid that I’ve maybe taught you wrong, becoming so close to you, letting you follow certain passions too strongly.” George shook his head, but still put a hand on his shoulder. Kylo tried not to stiffen at the gesture. “I should have done this a long time ago, but I really want you to be ready next year to live in the moment and trust your instincts, not only your feelings.”

It was another test. Of course.

It would be one that he would refuse to fail.
“You’re making sure that I’m not trying to force a connection that isn’t there.” Kylo straightened his shoulders. “Looking for clues so far from home when there are none.”

George’s face relaxed. “Exactly. That’s exactly it. I knew that you would understand.”

Kylo still couldn’t shake the word *distraction* being given to him so coolly, but would have to force himself to get over the tone and phrase. George was right: there were six people who were dead. If he was going to be of use then falling into self-pity wasn’t going to help anyone.

But it still meant it would be a long week of ignoring the distractions that were always attacking his phone.

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“When did Kylo get back?” Liza asked, fixing the top of her yellow bridesmaid’s dress before adjusting the straps. They were at the final fitting. The wedding was three weeks away and everything was either coming together or falling apart.

Liza and Paige would sometimes argue before Liza would find some way to make Paige smile and laugh, forgetting what they had been talking about. Rey and Rose would try not to get in the middle until the women would ask them what they thought about some random thing from table settings to where the decorations would go when they fixed the reception space in a couple of weeks.

It was easy to be drawn into the excitement. But Rey also felt nervous; she could make the wrong decision. Paige tried to be laid back but seemed to wake up every morning with a new idea that had to be talked over.

At least her dress still fit perfectly. She played with the flowing gown, watching it shimmer in her hand, soft glitter sparkling as she moved. It fell delicately on her shoulders and she felt tall and thin in the floor-length gown. Kylo still hadn’t seen them yet, at least not fully, with the shoes.

“Yesterday. George is still there and they’ve already talked a lot. But they think that they figured out…”

“Oh,” Liza interrupted her, still trying to fix the fit of the front of the dress, where it dipped along her breasts. “It should be tighter, I think. Or a need a better bra. And I need to go tanning.”

Rey glanced over her shoulder, ignoring the hurt, back to Rose and Paige across the bridal shop. Paige’s mom was fixing her veil, smiling at her daughter as she stood up straighter to study herself in the mirror, swaying her dress just as Rey had done. Paige’s dress was without large frills or fringe: just a simple white gown with eloquent beading and lace. It made Rey sigh and tilt her head. It wasn’t like the dresses that she remembered from childhood cartoons about princesses and dragons.

“I think it’s fine, Liza. You’re very pretty.”

Liza finally stopped looking at herself in the mirror to meet her eyes. “Thanks, Rey. You too.”

But once their dresses were packed up, ready to be sent to where the wedding would be held in a town closer to where Hux and Kylo lived but far enough away that they all got to stay in a hotel the week of the event, she still couldn’t shake the dull thoughts that Liza had brought out in her.
Kylo was sitting on the couch when she got home. He was normally in his room, but now he was sitting there reading rather than upstairs on his computer. He still looked tired from his week with George, and he was always tugging at his hair when he got too focused.

She only had to meet his eyes for him to know that something had happened. Blinking out kind words, he let her sit next to him. Leaning against his shoulder, she finally shook off the week without him. With his arm around her, Rey could finally breathe.

“What did Liza do?” he asked, running his fingers through her hair. Gentle, light touches. They weren’t like the ones he gave himself.

“She just…interrupted me when I was trying to talk about your case. It wasn’t a big deal.” She took a shaky breath, reaching for her centre. “Maybe she doesn’t like talking about murder.”

She could feel Kylo replicating her actions. “Others can have different opinions. I have to tell myself that all of the time. Or she could only care about herself.”

He’d been quiet all morning, mostly on his phone. He’d make an effort to respond to a question but he would eventually leave the room, saying that he was working. His actions betrayed his frustrations. He had wanted to have more time doing a real investigation but George couldn’t keep him there longer than those few days. But Kylo got to keep his guest badge. He probably would have worn it around the house if he didn’t cherish what it represented.

Finally, he hugged her lightly before standing. “I have some work to do before Hux drags me to do the same thing that you just did. Come with me?”

His eyes were honest, inviting. Still, his hands were ringing his wrists. There were too many things on his mind. He had a right to be alone.

She shook her head. “I’m going to call Finn and see if he wants to come over. I think he wants to see the pictures of our dresses.”

Kylo winced and then apologized for not asking. She showed him and found herself drawn into how he looked at the snapshots on her phone, swiping through them. His shoulders eased and he smiled at her.

“You look so grown up.” He glanced at her, then back to the phone. “Rose too. You’re going to look perfect. Can you send me one of these? One of just you?”

Even though she could still feel his strain over what was rolling through his head, she knew that he meant it.

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“How are they even paying for this…thing?” Han looked around the expanse of the reception hall, decidedly avoiding helping them with the decorating.

Rey stood at his side, trying to untangle the thick piece of ribbon in her hand for one of the tables. “Kylo says that Hux’s dad paid for it all.”

Folding his arms, Hux let out a long sigh. “I heard he’s not doing that hot.”
Shrugging, she finally got the knot out. “They’re only taking a week for their honeymoon so they can be with him.”

Han turned, quirking a grin at her. “I guess that boy is finally growing up. They both are.”

Kylo was across the space, far enough away that she couldn’t hear what he was saying to Liza. He was taller, able to hang the looping swoops of white and gold fabric around the room. Liza was standing at his side, her hands on her hips.

His hands were steady, but she could see what was coming by his shoulders.

“If you want it done a certain way then do it yourself.” Kylo’s raised voice finally echoed across the space as he turned to shout at Liza. Her shouted reply in return made Rey purse her lips. Over a dozen eyes were on them and she could almost hear Kylo’s pained exhale.

“Doesn’t mean he’s not done growing up.” Han gave her a light shrug and then finally went to help his son.

Turning away, Rey went to finish her task. Even if the rest of the afternoon would be filled with adults bickering, she was determined to get all of the decorating done so Paige could have her stagette and relax the next day. Finn would be there then and she could talk to him.

Fixing another centrepiece, Rey spotted Rose across the room and waved at her, tossing up her hands to show her how many she’d done. Rose stuck her tongue out at her: she had done four fewer.

Kylo hadn’t exactly been having an easy time the last few weeks. He was pausing more around her, apologizing for thinking about the wrong thing. She was almost tired of having to tell him that they could talk about something else other than how she was feeling, or what plans still had to be made.

She already didn’t mind the thought of eating dinner with only her family that night, letting Kylo have some space to shake off his annoyance. At least with her around, he’d eat properly.

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“You need to get laid, man.”

Hux’s already annoying friend David had been pushing Kylo’s limits all night and he finally hit the breaking point. He couldn’t ruin Hux’s bachelor party but he had to punch that asshole in the face at that moment.

He had been seated one moment and on his feet in one swift motion, clocking David against the jaw with his fist.

“You don’t know a fucking thing about me!” he shouted, drawing even more attention to their corner of the bar.

Hux and the others were playing pool and drunkenly looked up when they heard the commotion and had started moving when they saw him dart for the door. Arms were finally holding him back from rushing into the night air, stopping his escape.
“Kylo, Kylo, Ky, Ben, calm down, it’s okay.” Hux was the only one who dared to touch him. The others were hanging back, nervously shuffling their feet as David sat up with their help. He was holding his face, cradling exactly where Kylo’s knuckles had connected. Funny, his hand didn’t hurt.

“He broke his fucking jaw, Hux!” Another awful excuse for a human being, Anthony, shouted. “How is this psycho your best friend?”

Kylo forced Hux’s hands away and stepped back. He turned to eye the others, feeling his breathing getting heavier.

Some woman across the bar had been eyeing him all night, not paying any attention to David despite the two drinks he’d sent her. She had come over and tried to talk to him and he had just shaken his head, trying to gesture her towards the dark-skinned man at the table behind him. The sentimental part of him that he hadn’t touched for so long had nudget him that morning, before the god-awful bachelor party afternoon had begun. It had been too many boring activities, just being used as excuses to get drunk. Many people were already there for the wedding, drinking in the pub or at the hotel. Weddings brought out desperate single people.

To get her to go away, he put his hand on the table, showing off the ring that he had decided was meaningless to everyone but him and only useful in situations like this. The one that he’d picked out for himself still lacked its pair but, as George reminded up only a few weeks ago, that was a distraction that he might just have to let go.

That’s when David sidled up to him and started a conversation about baseball, filling the void that the huffing woman had left. He was almost being pleasant.

Until he asked why he still had a ring and if he was still gay.

David wasn’t intelligent enough to understand the amount of feelings he still had about that question. Hux had never bothered him about it, other than his failed attempt at setting him up that turned into more of an embarrassment for his friend than it was for Kylo. After the last failed time, they had gotten drunk together and talked about it and he finally understood. It wasn’t anything that he hung his personality or sexuality on. It was about a person, who happened to be a guy, a guy who he still missed and thought about more and more as discussions about table decorations stretched on for too many days. The pressure from everyone, especially Liza but distantly George, had made it easy to reach out to rage in that moment. Dealing with Liza so often leading up to this fucking mess was enough to make him understand why normal people hated weddings even without years of trauma. Her hollow yet complimentary replies had stoked his ego; her soggy mouth and firm body had satisfied his body for a few minutes years ago. Those memories were about all he wanted to take away from his encounters with her and how he charted out his future sexual relationships. She wasn’t Poe. She didn’t smile like him, she didn’t joke like him. She didn’t kiss like him. The main thing that weighed on him as he sorted through their differences weren’t physical: he had listened to him when he needed it most. And if she wanted to keep punishing him for not wanting to have some casual, worthless relationship with her by bitching at him the entire time then she had more to let go of than he did.

He was a can of ashes on a shelf in Florida, mostly because he sent them all to his mother rather than keeping a piece of his own. What would have been the point? Talking to a ghost was about as sane as talking to a burnt piece of a body that he had once held and loved, but whose absence had faded to a distant ache on good days. The bad, down days were something he was always fighting and had to get through. The distractions had to stop.

Still, he knew that one day, he’d be the same: just a set of ashes. Dead forever rather than just dead
And he might be failing George by still being so consumed by all of this when his mind faltered. Rey believed in him and that kept him going but, just as he always felt, it would get to be too much to keep contained in their bubble of light. Toronto hadn’t been a failure and George complimented many of his observations, but he still didn’t offer anything that anyone else could have.

Why had he fought so hard for something that he was only ordinary at? The thought pained him deeper than it should; all of this had shaped him and he could never learn from it.

Rey would say that he had. And he was letting her down.

Suddenly, he was blinking back tears and turning away. He wanted to go home, but all he had was the fucking hotel room upstairs. The wedding was in two days and he probably had just broken a groomsman’s jaw.

He swallowed and took a couple of steps back, mumbling an apology.

Hux had his hands full, looking around at the arguing voices surrounding them. Kylo didn’t hear them. His head was elsewhere, watching the space blur until his eyes found purchase on a spot of flaking wallpaper across the pub.

The redhead finally cleared his throat and grabbed his arm, dragging him outside into the August air.

“I told you to ignore him.” Hux, sounding embarrassed and frustrated, huffed in one solid exhale. His hand was still gripping his bicep and only let go after shaking him lightly. Despite the redness in his cheeks, he looked at him with a hint of gentleness. But maybe that’s just what he hoped to see. “What did he say to you?”

Did it matter what was said? He was the one who had acted.

He ran his hand through his hair. “He said I needed to get laid, on top of other shit. Did you fucking tell him what I told you?”

“No! Kylo, Jesus Christ! I don’t tell them personal shit about you. I tried to set you up a few times and then I realized….shit, I tried. I just tried. You deserve to be happy, man. All I told the guys was…it was the standard thing. Just that you’re my best friend and always have been. Seriously, you have been. And that you’ve been through some fucked up shit in the past and that three years ago your partner died and not to talk about it. David and Tony are from poker, Gabe and Liam are just friends I know from our school. You know that. Fuck, I told them not to bring this up.” Hux sucked in a long breath and glanced inside the pub. “Don’t fucking run away. This isn’t your fault.”

He knew of his friends but hadn’t bothered to learn anything about them. Another mistake. He wished that he had finished his beer. He thought for a moment about storming inside to finish drinking it and then coming back outside but shook off the thought. “Don’t make excuses for me.”

Hux exhaled through his nose, heavily. The sound rattled for a second, drowning out the distant music and empty parking lot. “I’m not making excuses. I wanted you to be here tonight. You’ve been stressed out all summer and I just told them to leave you alone. I’ve been stressed out too, putting it on you, so I just wanted to hang out and have you there. You like sitting in the corner and watching. But they had to be fucking assholes about it.”

He chewed on the inside of his mouth, still going over the day in his mind. He had been watching most of the day; he’d at least been given that. He’d refused to play golf, sitting in the cart and
taking pictures with Hux’s phone until he got bored and stopped. The rest of them got drunk and were laughing the entire time. He had looked long and hard at a water hazard and wondered how long it would take him to drown one of them in it.

“He didn’t just die,” Kylo mumbled.

Hux had been looking up at the stars, but turned back to him. “I know. And I’m sorry for putting you through this. I just…Paige’s dad had set the plan for today. Thank fucking God he went to bed before this happened. And where the hell is your dad? I don’t care about my dad not being able to do this but I actually like your dad.”

Kylo had fixed his eyes towards the inside, the bodies moving and talking within the pub. “He looks okay. Paige has makeup that can fix the bruise, right?”

“Yeah, yeah she does.” Hux followed his eyes and nodded. Then he started to laugh. He started high and then he turned to look at him and Kylo managed a grin and felt himself being drawn into the lighter tone as well. “I owe Paige twenty bucks. She said that you’d start a fight and I told her that you wouldn’t.”

He quickly took a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet. “Then I owe you.”

Hux eyed the money and shook his head. “I’m going to go back in with them for a bit. I’m not…abandoning you or anything. I’ve got so much shit going on right now that my head is going to, um, explode. I’ll see you upstairs in a bit. And we’ll talk. Or we can sit and stare at each other and figure out what we’re doing here.”

There was a hand on his arm for a short warm, while before Hux turned to leave, going back inside. He paused for a moment. “You know that’s Canadian money, right?”

He could only roll his eyes and leave the pub for the nearby hotel entrance.

Fuck tonight.

Fuck those assholes.

It took every once of strength, every part of him that believed he was getting better, to force himself inside and up the stairs to his room. His focus took him by his parents’ room. He stopped himself from knocking.

He looked at Rey’s room and only heard giggling inside.

At least she was okay.

That’s what mattered, he tried to tell himself. She had her friends. And at least now he could be alone to look at more crime scene photos until Hux got there and he could finish getting drunk.

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“I don’t know. Maybe I want to get married. Maybe I don’t.” Rose shrugged, reaching for more of the chips. Paige was having her stagette party downstairs in some room that was pounding with music and laughter. They’d snuck out earlier to spy on them but quickly left when the giggling
started to get shriller and more dramatic. *Girls are always screaming,* Finn had mumbled. They weren’t real screams, she almost replied but held the thought back.

Her friends knew what she had been through but had almost seemed to forget it. It would be nice to one day feel the same way.

She’d spent most of the time at the hotel watching Liza and Kylo avoid one another, even during the rehearsal events yesterday. Their hands would hardly touch and the wedding coordinator scolded them. She had to blink hard at Kylo to get him to calm down. Her partner just sighed heavily and glared at the other man’s back. The man and the other groomsman didn’t look pleased with being paired with teenagers. That had been Paige’s cue to freak out on them, telling them that they had every right to be a part of her wedding and they had known about it for a year. Everything seemed like it was going to boil over so Rey couldn’t blame all of the sides needing to take a break and unwind tonight.

Still, she had been more and more worried about Kylo. The last few weeks had seen him faking more and more. He’d always be texting or calling George, talking rapidly about some thought he had, and then ignoring other messages. He did his duties as best man and seemed to relax when he spent time with just Paige and Hux, but his mind was still elsewhere as the day grew closer. Even when they were together as a family, mom would hold his hand more when he looked blank or had a lingering sadness that he was trying to hide.

She wondered how often she thought about him.

She was sharing her room with Finn and Rose, a cot put up next to their two beds. They were really just planning on playing games or watching movies. Paige had made sure they could have whatever they wanted in their room so there were enough sugary drinks and chips to make it a party. Liza had offered them booze but both Paige and Kylo had glared at her hard until she told them that she was just joking.

Turning to Finn, she tried to get herself back in the room and back with her friends.

“I don’t know, man. This whole wedding thing seems like a nightmare. Everyone is mad at each another and for what? It’s just a fancy party. Everyone needs to stop freaking out all of the time. Nothing is ever going to be perfect. They should just want to have fun and not argue.” Finn wrinkled his nose and reached for more of the chips between them on her bed.

Rey was so happy to have her friends there. She had to beg Leia to talk to Finn’s mom and stepdad, to make sure he could be there so early. He couldn’t just be there for the wedding. Maybe it wasn’t really begging, but it felt like it. It was asking for something that she wanted, but couldn’t control. She had to clamp down as the feeling of helplessness started to rise in the weeks leading up to the trip. Kylo had said the right things, but his head was also lost in the same sea of feelings.

“Rey? What do you think?” Rose could sometimes guess when she was thinking too hard about something in her head. She appreciated her kind voice, trying to draw her back into the conversation.

“I don’t know. Maybe…” her mind drifted. She was about to get washed away, about to forget how she was in a warm and protected hotel room, awash in anxious adults desperately trying to unwind before more pressure was added. Her parents—still not her real ones but forever more important for her future than the dead past in California—were down the hall. Kylo was there. Her friends were there. In that instant, she wanted to go back to how she knew so many children who never got to have those thoughts, never got to dream about a wedding and falling in love. She felt her lip start to tremble but shook it off. Finn took her hand and she smiled at him. “Maybe I need a
few more years to think about it.”

What would Kylo’s wedding have looked like? Would he have looked as handsome in his tuxedo as he did now? She’d watched him try it on one last time before they made the trip down. It showed off his broad shoulders and long legs. She saw how he looked at himself, still finding the faults and picking at threads. She had no idea how to compliment him in that moment but was determined to find a way during the reception.

She felt Finn’s hand warming hers and thought about what it meant. He hadn’t tried to kiss her again, but liked holding her hand. Talking with Ransolm on the phone or her other therapists helped her understand why she both craved the closeness, but also why it made her apprehensive. Her body was still changing; her mind was always going to be drawn back to earlier pains from childhood. It had taken a unique and caring person to carry Kylo through those thoughts. Maybe she would have to take a little while longer to find hers.

She just knew that it was harder to share Kylo’s bed. He was strong, warm, and soft when he was with her. He’d always hold her in a way that made her body want to hum.

Suddenly Rose was off her bed, pulling her into a hug. From the other side, Finn hugged them both.

“Don’t be sad, Rey,” Rose whispered. “I’m glad you can be here for my sister even if it makes you think about bad things.”

Rather than giving into her tears, Rey started to giggle. They bubbled up and her friends sat back before matching her silliness with laughs of their own.

As they spent the rest of the night watching movies, despite a warning from Han around midnight that it should be lights out, Rey tried to push on the spots of joy in her heart rather than the sorrow that always lingered there.

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His father took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. The motion distracted Kylo in the middle of his speech.

The ceremony had gone as well as it could. He had to walk with Liza and act like he wanted to be there with her. He tried to get drawn into the words and actions that Hux and Paige were undertaking. They’d been nervous, but none of it showed when the vows were finally said and the act was complete.

He blinked, looking around the expansive dining hall again. It was like teaching, but worse. These people would remember what he was supposed to say.

“Um,” he said. “Let me start over. It’s been a long day and I’m a little overwhelmed.”

Shifting his weight, he turned his eyes to Rey. She was sitting at his table and wasn’t as distracting as his father. He looked beyond Liza and only focused on her. She smiled and the simple movement of her eyes gave him strength.

*Say what you want to say. You’re doing great.*
The final colours ended up being yellow and white. Rey’s dress wasn’t even wrinkled, even at this point of the dinner. His suit smelled like beer and weed. But that was all Armitage’s fault. The flower arrangements weren’t as distracting as he’d thought they’d be; those had been Liza’s decision and he almost felt like he needed to apologize to her. Almost.

He had spent the previous night trying to finish his speech and really only had his own experiences to draw on.

And they all pressed on his chest in that moment.

He cleared his throat.

“I’m not trying to make this about me, let me get that out there. But I missed seven years of Paige and Armitage’s lives and since then, I was catching up. I had to catch up with everything in the world and then the world caught up with me. There were a couple of years when Armitage and I didn’t really get along. We still don’t agree about whose fault it was. But since we’re both stubborn, I don’t think that we ever will,” he paused for laughter, guided by Rey’s eyes. The room actually chuckled and he shifted his weight again. “But since then, I’ve seen them grow up and get closer to everyone and everything: to stop being awkward teenagers and into being something real. My…someone once told me that being in love was like following someone down a dark road, one that didn’t have a real end or beginning. Or at least, that’s what I thought when h—the person said it. You don’t know how many turns there will be, but you still keep going. You follow the person you love so they don’t have to be alone. And you know that they’ll follow you too. The good times, the bad times, you’re never alone. And I think that Paige and Armie will follow all of their roads together.”

He raised his glass and didn’t hear the applause.

He sat down and Rey was blinking both words and to hold back tears. He would have been proud of you. I know I am.

The emcee took over and he watched Rey’s eyes as he poured himself more wine.

And from the corner of his eyes, he saw his father put his glasses back on.

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“Hey, dance with me.” Rey grinned, reaching for his hands. He was leaning against the bar, happily swimming into nothing.

He’d survived the dinner. He had survived sitting next to Liza all night. He had managed not to make a face during her droning and over-written nightmare of a speech. She’d made some remark about him in high school and he forced his face to stay emotionless.

He even survived apologizing to David outside when they were finally freed to let the staff rearrange the tables for the dance to follow. They shared a flask with Hux, who looked relieved but also still stunned. The speech from his parents had hit them both in tender places. His father had faded greatly since the last time Kylo had seen him and that had been only a year ago. He watched as Hux’s mother supported her ex-husband to stand and tell his son how proud he was of him for all of his hard work, and for finding someone who could love him through anything. When Kylo had turned to his own parents, he saw only pride from them as well.
He had held Rey’s hand, watching the couple share the first dance. The song they picked was so overly sentimental that he snorted a chuckle. Rey had swatted at him but blinked her agreement.

Rey danced with his father, joining the floor as Paige and her father completed their dance.

When he did the same with his mother, she whispered that she was also tired of how the damned music was trying to trick them into being emotional. *That’s all weddings are Ben. They’re just trying to trick you.* He’d laughed, hugging her. She was almost as drunk as he was and he felt warm and secure with her arms around him. He could almost ignore how small she felt.

But now, with the floor open to everyone and the night wearing on, he was counting the hours until he could go upstairs.

But he did owe Rey a dance. He’d promised.

“They’re finally playing the songs that we wanted them to play! This is my song Kylo. It’s our song!” She was buzzing, grabbing at him. There was a bit of chocolate on the edge of her lip, just a smudge from somewhere. She’d let him have the night to himself for so long and he couldn’t let her down.

She was shouting over the deejay again and he finished his drink, turning to follow her, guided by her vibrating hand.

He still didn’t believe that Paige’s parents didn’t at least pay for some of this and that all of the money didn’t come from Hux’s father. The food must have entirely been their decision. He was almost certain that Paige’s mother had made some of it, despite the clear trademarks of a hotel trying to look fancier than it was. Too many small garnishes, too many rings of sauce.

Moving from the darkened area of the bar onto the barely lit dance floor, he couldn’t help but roll his eyes at himself. “I don’t dance, Rey!”

She threw her hands up and spun, swirling her long dress around her. “You used to! With me in the kitchen.”

He finally laughed. He watched how she moved without thought or embarrassment. She was free, free to be a fourteen-year-old girl at her best friend’s sister’s wedding. And she needed a dance partner.

Reaching out, he snagged her hand and she grinned at him.

“We survived, didn’t we?” He had to think of something to say so he blurted out the words. “You were so beautiful tonight, Rey.”

Rey had to crane her head to look up at him, her arms reaching up to his shoulders. She ran her hands up his chest. “You looked great too.”

He couldn’t stop himself and reached up to brush the chocolate from the corner of her mouth. Her cheeks reddened but he managed to grin. “Now you’re perfect.”

Sighing, she put her head against him.

He couldn’t ruin this night for her. His thoughts had been churning throughout dinner about so many things that he could easily pin down why he hadn’t been able to truly relax. Inwardly, he knew that it was more than just George’s words from last month. This wasn’t work, but he was always falling into distractions that kept him out of the moment.
When the song ended and let her drift away, back to her friends, he tried hard to keep her smile at the forefront of his mind. And it worked for a while, until the blonde beast from his past showed up again.

He’d dealt with her in as calm and collected tones that he could manage the last few months. He’d been snapping more lately and it probably, probably, wasn’t her fault and he should apologize. Going through all of the planning had shown how similar they were. Letting everything be paid for by someone else was something that they were both used to and he wanted to throw up at the realization.

Still, when Liza pressed against him, beside him at the bar, he was drunk enough to react. She was talking, laughing about something as she took a shot and raised her eyebrows at him. She was taunting him. The familiarity, the warmth, the smell, they were all ingredients that led him to desire. As he got drunker, his mind always took him back to those tender places and how much he missed them. Missed him.

“We should have danced earlier, dummy,” she said, shoving him. “We were supposed to. Come on.”

Rey was dancing with Finn across the floor. It was all couples.

No.

“I didn’t want to.” He hoped that his answer would get her hand away from his arm.

Somehow, she forced his reluctant feet out with her.

Her hands roamed around his body. Rey’s touches from before were being erased. Rey’s scent, her soft perfume from before, was being covered up. He didn’t want this.

But his body did. And he was fucking drunk. He also mildly cursed Hux with only getting bad jobs in the future because of the fact that he’d gotten him high earlier in the night, between the ceremony and the dinner: *You won’t get to do it in the FBI so why the fuck not?* God fucking damn him. “I don’t want to right now either.”

Despite his words, his hands were holding her tighter.

She winked at him.

“I liked your speech tonight. It was better than mine, but I mean, I don’t know what love is. But it really sounded like you did.” Liza just kept talking. He let his hands roam freely. This thing was about to end for him and he could go to bed. That’s all he wanted. He wanted to drain his minibar and blackout this entire evening. His parents were still there, still expecting more from him, but he didn’t care. The memories that he would keep from the day would be the sweeter ones. The rest of it was up for grabs in his broken, distracted brain.

“I did, once. I think I know now but I…” his stupid mouth kept him talking and Liza looked up to grin at him. Her flash of white teeth and the glitter of her makeup blinded him.

Having her so close, and his loose grip on his thoughts, made it very hard not to react.

“But maybe you were thinking about going upstairs?”

It had been so long since he’d had sex. It was rarely on his to-do list, but Kylo still missed sharing those feelings with someone. Liza had been awful and aggravating in the last few months, hell
almost a year. She’d made him into someone that he wanted to hate. But right now, right then, she was in his arms.

And he was drunk. And high.

He could ride on those excuses to get to release and then punish himself for it after.

He stood up to his full height to glare down at her for a second before grabbing her by the arm. It was loose; she could have slipped out if she wanted to. It would have been harder, more tenderly demanding, if it had been him. He heard her laughter as they wound through the exit of the reception hall to the elevator, leaving the party and music behind them. He saw some familiar faces. None of them were Hux or Paige so he hoped that no one would say anything. It was a wedding. Stupid things were supposed to happen. He wasn’t supposed to do stupid things but he was so close to snapping again that this was an easier recourse than hating himself over fighting someone. He knew that he hadn’t hurt her the last time that they’d been intimate. He could manage something meaningless one last time. If he got it out of his system, more of his focus would be back.

They were kissing in the hallway just outside of his room, Kylo leaning over and into her in an instant, losing himself in anything familiar, even if it meant knowing that disgust was rising at the same time. He needed to be drunker. He needed to stop feeling.

Liza was giggling, kicking off her shoes as she led him to his door. She knew where it was. Why was she laughing? He needed her to stop that. Her shoes were in her hand and she was touching him with the other. He was in two again: he wanted to push her away but the other part needed something like this. It was hollow but it held echoes of what he craved.

When he had her inside, hidden from people who might know him and judge him, she started asking him to help her with her dress. If he hadn’t been with them the entire way, and knew how much the thing cost, he would have ripped it off of her. Instead, he undid the zipper and kissed her shoulder blade, bitterly taking in how she sighed at the touch of his lips.

“Get drinks while I…take this off.” He was talking, but he couldn’t hear himself. Kylo was floating outside of his body, watching himself make a poor decision again out of loneliness. He wasn’t there and was never coming back, but he couldn’t think about him in that moment. Liza was already laughing and getting the tiny bottles from the minibar as he stripped off his clothes. At least he managed to lay them down neatly on the chair in the corner.

“Wow, you look…you do work out a lot. That suit wasn’t just good tailoring.” Liza was kneeling in her underwear on his bed, two tiny bottles of whiskey in her hands. She still narrowed her eyes after taking him in. “What did you do to your arm?”

He snatched one of the tiny flasks from her. “Just tell me that you want me.”

He downed the offered alcohol in two long and effortful gulps. She grinned and handed him the next bottle and it was gone too.

And she just stared at him before lying back and spreading her legs.

He still thought about how easy it would be to kill her even as he climbed on top of her, lunging against her warm and wet panties. He felt her arms around him and shuddered at being touched for the first time in so long. Even as he was kissing her, her sloppy mouth opening too quickly and easily with none of the teasing that he desired, he knew that he was going to be sick when it was all over. If he didn’t resent her in so many ways, he’d let her see him weak again. But her arms
weren’t offering the comfort that he needed when he pushed his body like this. It was a facade, like a movie. It was like how it had been all of the times before; he hated himself too much to inflict what he was on anyone else and she treated him just as equally awful, like a hateful plaything. He deserved this.

“God, Kylo, I love your cock. I’ve missed it,” she gasped, gripping him tighter, lunging against his clothed erection. “I always want it in me.”

Those words should only be spoken by someone who loved him, he thought as he forced her down against the mattress. He kissed her again, making her shut up. He was so pathetic, falling into this again. She wasn’t a stranger; in some way, he could trust her even if he truly disliked what she was. He should be stronger than this; George had warned him about distractions and here he was, giving in to his fucking need. Everything from the last few months nagged at him, eating him away until he didn’t have anything left to give. He might as well be ash.

He didn’t say anything and tried to find a trace of something comfortable by kissing up her jaw to behind her ear as he kept grinding into her. She only gasped at the movements from below his waist, grabbing at his hips to force them onto her harder. The rest of him was meaningless. She smelt too false, too fake.

He moved to undo her bra but her hands stopped him, forcing him to meet her eyes.

“You can fuck me in the ass, you know? If you miss him so much, you can pretend that I’m him. We haven’t done that before.”

As the words died on her smirking mouth, his world turned red.

His arms went numb and his mind went blank.

He could have killed her in that instant.

It was a clear, sharp hallucination that danced across his eyes. He gripped her neck, making her gasp and gape at him in terror. He held her down, feeling her soft throat crack under the pressure from his hands. He watched the life leave her body, getting her away from him and his hateful, murderous hands. There would be no tenderness there. It would be over quickly. And he wouldn’t feel anything. The picture was so clear: she was flailing and clawing at his hands as he choked the life out of her, watching her turn red and then fade to the white of death, her eyes as dead as his.

But he didn’t do that. That part was in his head.

He knew that he was staring at her, taking in ragged breaths, but didn’t know when he started screaming.

He knew that he shouted. He knew that he tossed things at her, forcing her to get dressed and get the fuck out. She was scrambling, shouting back at him at the same time. The repulsive words that left her mouth made him want to lose control and strike her. He could slap her but that would just mean he’d have to touch her again.

How dare she. How dare everyone.

The door finally slammed shut and he could hear her sobs on the other side.

Her tears could go and burn in the same corner of hell that he wanted to crawl into.
“Hey baby girl,” Han said, putting his hands on her shoulders. “Where’s Ben?”

She was getting something to eat as the midnight buffet was rolled out. They were mostly just snack foods but she was hungry from dancing and chatting with her friends all night.

She heard a cheer from across the room. Paige and Hux had re-emerged wearing different outfits, looking more casual. She looked down at her own dress and then to Rose at her side. She watched Han grab a sandwich and start eating it, reminding her that he’d just asked her a question with his grey eyebrows.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him in a while.” She looked around the room. Slowly, the older people were leaving. Hux and Paige’s friends only occupied the dance floor now. She didn’t know why she looked there for Kylo because he’d only shared four dances that night: her, mom, Paige, and Liza.

Liza.

The third yellow dress was missing too.

“He probably went to bed,” Rose said, even though she could see the panic in her eyes. “He looked tired all night.”

She tried to give her friend a smile, trying to keep her heart from choking her. “You’re probably right. But dad, I’m going to go check on him. He gets sad sometimes when he’s drunk.”

“Yeah. I’ll be up later to check on him too. He made us all really proud tonight. We’ll give him some space and then make sure he’s making sense out of it.” Han leaned down and gave her another hug. She loved dancing with Kylo, but dancing with dad and Finn had been nice as well. Hopping around with Paige and Rose, showing off how well she could dance on her own had also boosted how she felt about the night.

But all of that was about to be shuddered away if her panicked thoughts were right.

Liza was supposed to be her friend. Was she just being nice to her to get close to Kylo?

She managed to cross the floor as calmly as possible. She thanked Paige for letting her be a part of the day, yawning and saying that she was going to bed. She had to see Paige’s smile one last time. She could have picked someone else, but instead had picked her. Hugging Hux reminded her that he was almost as tall as Kylo. He just slouched more. But even as she smiled and waved goodnight to everyone, her mind was upstairs.

She couldn’t run, but walked as quickly as her heeled feet could take her through the lobby, out of the reception hall and towards the elevator.

Her dress was suddenly too hot and tight as she tried to catch her breath in the elevator.

Rounding the corner to their hallway, she could finally hear the distant sounds of someone crying.

A flourish of yellow was spread out on the red carpeting of the hotel floor, pooled under the weeping and half-dressed blonde. And she was leaning against Kylo’s door, sobbing.
Liza’s dress had slipped off of her shoulder and her head snapped up when she heard her feet in the hall. It wasn’t even zipped up. Her bare back mocked her as she sat up away from the door.

“What’s…are you okay?” Rey’s voice shook as she spoke.

Looking up and trying to fix her dress, Liza gave her an awkward and forced smile. She wiped at her eyes and shook out her hair. But her hands were unsteady the entire time. “It’s…I was just talking to Kylo. It’s okay. I’m fine.”

She spat out the last part with clenched teeth. Her makeup was smeared and cracked; she wasn’t the usual confident and cool Liza. They’d gotten so close the last year. It was a shock to see her so broken and faking being okay, but so was the hateful glow of betrayal that raked across her chest. She was also drunk, messy, and slurring her words. Kylo had almost been the same. She’d seen them leave together. But Liza wasn’t just crying over something that Kylo had said. She watched as the woman adjusted her dress to look at her.

Liza forced herself to her feet and let out a hateful snort.

“Don’t fall in love with him, Rey. He’s just going to hurt you and fuck you over,” Liza was lowly speaking to her and then turned her face to scream at the door, “Because he’s a fucking faggot who can’t get over his dead boyfriend!”

Liza didn’t even look at her when she turned and walked away, slightly mismatched in her footfalls. One shoe was in her hand, the other was on her foot. Rey wanted to ask her what happened one last time but she pushed down that concern. Behind the door was Kylo.

It took so much strength to bring herself to knock on it, her small fist breaking the silence of the now-empty hallway. She breathed in and out, almost trembling.

“Fuck off Liza!” Kylo screamed when he answered the door. He was wearing a t-shirt and his boxers, a bottle of booze in his hand.

His face transformed in a second when he saw that it was her.

Not saying anything, he stalked away and let her in.

“You should be with your friends,” he finally mumbled as she closed the door, hearing it click shut in the suddenly soundless room. She heard herself breathing at first, then Kylo spoke. “Rey, I really…I really need to be alone right now.”

He sat down on the bed and kept his eyes low. His head was shaking as he kept his focus hatefully on the floor.

Should she be angry with him? Should she be kind? What was in her heart?

“You should stop drinking,” she finally said.

“I probably should.”

She moved to sit next to him and he flinched away to stand across the room.

“Please, Rey. Leave me alone.” He was pleading with her, tears threatening to snake down his cheeks. “I can talk to you in the morning but I’m so…angry right now that I don’t want you to be around me.”
She licked her lips, watching his fist clutch the bottle. “You can tell me what happened. I can… I can try to understand…”

“No, because you’ll just fucking hate me again! You’ll see how I keep making mistakes because I can’t always focus! There’s always a part of me that feels alone and I can’t…” he raked his free hand through his hair. His voice fell as he spoke next. “I’ve slept with her before. I just wanted to forget again.”

The words rocked through her body as she watched his shoulders slump. “When?”

“After he was gone. After you were gone to Luke’s.” He looked at her with agony lining his face. “I want someone to love me like that again. And I’m never going to find it.”

She turned away when he opened and downed the bottle. After feeling a tear slip down her cheek, she sniffled. She heard him toss the empty bottle aside and then sit down next to her on the bed. He put his head in his hands, his shoulders trembling.

“Kylo…” she started, trying to reach for him. He didn’t shift away but he didn’t move to look at her either. “Kylo, it’s okay.”

He snorted and glanced at her. Exhaling, he shook his head and stared at the wall across from them; he was always looking for that spot. “It will be once I calm down. I know I can but… sometimes I still want to explode.”

The stress from George. The pressure from his friends. The atmosphere of something that he once wanted to share with someone else. Kylo made mistakes when he lost focus and sometimes when his eyes couldn’t see what he actually had.

“Kylo,” she said, gently taking his hand. He weakly let her guide it to her cheek. She leaned into it, watching how he looked at her. He’d told her all night how beautiful she was, how she looked so grown up. She’d felt that all night. Even when he was lost in thoughts, he could make her feel in the centre of the world, even on a night that was for two other people who they loved. She was never more thankful to have their balance back, to be able to be this close. He was falling to pieces and she had to keep him together until he was himself again.

He turned, bringing up his other hand to frame her face. She shut her eyes at the warmth and gentleness that his touch brought. She’d calmed him down. She would still have her own thoughts to sort out when the night was finally over, but she’d brought him back into their bubble.

Her eyes flashed open when she felt Kylo moving closer.

He was firmly focused on her, leaning his mouth towards her. Her tongue darted out, moistening her lips, aware and wanting what she was sure he was about to give her. Her heart thundered in her ears and her hands tightened against his.

When he was a breath away, when she could smell the alcohol on his lips, his eyes flashed in terror and he dropped his hands and jolted away. Scrambling from the bed, he slipped and fell to his knees.

“Rey. You need to leave. Right now.” His eyes were wild, darting around the room, unable to focus on her or anything.

“But Kylo, I…”

“Get out now!” He screamed at her, shattering the sweet calm from before.
Turning and fleeing, Rey heard him drop to the floor and sob as she slammed the door behind her.

Chapter End Notes

Standard warnings, with a heavy emphasis on murder, past relationships, references to self harm, drug and alcohol use...

...and please don't hate me. I swear to God this started out as a softer chapter. Liza wasn’t in the first draft (and other than being heavily referenced in the next chapter) she's finally gone. And it’s also just a coincidence that big stuff seems to happen in chapters that end in 7.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Kylo talks through what happened with Rey and Liza with Maz and then takes another step in his chosen career.

Read the notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So, this is our last session, what do you have to tell me?”

Kylo’s eyes snapped from the lazy flakes of snow drifting down behind the window of Maz’s office in a burst of confusion. “What do you mean our last session?”

Maz shifted forward and he could hear her back crack. He’d actually flown out to Virginia this time, not making her come to him. After all of the years he'd known her, this was the most prepared he'd ever been for a session. He’d arrived that morning and only had time to drop his bags at George’s before the appointment. He didn’t want to make her wait. For once.

So many memories from his past rocked him when he heard it was about to be over. He should have more time. It was only fair. Even if he hated her, he needed her. Why was she always so hard to read?

“I know that you’re applying soon. George will, well, George will be George even if I tell him not to. So this should be our last contact before we start a different relationship. You’ll have a different file when you come see me as an agent, Kylo. All of this will go somewhere else.” She looked more comfortable in her own space and he knew that it was all about control. She had also never felt at peace in those rented offices in Connecticut and had just faked it. The playing field had been more even there and he hardly knew it.

He should say something about her but still didn’t.

“You’re saying that like it’s going to happen,” he countered. “There are still so many steps.”

“But you’re still dreaming about it, yes?”

He could only close his eyes and nod. “After the last few months, it’s kept me focused. Things have been...tough.”

He held back that it had been the only thing that kept him on a straight path. If he could call it that.

“So, where do you want to start? We can talk about how your other therapists have been treating you?” He could almost hear her voice follow that up with: What do you want to complain about them to me? There must be a long list.
Slumped down in his seat, he shrugged. He ran his hand through his hair and still felt how short it was. He was never going back to that barber again, despite what Han said. “They’ve been…they’ve been better than usual. I wanted to ask you about a new diagnosis and I know how it sounds. I have my Masters now and I know how you think.”

Maz wasn’t writing anything down, but her pen still tapped the paper. She just lifted her grey head a little higher.

“Do I have a personality disorder? Am I borderline? And I want a real answer. The last guy looked at me like he expected me to act like it was the end of the world. And I didn’t react how he wanted. It made him even more suspicious.” He asked the questions flatly, keeping his eyes level with hers. “Am I borderline because of him and what he did to me? Am I going to be like him?”

“Well,” Maz paused to smirk. A sight like that used to frustrate him but now it only drove him to think deeper, to try to find the reason behind the look. “Well, if you have your Masters in psychology, especially in psychological analysis and criminology or whatever you think you’re a master of, why don’t you describe how you would diagnose yourself? And, since I’m still senior here, we can discuss your conclusions.”

Licking his lips, he nodded. He thought about himself all too often. Of all his flaws, that one was the hardest to try to correct, even on his best days. “I’m impulsive out of anger, sometimes for small things that make sense to no one else but me in my fucked up head. I can be even and level for weeks and one little thing can make me angry or obsessed. And then I am lost in it for too long. I never feel good enough, but at the same time feel like I’m better than others in too many ways. I find…I find favourite people. I can’t leave them alone. I obsess over them to the point of love or hatred. That's the main thing I've read about. And the amount of times I’ve tried to kill myself…”

Maz cleared her throat. “There was only one serious attempt, Kylo. And that was under a highly stressful, traumatic event.”

Even with her words, he shook his head. “What about the self harm then? I’m not stupid and I don’t bother with Internet quizzes. But I’m obsessed enough with myself to diagnose myself. Is this…is this what you’re going to write your final report about? Or has this been there the entire time and I’ve never heard it because everyone knows that you can never recover from it. I’m torn between feeling empty and feeling too much. I only think I haven’t been more reckless because I…I didn’t want to fail. I hate rules but always need them.”

Maz snorted lightly and then shook your head. He felt his face burning and he pressed his thumbs into his eyes. He should have mentioned how much he hated being wrong too. “You know what you did wrong right now, right?”

“I tried to diagnose myself.” He sucked in spit behind his lips, letting it hiss angrily as he tried to find his focus, looking at her again in shame. “And I shouldn’t do that.”

“Yes,” Maz said, not mocking him like he had expected. “Remember that when you’re writing the exam and during the interview, throughout the rest of your training. Even though we know ourselves better than anyone else, we are the last people equipped with being able to assess who and what we are. It’s like a doctor trying to remove and transplant his own heart and expecting to survive it. We know what to do and how to do it, but doing it on ourselves will never give us the results that we want.”

He lifted his head and blinked a single set of tears away. They could wait for later. “So I should keep seeing better doctors if I get to move here, if I get to be here?”
“Well, yes,” Maz smirked. “I expect that you’ll still be seeing me and I’m a better doctor.”

“Don’t brag,” he muttered.

“Don’t make me brag, Solo,” she said as she nudged her glasses down on her nose. “Can we move on from this? On to what you really want to talk about?”

He was fine talking about how he was wrong in this way, the part of him that made him act violent or want to be obsessed, but there were so many more parts of him that made him want to draw back. Now, drawn to a point by a deadline that he didn’t know about, he couldn’t let Maz go without going through the last few months. He hadn’t been able to talk to the other therapists in his life about it because there was always some other pressing issue. He’d only been able to talk to the people around him: his support system. It still burned him how one of those members had forgiven him despite what it meant and what he had done.

“Do you think I’m like him?” His voice dropped and his head fell with it. “Am I like Snoke? Or could I ever be like him?”

He felt Maz shift before she spoke. “In what way, Kylo? There are so many sides of him and his profile that I honestly have a hard time reading what you’re trying to say here. It’s been a long time since we spoke. Can you tell me what happened? Start from the beginning.”

His stupid mouth made an exhausted sound as he swallowed before he nodded.

He started where he could. He told Maz about Liza and then about what he was about to do to Rey. The words came out heavy but also distant. And then he moved on to the aftermath, or what he remembered of it.

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His father was in his room. He somehow let him in.

Kylo was sobbing and still on the floor, drawn into Han’s arms and a firm embrace. The only thing that he knew was what he was saying: someone needed to check on Rey, to make sure that she was okay. She should hate him. She should be afraid. She should never want to come close to him again. If she was alone then she wasn’t okay. He couldn’t get to her; she’d be too frightened of him. He’d ruined everything. He couldn’t save her.

“Son, Ben, Ky, come on.” Han dragged him up, making him stand. His legs felt unsteady and he had to lean on him again, dragging him down. “You’re going to shower and then drink some water. And then I’m going across the hall to check on her. Okay? Does that sound like a plan?”

Han’s arms braced him. At some point, he’d thrown up. He felt it and smelt it suddenly now that he was being lugged into the washroom.

He sat on the edge of the tub as his father pulled off the messed shirt. A soft touch brushed the bruised bite mark on his arm. Yeah, the last few weeks had been bad again. So what?

“You going to tell me what happened there?” Han brushed his hair from his eyes, kind no matter how fucked up his son still was.
“I did it?” He spoke as he swayed. “I did it because I’m not good enough?”

His father’s hand warmed his cold skin, cupping his face. “No one has ever said that except yourself. This last, whatever, this last forever has been hard. And you’ve been more than good enough. You’ve been perfect. You’ve been our boy. So come on and let’s get you cleaned up so I can go check on Rey. That’s what you want right?”

He nodded and shakily stood up. His legs made him stumble but strong and safe arms held him in place. His eyes blurred as his father finished undressing him and with one arm, supported him into the shower. He slowly slumped away from the hand and leaned against the wall, seeking sleep.

“Oh no, you don’t.” Han reached in, stopping him from dropping to the floor.

He was drunk but all of it felt like reality given to him from a dream. But the dream blurred. Poe was gripping him, telling him how much he loved him and nothing was a mistake as long as he thought about it and tried to fix it.

He kept looking for him, but only felt Han’s hand, holding him steady.

The shower woke him up enough to be guided to his bed. He didn’t feel clean, but at least he didn’t smell anymore. His father didn’t have to dress him, but his hands were mostly numb in the process of putting on clean clothes. But did he really do it himself? Someone else must have been dressing him instead. Somehow he had clothes. A light kiss against his ear told him that it must have been a ghost. He had new clothes and they weren’t sticky.

“Dad, dad, dad, don’t leave me,” his pathetic voice sobbed, grabbing for him. “Dad, I did something awful tonight.”

Han gently guided him under the covers. Still in his tux, the one that he wore despite how stupid he felt in it, he put himself down on top of the sheets and put his arms around him. Kylo greedily hugged him closer, feeling the dampness of his sleeve. “Ben, you’re really fucked up right now. I don’t know how you got this way but you need to take a deep breath and talk to me. Do you want me to get mom? Do you want me to call George or get Rey?”

“No, not Rey. Not George.” He rubbed his face against his father’s shirt. “Mom. I want mom.”

Han patted his shoulder and rolled over, still touching him. He dully heard him make a call.

But staring up at the ceiling, he only felt the room spin. He had almost forced himself on her. He was so lost in the moment that he was about to ruin her. He was about to make himself as bad as he had been. No matter what he did after this point, he was as bad as him. An unwanted kiss was rape. Even if it never went further than pressing his dumb lips against hers, it was as bad as rape. He’d fought so hard to keep her innocent, making her forget in his weakest moments, and now he was about to drag her back into the worst feelings. He didn’t want to sleep with her but a kiss, even without desire, was as bad as everything that Snoke had done to her because he was putting her in the position of being powerless.

But he only wanted to kiss her because she was home. She was everything.

Even if he didn’t feel anything sexual behind it, she would think it would be. He just wanted to feel love in that moment and broke down. They’d kissed so many times when they were younger. But now, now that he had almost assaulted her, she’d be afraid of him. His attraction to people over the contexts that they were in was part of why he George didn’t want him anymore either.

He was dully sobbing and mumbling when he smelt Leia’s perfume. It was the same scent from
before and he could breathe.

“Kylo, sweetheart?” He heard Leia ask. How’d she get in the room? “Can Han go and check on Rey?”

“Yeah, yeah.” He reached for her hand and slowly her body replaced Han’s. He nuzzled against her, feeling himself engulf her small frame. “Make sure she doesn’t hate me. Make sure she’s not afraid.”

“Jesus Christ, Han, go talk to the kids. If Rey was here and saw him like this…fuck, find out what happened to him. Find that woman too. We’ve seen them the last week. Find her and ask her what the fuck is going on.” She was speaking lowly, only for Han to hear but his ears were still open.

Han mumbled something and then disappeared. “Ben? Kylo? Can you talk to me?”

His head hurt. His body hurt. Everything burnt with pain. “Just want to sleep.”

She shifted out of his arms and he whimpered. “Here, drink this.”

It was water. She was making him drink.

Sitting up, his blurred eyes took in his mother. “You’re so beautiful.”

“And you’re a very handsome, strong, young man. And whatever happened here, you have us to help you. Okay? Okay?”

The shower had woken him up. He was hearing these things. He numbly nodded, gulping down the rest of the bottle. Another was quickly pressed in his hands.

“Did you do anything stronger than marijuana tonight?”

He shook his head. “Hux had weed. Said I’m…when I work with George I wouldn’t…”

“Christ, Ben. Thank God. Do you need to throw up again?”

He’d finished the water, feeling it dripping down his chin. He met his mother’s eyes.

And then he nodded.

He wasn’t sure if he threw up or not because everything went into a black blur.

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“So this happened after your trigger?”

He sucked in a breath. “There were at least…there were too many triggers. And I hate that term.”

“List them.”

Like with George, she wanted him to rise to a task, one specifically framed around understanding himself. “Trigger one was stress: I was performing a role for people I love. Hux is as close to a cousin or brother I will ever have. Paige is like the sister I’ve never had. I had to perform a role for
them and as annoying as it was I liked helping them figure it out. It’s been over three years since he’s…since Poe has been gone and they know that I’m still rolling in it on bad days. The medication I’m on now is better and I’m more balanced than I was before. I should have given up more control. But they also know that I like a challenge. I like stress but I hate annoying, meaningless stress. I should have told them when it got to be too much. I let that happen.

“Trigger two was…Liza. And my own…sexuality.”

Maz looked at him expectantly. “So are you going to strip down yourself now, Solo? Put yourself into context?”

Exhaling, he shook his head. “If I was…if I met with a client like me…I’d tell him that…”

He trailed off, not able to make the words. It was about to come out, but he couldn’t force it. Instead of pressing him, Maz sighed. “Why don’t you tell me what happened next?”

“Okay.”

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The room was black and the person holding him wasn’t strong.

“Mom?” He recognized the smell. “Mom, where are we?”

Leia stirred and pressed him back against the mattress. “Quiet, Ben. It’s all right. You’re fine.”

He blinked and slowly figured out where he was. “I’m…I’m hungry.”

“Shush. Dad will be here soon and you can eat. How the hell did you get so big with how little you eat?” Leia’s voice made him be more awake with each syllable.

“I ate more with him. And I eat more when I’m with Rey. We don’t have to share food anymore and hide.”

“Ben, sweetheart, you’re safe with us. That man has been dead for a decade. You’re so strong. You’ve had so much to deal with and you never should have lost him. You can miss him all of the time and we know that you do. But there are other things to deal with right now. Rey is fine. She’s upset and worried about you, but she just said that she came here and you weren’t yourself. I need to talk to Liza and I’m here with you. Do you understand?”

But then there was dad, coming through the door with a tray of food for him.

“It’s mostly just eggs and I…fuck, Ben, do you like or hate eggs?” Han looked genuinely puzzled, like he was afraid of offending him.

He smelled the plate and nodded. “He used to make me eggs.”

Leia shifted off of the bed and Han put the tray near him, still making him reach. He folded his legs under him and pulled the plate, piled with eggs and bacon and salt and everything, closer and started to eat. His stomach still ached but he needed something to fill the emptiness.
Leia handed him his phone and he nodded, putting in his headphones and pretending to scroll through his music. He earned this; he had acted like a child. They used to do the same thing to him as a kid. He’d listen to Leia’s phone while they argued about something.

He still heard what they said to one another as they stepped into the washroom.

“…Liza was also wasted. She’s down there now, saying that nothing happened. She’s wearing sunglasses like the rest of them, flirting with another groomsman. She came on to him and then he freaked out. I swear to God, Leia, I was so sure she’d be calling the cops because there’s just something wrong with her. Did he say what he did that was so wrong? The last thing he needs is someone accusing him of …of anything,” Han was saying. Kylo focused on eating, pretending not to know what was going on in his room even as he strained to hear it.

“So we’re here now. We are here trusting our son because we know him. We’ll always trust him. But what if she said something different? We’d still stand behind him and fight to the bitter end.” Leia sighed and he still kept eating, not just moving food around his plate like he wanted to. “How can I even be thinking this way? He’d never do something like that.”

“Well, it didn’t happen. He got too drunk, she came on to him and he shot her down. Good for him. If he’d talk more about if he’s dating again then this would be easier to understand. And Rey said that he was heartbroken when she got here. I hate to say it but I wish he was here. I wish they were still together. I still need to get Armitage alone. So let’s slow it down.” Han stopped to exhaled. “Why don’t you go down and get some breakfast, love. You’ve paid your dues. And I will still love you on the other side.”

“Well,” Leia said and he heard the door open and snapped his eyes down at his phone to press play. In the brief second it took his music to start, he heard her say: “Then see you on the other side.”

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“Your parents sound very loving.”

He almost rolled his eyes but settled for folding his arms across his chest instead. “They try. They’ve always tried. I haven’t always tried…”

“Now you’re just being purposely self-deprecating.”

He smirked. She returned the look by quirking her own lips.

“I think you explained how you ended up in that state. You clearly panicked because of what happened between you and Liza and…”

Shaking his head, he frowned. “She was part of it. But it…it was more of what almost happened with Rey. We’re still…we’re better now but it took a while for me to forgive myself and to help her understand why I was about to kiss her.”

He kept his eyes down but heard Maz take a deep breath. “But you stopped yourself. Kylo, I need to understand how you were thinking because this is…this could mean a number of things.”

“I was already feeling guilty. I almost slept with Liza again and I told myself I’d never get that low
again. Whatever my sexuality is, it’s…I went to one meeting on campus because the idiot I see at the university made me and what the others were talking about, I’ve never really felt. I know my mother has been reading books about…” he had to make himself say the word and grunted to himself, “…about bisexuality and it still doesn’t feel right to me. Why the fuck does everything need a label?”

“You had a long relationship with a man and you’ve also slept with a woman. And just because you’ve become more and more open with me, I know that you haven’t had any other sexual encounters. That’s your choice, but maybe moving on into a healthy relationship would be beneficial for you. But there’s nothing wrong with who you desire, Kylo. You can stop questioning whether or not you’d be a different way if you hadn’t undergone traumatic torture for many, many years. You don’t need a label if you don’t want one but your sexuality is inherently not wrong.” Maz made him look at her with her tone. But she still frowned. “As long as you didn’t truly desire Rey in that moment. Because as much as I care for you, as much as George and your parents and your friends love you, those thoughts mean your goals for the future will be eliminated and we will be having a very different conversation involving the police.”

“I know that. And I wouldn’t blame you.” He lifted his chin, hoping that he still had her respect. “In that moment, I was intoxicated, enraged, and aroused. Those are states that make me lose control while also fighting to be in control. It gets to a point where I split apart and just act. He saw those things in me and stayed with me anyways. Having sex with him was…he helped me through so many things. When Liza just causally acted like anal sex was something that would magically make me fall in love with her or whatever she wanted…it was something that I should have reacted better to. We didn’t even have any condoms. What the hell was I thinking? What if I did sleep with her? What if she got pregnant? I would never take a child from his mother again but raising a kid with her would be a nightmare.”

“So you were feeling shame about letting yourself be vulnerable, both in terms of how you process sex, as well as exposing your previous relationship again. Even though your assault occurred almost twenty years ago, it is the unfortunate foundation for your ability to form and maintain relationships. Correct?” Maz was letting him talk about anything other than Rey, but he knew she would correct the course soon enough. And he’d have to reveal the thoughts he was trying to press down.

“Rey was also vulnerable that night,” he said. “I put her in that position.”

“But you didn’t assault her.” Maz’s tone was serious and he wanted to believe her. “I just want to know if you sexually desire her, Kylo.”

“No,” he answered, flatly. “I told her that. I told her that I’d never…force myself on her. It wasn’t that way. The only thing I wanted was to feel close to her, like we were when we were younger and had to share everything. I wanted the pain to go away and the world just to be us. If I had…when I replay the whole thing in my mind, I would have kissed her like I kissed my mother or grandmother. Affection without arousal. I would have hugged her after, telling her how much she means to me and I don’t deserve her. But since I was drunk, she could have read it in any number of ways. And all of them end up with me becoming Snoke in her eyes.”

“What happened when you did talk to her?”

Sighing, he went back again.

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“Kylo?”

He’d forced himself out of his room to use the gym. He avoided meeting anyone’s eyes that he recognized when he’d sweated out the worst of his hangover. Now, sitting on a bench outside of the hotel, he let his body ache with his heart and mind. He went for a run after the gym and was quietly thinking about how good it would feel to massacre his arm with his teeth.

Looking over to Rey, he caught the gentleness in her eyes and tried to smile. “I’m not avoiding you.”

“I know.” She sat down beside him and he tossed his half-finished cigarette on the ground and smashed it with his foot. “Mom and dad told me.”

“Rey, I don’t know how to tell you how sorry I am. You were trying to help me and I made you fear me. I’m so sorry.” The words felt dumb on his lips but she still took his hand. “You’re so much more mature than I was when I was fourteen.”

Shaking her head, Rey sighed. “I’ve had…I’ve had help.”

“Tell me what you’re thinking. Please. I need…do you still trust me?” It hurt to look at her so he focused on her hand.

“I still trust you.” She squeezed her small hand against his. “I’m not…I’m still confused, I guess. Did you…why did you go upstairs with Liza?”

He bit the inside of his mouth hard. “I wanted to sleep with her. Again. If she hadn’t said what she said, I probably would have had sex with her and regretted it. Again.”

“What did she say to you? Why were you so mad?”

How was he going to explain something that he really didn’t understand himself? “She wanted me to…she told me that I could fuck her like I used to…be intimate. With him.”

“Oh.” He glanced up, watching Rey process the information. “That…she shouldn’t have talked about him like that. I’m still angry that she called you that name. I remember when we were kids, how mad he would get when anyone would call you guys names. You just loved each other. When I was at Luke’s, we talked about this. We learnt about it with Ransolm. When mom talks to me about sex, it’s…it’s so I understand my body and how I might still be afraid of someone hurting me. Liza was…she hurt you. I don’t blame you for getting mad. It was really mean.”

“But you weren’t afraid? Afraid of me?”

The question hung in the air until Rey finally sighed and he could breathe again. “No. But maybe…maybe I was a little afraid. Afraid of my own thoughts.”

He’d been too focused on himself again. “Did you…did you want me to kiss you?”

She closed her eyes. “I always…I don’t like it when you’re upset. It hurts me. I always want to make it better. I just thought…if you had me, you wouldn’t need Liza. You wouldn’t miss him as much. And I could…fix you.”

“That’s…fuck.” He roughly ran his hand through his hair. “I hate myself for making you feel that way. I don’t know how to say this without making you think that there’s something wrong with
you but I didn’t want you that way. It wasn’t sexual. I don’t…I’m not like Snoke. I’d never do that
to you. Your first time…when you find the right person who’s your age and respects and loves
you, it will be for you. I’m so much older than you but I don’t act like it. Putting you in that
position was wrong. I’m…everyone sees us as brother and sister. I don’t…why am I like this?
Why did I do that to you?”

A warm breeze made him realize where they were and that they were there together.

“But you didn’t do anything. I need,” she said, gripping his hand so he would meet her eyes. “I
need some time to think about how I feel. You’re all I’ve known my entire life. Even when I was
mad at you, even when I thought you were trying to hurt me and make me jealous, I still loved
you. And I love you right now but I don’t know how to feel about you. You hold me and I’m home
but I feel warm in a different way now.”

She was a teenager. He remembered those feelings too. Arousal hurt at first because he thought it
was wrong to feel that way. She was just like him, not understanding her own attraction. He’d
failed her. He was supposed to help her and he’d made her just like him.

It was also discomfortingly satiating that she thought he was attractive. He’d have to work on
forgetting that realization.

“We need to talk about this.” He studied her again. She was in a simple white sundress, her hair up
in a ponytail. The makeup from yesterday was gone and her face was bare and young: too young
and innocent. “I’m always going to be in your life but if you need space and time to figure out how
you’re feeling, I can go back early. Go to my own apartment and you can be at home. You can…
have these feelings. But you have to understand that I can’t think about you that way. You’re my
soul, Rey, but…you need someone your age. It’s not that I don’t think that you’re beautiful,
won­derful, and…attractive. But how I feel about you is different.”

She withdrew her hand and wiped at her eyes. The tears came slowly, but they were still there.
“I’m…I understand. I think. Or I want to understand. I need some time to think about how I feel.
I’m not sad that you don’t…feel that way about me. I don’t know how I feel either. Because maybe
I don’t really feel that way about you. Maybe I got…”

“You got caught up in all of the emotions.” He rested his hands on his knees, afraid to touch her
but still wanting to comfort her. “We’re still us.”

She sniffled and shook her head. “Remember when…remember after the police left and after Han
yelled at us? Remember I asked if you could be my boyfriend one day?”

He could almost feel the warmth of the bathwater on his hand; the lingering sting of his broken
arm snaked through his body as well. “That’s a hard day to forget. If…one day, if we both feel the
same, then I’d be very proud to be your boyfriend.”

She turned, a small smile breaking through her tears. “I think you’d be a good boyfriend. You’ve
had practice.”

He wanted to cringe but smiled instead. “I can drive you around in my car and buy you things.”

Rey grinned. “And you can kiss me and I can sleep in your bed.”

Taking her hand, he kissed her palm lightly. “Maybe one day.”

They sat in silence until he saw Liza emerge from the hotel entrance and start to make her way over
to them.
“The next time I speak with Rey, we will discuss this. Has she been…how have the last few months gone for her?” Maz made him focus again and he nodded.

“She hasn’t…” he stopped talking and sighed. “We’ve talked about it. I can get tired of always talking about things like this so I’ve had to work to be focused and let her explore her own thoughts. I just don’t want her to start having sex before she’s ready. Leia thinks the same way. She started having…her periods have been really painful and now she’s on birth control. It freaks me out. I want to protect her and keep her from being hurt but she’s…I just hope she waits longer than I did. People can get taken from us too easily.”

“That could go either way, you know. Telling her what to do might make her act out. You were very much the same, remember.” Maz folded her hands behind her head and pursed her lips. “Tell me what happened with Liza.”

He shrugged, replaying the awkward conversation in his head. “She apologized to us both. I didn’t say anything but I was glad that she did for Rey. She didn’t admit what she was doing but we knew. Then she went back inside to boss people around at the dumb gift opening. I talked with Hux afterwards and Han and Leia explained everything without making it worse.”

“Are you prepared not to live with him anymore?” Maz adjusted her glasses.

Another shrug. “We submitted our theses at the same time. He really didn’t want to take the extra semester and complained the entire time but it felt good to do that one last thing together. We went to the printer’s office together and he was mad that I only had minor edits on something that’s 300 pages long. But it’s double spaced so I don’t understand what his problem is. We’re not bothering with convocation and will do something at Christmas instead to celebrate. It’s been so much work to pack up our shit and he’s been commuting a lot. After his dad died, he had to take on so much. His bitchy step-mom tried to take everything and didn’t realize that Hux’s dad left her nothing. He was a really good lawyer, I guess. But he’s got a job at our old school. Holdo is retiring and he’s going to be Rey’s principal in January. I’m…I guess I’m proud of him. Paige is pregnant so his life is going to be so different. And I’m…I’m still going through the same shit.”

“Well, you’ll have one more moment together after Christmas when you turn in the apartment keys. And just because your time as roommates is over, it doesn’t mean he’s going to go away.” Maz hadn’t written anything down the entire time. They were really just having a conversation.

He’d spent over ten years trying to figure out who she was and what she wanted from him. He wasn’t allowed to know a thing about her and preferred it that way. When he left the office that day, it wouldn’t hurt as much. But deep down he would miss her and their sessions.

“Yeah, that’s the last part. I think he’ll miss me paying his rent but that’s because he’s a fucking cheapskate.” He snorted to himself and caught Maz smiling. “He’s already threatened me with being the godfather to his kid. I don’t even want to think about that. Poe would have been thrilled. He loves…loved kids. Rey is excited too. She can’t wait to start babysitting. I’m just afraid that if I have to hold it, I’m going to drop it and Hux will kill me.”

“So you’re both starting a new phase in life. And you’ve overcome something with Rey in a mature way. There will still be fear and pain there for you and her, especially if those feelings are
unbalanced. But you can handle it. I know you can,” Maz said and he returned her praise with a small smile. “And when you approach the exam, handle it in the same way. Look at the problem and know that you’re not alone in solving it. Of course, when you write the exam you will be, but in the future you will be part of a team. You can be an excellent leader if you get past some of your more negative thoughts about yourself. But working with others and getting along with them… don’t lose sight of that.”

He glanced at his watch and sighed. “Time’s up.”

“Yes. Yes it is.”

“Can I,” he said then briefly shut his eyes before looking at her again. “The next time I’m here, for the interview, can we get some coffee or something?”

Maz smiled broadly, the grin almost taking up her entire face. “Well, Kylo Ren, I’d really enjoy that.”

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He helped George decorate the Christmas tree. He’d already done the same thing with Rey, putting up their tree at home, stringing up tinsel and lights on the first of December. It had been the week leading up to his defence so he’d been overwhelmed by nerves and was really thankful to have a relaxed afternoon of decorating and eating her freshly baked cookies. She’d really forgiven him but she still kept her distance at times. The hugs were shorter. She didn’t sleep in his room or cuddle with him on the sofa. She talked about Finn more. And he couldn’t be hurt by that. Her feelings were her own and she shouldn’t always feel like she had to keep him together.

“I can’t remember, does your family have an angel or a star?” George asked, stepping back from placing his own angel at the top of the silver tree. His kids would be arriving the day after Kylo left. Inwardly, he regretted not being able to meet them. His oldest son was only a few years younger than he was. It was a strange part of his life that was public but also oddly private.

“Star. It was the first present Leia got from her parents when she got married. Han said it was the only gift that they’ve kept since then. I’m always afraid that I’ll drop it when they make me put it on. It’s not my fault I’m tall.” The tree was simple, but he hoped that George’s kids would appreciate it.

“Yes, we share the same problem.” George put his hand on his shoulder. “Do you want to talk about your session?”

He shook his head. He really wanted to do another practice exam but George had made him promise that they would have one day without going through the questions again. “Not really. But I feel good, stable. I’m almost sad that it’s over.”

After dinner, while drinking warmed mulled wine, George apologized again for Toronto. And Kylo had to tell him not to be worried.

He was almost ready.

On New Years Day, mildly hung over and craving a cigarette that he couldn’t have because he made a damned promise, he sent in his FBI application.
Rey held his hand when he clicked submit.
Whatever happened, he had her.
He just had to stop risking losing her.

Chapter End Notes

Standard tag warnings, plus mentions of personality disorders, almost underage content, suicide references...etc. If you're still reading this, then you know what this is about.

As a side note, I do actually have a PhD but it's not in psychology so take all of this as it is: something that came out of my brain.

I'm also fudging reality a bit here (HA!). In my extensive research about how to get into the FBI, Kylo would technically need a full year of work experience before applying. But if you want a fun fact, the FBI has a special category for professional athletes and how doing sportsball makes you a prime candidate for being an FBI agent. So Kylo's brief consulting work and weird internship when he was 18 technically make him eligible in this twisted universe in which a clearly damaged person would be given a badge and a gun.

Next chapter will be just Rey. Her chapters are harder for me to write but hopefully her chapter will explore a little bit more of how she's feeling and not just from Kylo's sad perspective.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Rey deals with Kylo being home all of the time and how she feels about him. Read chapter notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kylo worked out every day. He was bored, stressed, or just wanted a cigarette, Rey guessed. He’d get up at six a.m. and go for a run, no matter what the weather was like. Bee would always wake up when he heard Kylo’s door open and quickly hop off the bed to get breakfast. He wasn’t a greedy cat; he liked the secret affection too. Rey would hear his meowing and Kylo’s response as he walked down the stairs. When he thought no one else was listening, he’d talk to the cat like he was a person who’d chirp little replies.

It was always in Spanish.

That was another thing that Kylo did every day. He’d talk to the cat or talk to himself. He’d listen to podcasts or watch the Latino news or some trashy telenovela, his eyes glazing over before he’d force himself to focus again. Hearing people bicker over romance wasn’t what he wanted to build his vocabulary on. He’d write grocery lists in Spanish and Leia would rub her eyes and comment how he could just do the shopping if he was going to do that. Rey was quiet, knowing that mom was thinking about someone else who used to do the same thing.

Mom and dad were worried at first about how focused Kylo was. None of the things were destructive though and he always kept his appointments. He was readjusting to being back home with nothing to do but wait. Family dinners were back to how they should be, just the four of them.

But he was in the house too much.

Since submitting his application, he was waiting for a response. His fingernails were bitten down and raw. January was stretching on for him and everyone else.

And Rey didn’t really want to complain about the working out.

Kylo would come back from his run as she was eating breakfast, getting ready for school. He’d shed his thick hoodie and gloves and wipe his face with his t-shirt as he gulped down water in the kitchen. She’d stare at the solid flesh of his stomach and then quickly look back at her cereal. The scars had faded and shifted; now it was muscular and smooth, white skin. He really didn’t look like any of the boys at school, even the seniors. They really did look like boys: gangly and awkward with changing voices and acne. Kylo was almost twenty-five. Kylo was a man with dark hair, a deep voice, and broad shoulders.

He’d been one for a while but their time apart meant that she didn’t have to be around him all of the time. He’d always been tall and big but now everything had fallen into place in the right spots.
Now, since he’d moved home, he was there all of the time.

Kylo showering, Kylo sleeping, Kylo sitting on the sofa reading, humming to himself and petting the cat until someone walked in the room and he’d ignore him.

Kylo also throwing a book across the room when it frustrated him. Kylo also complaining when mom made him shovel the walk. Kylo also looking lonely and lost in memories when he’d look through old pictures.

It made it very hard not to think about the autumn and how painful it had been to work through how she thought about what happened in August. It still didn’t make sense but at least now things were almost back to normal. Maybe not normal. It was another new normal in a long string of new states of being that they had to adapt to. She’d still feel him keep his distance from her and she’d do the same. He wanted to make sure she wasn’t afraid. But that night hadn’t only been about fear.

She didn’t want to tell anyone, especially mom and dad, but had confessed to Rose that night in the hotel room. Rey had been in bed, sobbing, when Finn and Rose got back. They were laughing and joking, almost flirting, when they saw how she was curled up on her bed, still in her dress. The feeling of Kylo’s hands on her face and the scent of how close he was wouldn’t leave her. He’d shouted at her and looked lost in his fear of himself. Those words wouldn’t go away either.

Rose had sent Finn back downstairs, telling him to help clean up. He looked at Rey with confused concern and complained about having to help but Rose made him do it. But Finn’s eyes lingered on her and her tears for a few heartbeats before he finally left the room.

Curling up next to her, Rose held her hand and asked what was wrong. Their dresses spilled over the edge of the bed in a mess of yellow and lace. It hurt to get the words out, how Kylo had been drunk and wanted to sleep with Liza, how he’d slept with her before, how he’d almost kissed her. Rose’s arms had tightened, then loosened, asking her if she was afraid of him. No, Rey had said. She had wanted him to kiss her, to take his pain away. Rose made her sit up, wiping at her eyes with a tissue. Rose knew how she had felt about Ransolm and tried to sound more grown up when she explained how she thought crushes were okay but Kylo would have been really wrong if he’d kissed her. Even if Rey wanted it, wanted to feel his mouth against hers with his years of practice at kissing and meaning it, he couldn’t do a thing like that and not hurt her. He was right to pull away. It would have hurt more if he’d done it.

She quietly wept and had to agree. They both swore to never tell anyone, to keep it a secret. They couldn’t tell Paige. Well, they could tell Paige about Liza. Just not what happened after.

By the time mom and dad got there, both looking slightly drunk but still sobered by their son down the hall, Rey had her story straight.

Talking with Kylo the next day had helped but her mind was still twisted in how she felt about him. Speaking with Maz, just after New Year’s before school started, as well as her other therapists helped some of the feelings. But there were still so many other sentiments tied to Kylo that she had an endless pile to unravel. He had saved her; he had protected her. He had almost sacrificed himself for her. The past hurt just as much as the present and the future was just as clouded.

Maybe all of it would have been easier if he had solely been attracted to men. But he clearly had many more things to work on when it came to that part of him.

And Rey knew that she had an equally important and hard task in the same sphere.

When they started school again in the fall, and Kylo was back angrily finishing his thesis, she spent
more time with Rose than Finn. Maybe it would be easier if she avoided boys for a while. Finn would send her irritated texts when she didn’t say much to him at school. He eventually stopped sitting with them and sat with his friends from basketball at lunch. Good, Rey thought. She could sit and talk to Kaydel and Rose and tell them about how bad her periods were getting. They had been spotty and weird when she was eleven. Then they were light and erratic when she was twelve. She didn’t have one for six months when she was thirteen and finally told mom about it, when she was back home. She took her to the doctor. The examination felt humiliating. Rey had cried and gripped Leia’s hands as the very nice female doctor tried to tell her that even if there was something wrong with her body, it didn’t make it broken. It was just a little different and they could find a way to make her feel better.

But what if a boy never wanted to touch her? Finn had backed off since he’d kissed her and she told him that she wanted to wait to have a boyfriend. Now that he was ignoring her, which was a good thing she’d tell herself, there really was only Kylo to think about.

Having to be on the pill was another wave of tears and shame. If anyone found out, she’d be back to being called a slut. The rumour that she’d been raped would reawaken in a harsher form. But when her periods got better, so did some of the tears. Rose kept her secret. So did Kylo. It was personal and he also shared her fear about being labelled something that she wasn’t.

She felt okay telling him things about her body. He’d try to understand and when he moved back home, they’d take all of their pills together. Kylo told her how his new medication made it almost easier to focus. She made a note to herself to ask her therapists about what he was on because her mind was clearly going to the wrong places.

He’d sometimes meet Hux for lunch at school. That was another bizarre trial that began in January. Her principal had a picture that included her on his desk at school. When she and Kaydel volunteered for the yearbook committee, Kaydel wouldn’t shut up about how hot Kylo looked in the picture and how perfect they looked all dressed up. She would lurk outside of the teacher’s lounge when he was there, just spending time with his best friend. She and Rose would have to drag her away and Rey infinitely regretted every giving Kaydel that picture of them.

But Hux also protected her in a different way, or at least offered to. Holdo would listen to her problems but Hux had seen many of them firsthand. But calling him Mr. Hux just felt wrong and weird, no matter how many times Kylo teased him about it and laughed until his friend turned red. The first time Hux and Paige came over for dinner, she hid in her room until Hux came up alone to talk to her. He was rubbing his palms on his pants the entire time, trying to tell her that he wouldn’t treat her differently, but also knew too much to be consistent about it. He had known her since she was four. They both had to respect one another. It wasn’t the most reassuring talk but it still got her downstairs. And that night Kylo explained more about what Hux had wanted to say: she could come to him at any time and he wouldn’t judge her.

Even though she couldn’t control how her body felt about Kylo, she also felt more for him on the emotional side. Kylo also differed from the other boys in how he talked about how he felt. He’d be quiet most of the day and then have a low conversation about how he was thinking or feeling. Dad got the bright idea to renovate the basement in order to give Kylo another hobby. Mom looked pleased at both getting the basement finished and having them do something together. Kylo would get back from the gym and forego showering and get to work, finishing what Han had worked on during the day with him. The only room they weren’t changing was the bedroom, but the rest of it was being altered: new walls, new finishing, new furniture. They’d talk and put up wallpaper while Rey watched from the stairs, adding in something whenever she thought it was important. It was most often how she saw a certain memory. Kylo knew how things happened, but only from his perspective. And Kylo always looked at her with bright and agreeing eyes.
It was hard to get those looks out of her head.

By February, Kylo got his answer and booked his exam date. Now when she was sitting on the staircase, watching them rip up and replace the flooring or light fixtures, she was reading practice questions from the FBI test manual to him. The questions didn’t make any sense to her but wasn’t surprised when Kylo got most of them right. Whenever he’d get one wrong, he’d stop what he was doing, get up and take the book from her. He’d huff and then get her to find a similar question so he could figure out how his thinking had misled him.

The night before the exam, he’d been more agitated than usual. He couldn’t study anymore. It was too distracting. He paced around after dinner and then finally stopped in her doorway. With his eyes soft, like they had been so many years ago, he quietly asked if she could sleep in his bed that night. He wouldn’t be able to sleep otherwise. If she was there, he would want her to sleep and couldn’t toss and turn the whole night. The words he blinked in between what he spoke begged her to still trust him, asking her not to think that this was something sexual.

Even though she said she didn’t think of it that way, sleeping in his arms that night made her body ache. She felt goosebumps with his arms around her and said that she was just cold; he’d hold her tighter and told her that she was safe. The sound of his voice made her wet. He kissed her forehead and fell asleep. Closing her eyes, she fell into a vivid dream of kisses, touches, and sex. She imagined it as far as she could. She hadn’t been able to ignore the shape and size of his penis in his sweatpants or shorts. He should have been able to walk through his own house without someone ogling him and the thought made the whole thing wrong but still so tempting. How would it feel inside of her? Would she make the same sounds that he used to make, the ones from that night in the apartment? Poe’s panting and wanting made her tense up even more, imagining it was her instead.

When he hugged her awake in the morning, thanking her and making sure she was okay, he quietly left for the long drive to the regional FBI office. And she spent a long morning in the shower, touching herself faster and harder until her body shuddered and she lost feeling in her legs. There had been a flash behind her eyes and the pleasure consumed her until shame rained down like the water around her.

She couldn’t do this to herself. Like the crush on Ransolm, this was wrong.

When Kylo called in the late afternoon and said that he’d passed, she knew that she couldn’t do this to Kylo either.

Maybe the boys at school weren’t so bad after all.

Chapter End Notes

Previous mentions to everything in the tags, but combined with female masturbation.

Hey, remember when chapters used to be short here? Well, here’s one. Be prepared for not good things to happen after this. And I want to throw up in advance.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Rey tries to hang out with her friends but old thoughts return.

See warnings in the tags for past references (and thanks for reading!).

Rose made her hang out after school for basketball practice. They had tried reading for a while when the boys were still running sprints and warming up, but they couldn't really stay focused. Rey couldn't come up with a good excuse so she reluctantly sat with the other girl on the small stage in the gym, watching the boys dribble and pass and try to show off. She could tell that they were all happy that there were girls watching them. Even though it was just them and not anyone popular.

She wasn't there because she was avoiding Kylo, she told herself. She was there because she wanted to be friends with Finn again. It had been almost a month since he passed his exam and was growing increasingly bored with waiting to be called in for the next stage. It would happen any day now. The FBI checklist was back on the fridge, with all of the initial phases, other than the last one before Phase II, crossed out with a red marker.

If she heard him say Phase II one more time she was going to scream.

He was getting ready to leave and he just got back. On the one hand, he'd be far away and she could miss him again. It would be one of those sweet but hard aches that made the time bearable, she hoped. It would be nice if he could be around for their birthdays but no one really knew. But, still, on the other hand, he'd be moving on with his life again. Virginia was far away and she'd never been there before. She'd have to take a plane to see him; it wasn't like before with the long car rides. But what if he was put somewhere further away? What if they made him move to Alaska?

Folding her arms, she frowned. "Is what they're doing...good?"

Someone missed a pass and the ball bounced hard against the ground. The boys started laughing at the player who missed the ball and she had to roll her eyes. Boys were so mean.

Rose shrugged. "I don't really know. I just wanted to watch. They have won a couple games this season. I guess they are okay."

She sighed again. Sports were really boring. Kylo, in his boredom, usually watched some sort of sports on television. Dad liked it. Hux would sometimes come by and they'd talk about sports like they actually knew what was happening. The basement was almost finished and she had a feeling that they'd hang out there more once it was done.

Maybe they were hanging out so much because Hux was also afraid of Kylo leaving.

"Should we go to the next game?" she asked, determined to be interested in the team for Finn.
Rose had her eyes on the players, but nodded. “I was at the last one. I think you’d like it. Maybe you can make Kylo come so he isn’t as bored.”

Exhaling, she licked her lips. “I’m not just thinking about him all of the time.”

Turning, Rose smirked. “Yes you are. And it’s fine. He’s like, he’s not cute but he’s handsome? Like Poe was cute. Kylo is totally different. He doesn’t scare me anymore because he’s always around but he’s…I don’t know.”

Rey tried to keep her eyes on the other boys, trying to force herself not to think about how to talk about Kylo. “It’s weird when he wants to be scary. That reporter came back. I guess someone forgot and put his name in his university’s newsletter. He really hates that guy. I don’t want him to have a gun but he keeps asking dad to get one.”

Rose’s eyes went wide for a second and then she breathed out. “Guns scare me so much. Armie showed me his dad’s old gun collection. They have no idea what to do with it. Like, they are going to sell it before the baby comes but I heard him and Kylo talking last week. He wants him to keep one and go to the shooting range with him.”

“He…there is someone out there.” Rey shifted her weight, sticking her hands under her thighs. “He worries about it when he’s tired.”

The conversation fell aside and they watched the boys finish practice. She waved at Finn as he walked to the locker room. He returned the gesture with a grin.

The world was never as simple as she wanted to be. She’d be fifteen in less than a month. And all she could think about was how much Kylo hated being fifteen. Sixteen had been good. But at fifteen, Kylo had been angry all of the time. Like always, she was worried that she’d make the same mistakes but with a different flavour.

She followed Rose out of the gym to wait for Finn. Crossing her arms again, she still wondered if she had the same strength that he did.

“Do you still want to hang out at my house after? Mom said that we could order pizza.” Rose was tilting her head, watching her friend drift off again. “I mean, if you don’t have homework or anything.”

She’d been distracted lately and was behind in a few things. But right then she wanted to do nothing for the rest of the evening. She reminded herself to talk to Kylo or mom and dad about how sometimes the feelings of boredom started to creep in again. Like with sadness and pain, sometimes the distance helped but it never fully went away. Maybe she’d take the time to call Ransolm that weekend or Maz to get her mind off of it all.

She was nodding at the same time Finn and Ethan emerged from the gym. Finn smiled and she quickly hugged him, grateful for a warm and firm hug. The feelings from before started to ebb and she could concentrate on smiling at her friends.

Kylo wouldn’t like that they were walking to Rose’s but it really wasn’t that far. And it was a nice cold, one that hung in the air rather than getting into her bones. And mom and dad knew where she was. She texted dad when they were leaving, all bundled up in jackets and heavy boots. Finn offered to carry her backpack and she shook her head; he already had his gym bag and his backpack. But she still thanked him after giving it another thought.

Rose walked ahead, chatting with Ethan. Ethan was laughing at everything that she said and it
made Rey snort and look at Finn.

“Yeah, I know he’s trying too hard.” He looked at her and smirked slightly. “But I guess he likes her.”

“He likes her this week, but what about next week?” Rey shoved her hands deeper into her pockets, breathing into the collar of her jacket. “Everyone in our grade doesn’t really get it.”

Tilting his head, Finn looked like he wanted her to stop walking. He shuffled his step for a second but then shook his head. “What do you mean, Rey? Is this something from therapy?”

“I guess. And a bit from Kylo. But I can make up my own mind. Sometimes I miss my old school. We could talk about anything with everyone. Here, I really only have you guys.” She held Finn’s eyes for a second and then winced to herself. “I’m sorry for being…weird the last few months.”

She really had been. And this apology felt clumsy and almost too late. Maybe they wouldn't be friends again because she'd pushed him away. The fear suddenly struck her that she really didn't know what he thought about her. Maybe she couldn't apologize enough this time.

“No, no way. It’s okay, Rey.” Finn really did make her stop now, lightly gripping her arm. “I know that I, like, kissed you a while ago and you said it wasn’t okay but I’ve been really thinking about it. If you like me back, then it’s cool. But you don’t have to. You went through a lot of bad stuff. It would be nice if we could talk about it again but I don’t want you to get sad. I’ve just been glad to have you back here with us.”

Standing under the streetlight, she let him hug her. His winter coat crinkled as they embraced and she sighed. She wanted to belong there. She loved mom and dad. She had dance class and her cat. And right now she had Kylo but he would probably be leaving again soon. And then what would happen? Most of the plans that Kylo had made when he was younger tended to turn into him thinking that what he wanted worked for everyone. And she knew from all of the healthy talking she had shared over the years that her goals and dreams might not align with them and they didn’t have to.

“I talk a lot with Rose but maybe we can talk about all of this again.” She gave Finn a light smile and hugged him again. Maybe if she talked with Finn more, she’d have a better understanding as to why the girls at school were always talking about boys. Talking about dresses she could do. Music and movies weren’t really her thing but fashion and dancing she liked. She really did have to like more things. Kylo was always right.

When she stepped back, Finn held her eyes and smiled. “Can I hold your hand?”

Blinking quickly, she felt a small twist in her heart. She actually wanted him to do that.

The rest of the walk, she had her gloved hand in his, enjoying a soft warmth that surprised her.

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A clattering from outside of the house made them all jump from the board game that they were playing. The clear banging of metal garbage cans made Rey sit up, keeping her eyes locked on the back door. Her heart shuddered at the sound and her breath stuck firmly in her throat. She couldn’t see her friends; she couldn’t hear them talking. It was just the empty space before something bad
happened. “…going to get my dad.” Rose was getting up to move and Rey shot her hand out, keeping her there.

“We don’t know what it was, Rose. We shouldn’t do anything.” She wanted her to stay quiet. They all had to be silent. She had only spoken in a whisper and gripped her fingers hard against Rose’s arm.

Rose glanced at the others, then back at her. “Rey. It was probably just our dumb neighbour’s dog. It’s probably nothing. My dad can check it out.”

Blinking, Rey slowly let go. Rose looked at her with kindness before heading upstairs.

She swore she heard the door to the basement rattle and she knew that she couldn’t scream. Instantly, she dropped to the floor and covered her head and ears. She couldn’t run. He’d always catch her and hurt her more if she ran.

She felt a shaking breath beside her. And it was like she could feel the same stench that had always clung to Snoke’s body, the one that was etched with death and pain. Biting back tears, she turned her head.

But it was only Finn. He was trying to tell her that it was okay.

She rose up, throwing her arms around him. Now she let tears start to fall, clinging to him.

“Hey, hey, Rey. It’s cool. It’s fine. Ethan locked the door. You’re safe here with us.” Finn’s voice was calm in her ear but she couldn’t stop her shaking.

The minutes stretched on before Mrs Tico came back with Rose. When the backdoor opened, it was only Mr Tico. He’d went around the house and only saw the upturned trash cans and paw prints. He came inside mumbling about how cold it was.

“It really was just the dog, kids.” His eyes settled on Rey and his face softened. He wasn’t a mean dad, but he was strict. Rose had more chores and rules at home than she did. But she could see how much he loved his daughter when he looked at her. “I heard him barking out there.”

“Do you want to go home, Rey?” Mrs Tico rubbed her back. Her heart still hadn’t slowed down. And she knew that she was quivering.

She nodded, still not able to find words.

It was just a dog. It had to be just a dog.

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She knew that Kylo had looked at the trashcans. He’d searched in the alley before coming downstairs into the familiar basement, feet heavy on the stairs. If he’d seen anything that was really there or something that he’d imagined was there, she really didn’t want to hear it. She just wanted to go home. But still, the entire time she spent waiting for him to come, Finn had held her hand. And it felt safe to be there with him.
“It still happens to me too. It’s okay, Rey,” Kylo said when they were finally in the car on the way home.

“I know. I just didn’t like that my friends saw me like that. I thought I was done being afraid of shadows.” Sighing, she kept her eyes on the passing streetlights. “Do you really want Hux to get a gun?”

Kylo silently stared forward for a long second. “I don’t ever want to lose anyone again. It would make me feel safer.”

Frowning, she traced a heart onto the car window. “So what are we going to do when you’re gone again?”

“I guess…,” he sighed and shook his head. “I guess watch out for one another. It’s not… I’m sorry that you felt embarrassed around your friends. But how you felt isn’t strange or makes you bad. And it’s probably my fault for always being worried about the same thing.”

Quietly, she leaned back to look at him. She still thought about that night in the hotel room, how she felt when Kylo was about to kiss her. It was wrong of him; he was so worried that she’d be afraid of him for many things. His fear of losing the people he loved was one of them; another one was how he reacted when he was stressed. But a lot of his feelings that night had been mixed up. She couldn’t blame him. She did want to help him but also didn’t want him ever to think that he was like Snoke. He wasn’t a killer; he wasn’t a pedophile. Maz made sure that she felt safe around him. Why wouldn’t she? Would it have been different if he’d just kissed her on the cheek? What would it have felt like? Would his lips have been soft? She already knew that his arms were strong and kind.

Those lips were pursed with worry as he felt her eyes on him. “But you were safe with your friends. You weren’t alone. We can talk about how not to freeze up if something like this happens again.”

Nodding, Rey went back to staring out the window. “I couldn’t run or hide. I used to always be able to do that.”

“You’ve grown up, Rey. Things change. But I know how strong you are. When… when I’m gone again, you’ll be able to take care of yourself and your friends.” He spoke but she could tell he was thinking about so many other things. It was mostly because he wasn’t looking at her. And the roads weren’t that bad.

She wanted to ask him why he had to go away again but it was a silly question. Of course he had to go. She just wished that her heart wasn’t so conflicted in the time that they had together.

It would never be enough, but sometimes it could be too much.

When they were finally parked in the garage, he pulled her into a long hug, sighing into her hair. “It won’t be forever when I’m gone the next time, Rey. It will only be for six months.”

Shaking her head, she leaned against his shoulder. “But then you’ll get a job there. And then you’ll really be gone.”

She knew she was upset. Her thoughts had been rattled and her cheeks still burnt with humiliation over how she responded to such a simple sound. That broken feeling always remained, hidden in the background. It was always waiting to jump out at her when she thought it had vanished into the haze of words, therapy, and healing.

“But then I’ll really be able to protect everyone.” His voice stayed soft. His hand was firm on her
back. “Not just our family but other families too. And when you’re ready, you can come stay with me wherever I end up.”

Shutting her eyes, she had to tell herself that the promise would keep being enough. George was able to keep them safe from afar. One day, that would be Kylo’s job too.

He helped her into bed, her bed, after silently staying close to her as she got ready to go to sleep. It wasn’t early or late. She just wanted to try to sleep. Kissing her forehead, he leaned back to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

“You can’t blame yourself for being afraid.” He was repeating himself but she managed to give him a small smile. Whatever would ease the pained look on his face. She knew all of this but it was sometimes hard to make the lessons stay fresh in her mind. It was just trashcans in an alley. It was just a dog.

“Where’s Bee?”

He glanced around and then got a momentarily annoyed look on his face before retrieving the cat from his room. “I don’t know why he’s started doing that.”

“He’s mad that I won’t let him go outside anymore.” She stroked her cat, watching him yawn and stretch and curl up at her side. “I used to think I understood death and fear. I knew I had to be afraid but when you were there, I knew it would be okay. Even if I died, I had you. But not being there makes it all different.”

Sitting on the bed, Kylo kept his hands folded in his lap. She thought she knew what he was thinking about but it could really be anything at this point. He looked at so many things about crime and how bad people thought and acted. He’d been to the edges of his own mind and she’d helped him find his way back.

“The further away we get from being there, the more it feels like it never really happened. Maybe it was just a nightmare that we shared.” His eyes slid over to her, distant sadness hiding in his lashes. “I think that’s why I look at the evidence all of the time. I need to remember that we’re like this for a reason that’s not our fault. I’m trying to stop being so hard on myself all of the time. And I know you are too. And really, that’s all we can do.”

He left her after kissing her forehead. She slowly curled up into a ball and stared at her lamp. She left it on that night, the old fear of the dark rolling back into her mind.

She heard dad’s feet on the stairs. He stopped to say goodnight to Kylo before he filled her doorway. “Are you feeling better now, sweetheart?”

“Yeah, a little.” She sat up, lifting her chin. “It was just a dog. And my friends aren’t mad.”

“Well, anytime you guys want to hang out, you can do it here. But you’re safe at your friends too.” Han leaned against the doorframe and gave her a small smile. “Mom should be home after you’ve gone to sleep but I can tell her to check in on you if you want.”

“I think it’s fine. Goodnight, dad.”

She still waited up the entire night until she heard Leia climbing the stairs. She smelt her perfume when her door was nudged open and she shut her eyes at last.

Even though she didn’t want to miss school the next day, she thought that she might. It had been a while since she’d had a night like this. And she had to listen to Kylo and stop beating herself up
over nothing.

It still hurt that she couldn’t climb into Kylo’s bed and sleep with him without bringing out more strained emotions.

Yeah, she was probably missing school the next day.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Kylo’s friends are threatened. Rey’s friend reaches out to her.

Standard chapter warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kylo could have waited in the car. He had wanted to wait in the car. His usual queasiness at being in a doctor’s office had set his face instantly in a long frown, but it was something he was working on. It was on the long list of things he had to expose himself to in order to learn how to be comfortable with them. If he did them often enough, he’d get over the little problems that always nagged at him. He had to get better but he would suffer the entire time.

And with the way Paige kept grinning at him, he clearly looked on edge, showing what he tried to hide. He finally returned the look with a sigh and shook his head. He felt his hair on the edge of his neck, reminding him that he needed a haircut. And not from his father's barber. If he had to, he’d drive three hours to get the haircut that he wanted.

“It’s no wonder they thought it was your kid. You look like you’re going to throw up. Christ, Kylo, calm down.” She was still wearing the hospital gown, waiting for the doctor to return to finish the check up. It was the same as before. Watch her get the ultrasound. Watch them take tests. He’d been there with her a few times, when Hux had to work. It was either that or have to hear him complain about his in-laws having to take Paige to her appointments, judging him for not caring about his child already. They didn't understand that Hux was determined to be a better dad than his father; they hadn't heard how hard Hux had described what he wanted for his life now that he had everything in order. His mistakes in the past were just that. But Kylo still had to hear it over the lunches that they shared at their old high school. Going with Paige would ease some of those complaints. He’d taken the best of the worst and would have to live with it.

Still, his ears burned at the doctor’s earlier assumption. “I thought I always looked like this.”

Paige leaned forward, reaching for him. He was slumped down in a waiting-room chair and was forced to lean forward to take her hand. Sitting up always put him back in the moment. She knew that. “Kylo, I know I can’t thank you enough. We can't thank you enough. But Armie and I, we really, really appreciate your help. This is going to get crazy for us and we’re hoping that you’ll be around for some of it.”

He was back in that situation again, watching his friends and family hold their breaths before he left again. Guilt scratched at the door but wouldn’t break through. “If I’m invited to the training, it wouldn’t be until August. I’ll be here.”

He watched her shoulders ease as she smiled, her cheeks warming with relief. “Then you’ll get to meet him.”
The interview was in two weeks. He’d submitted everything and now he just had to wait and find something to do to fill his time. All he’d done since passing the exam was kill time and he hated thinking that way. There was only a finite amount of time in the world and he had already wasted so much of that by being paralyzed in bed, lost in demons and dark thoughts. Working out and reading about psychology and serial killers were stimulating but he missed having contact with more people. It was an embarrassing thought when he realized it. Being solitary in the weeks leading up until the rest of the process began wouldn’t put him in the right frame of mind. Go out, do more, be more. George would have wanted him to be more social. Don’t be nervous about the background check. Don’t even think about it.

So he tried to sit up and pay attention when the doctor returned. He was another old man in a white coat, pasted with trustworthiness only through appearances. Paige purposely called him the godfather several times during the conversation and he ached to frown but met her challenge with a tight-lipped smile. They were allowed to do whatever they wanted. They’d been such an important part of his life and he couldn’t jettison them just because something made him nervous.

Even as the doctor was speaking, his mind was elsewhere. He’d almost snapped when the journalist, that journalist, came by the house again. At first, the man didn’t seem to recognize him. Kylo hadn’t either, initially; he was older, more lines on his face. He hadn’t seen him clearly since he was nineteen. But it was still the same man, only time hadn’t been kind to him. He didn’t deserve that gesture with the poison he spilled unto the world. The second he started speaking, Kylo felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end and he grit his teeth. Krennic. And his blog and books and endless commentary on television.

And he came to his house. He still knew where they lived.

And it took all of his strength to slam the door in his face and not strangle him.

Hux needed that gun. So did his father.

It was frustrating that no one trusted his instincts.

And he had to trust the police to follow through with driving by their house. He had to fight against the pressure that had worn him down when he was fourteen. He had to stop backpedalling into familiar emotions that fit more comfortably than exposing himself to the world.

Rey’s panic a week ago made it all so much harder to know that once the summer was in its waning month, he’d be gone for six months. He wanted to spend more time with her but couldn’t figure out how; by the summer, he would know. He would approach it all with more determination once he had a firm answer. She had dance class and school and wanted to spend time with her friends. He couldn’t take up her time because he didn’t have anything better to do. But after seeing the fear in her eyes that night, over thinking that someone was outside, they could work on that. They could take a self-defense class. That would feel nice, except for the fact that he knew he’d be the one that everyone would be thinking they had to watch out for.

His own vanity was eating away at him. Being alone and only knowing attraction from distant strangers ate away at him.

Whatever. He was fine on his own. He’d had enough intimacy for the rest of his life. He had to stick to that. The love he would know would be guided by Rey, his friends, and his family. The future was having a career in which his mind and compassion was more important than getting personally invested. George had been trying to warn him not to be like him. And he’d have an easy time with that. Caring for a person and leaving them was so much easier than accepting anyone new into his heart.
In his thoughts, he missed what the doctor had said. He still stood and shook his hand, following him outside into the hallway of the too-white, too-clean practice.

He waited as Paige changed, breathing and trying not to focus on any spot in particular. If he looked at it too long, it would just swallow him up. Looking around the waiting room, he saw all of the expectant parents and hid his glare. Did they understand what world they were bringing their children into? Didn't they see and know the hurt, the pain? It was all there. They were just ignorant morons. Their children could be taken, their children could die...

*Don’t think that way, Ky. There’s good stuff too.*

He winced at the voice in his head and shoved his hands into his jacket pockets, hearing the rustle of a forgotten receipt. He bit at the metal piece of the zipper, pulling his collar over his mouth and sighing at the rush of warmth around his chin. There were good things. Of course there were good things. The light had to shine through the darkness, always. There was teaching Rey how to ride a bike, teaching her how to swim. Teaching her that their scars weren't what they should be measured by. Walking to his friend’s house on his own and living on his own, buying groceries and making dinner with warm laughter in his ears. Learning how to drive and finishing his degrees. Taking Rey to the fair and letting her see a horse for the first time, taking her again and hearing her happy gasps on the rides. Explaining to her how there were different types of being scared. Seeing the joy she had for animals and dancing, art and life. Sleeping across from her and being able to hear her soft breathing when he couldn't sleep. The way she laughed. The way she could make him say the truth even when he didn't want to.

Still, his mind drifted to warm kisses on the couch on Sunday mornings, gentle hands in the shower. Quiet moments in bed, reading with someone warm and in love beside him...

“Are you ready?” Paige was by his side and he was infinitely thankful for her return.

He tried to put his hand on her lower back and she swatted it away.

They could take care of themselves. He had to believe that they could.

He drove Paige home, catching her looking at the new ultrasound picture in her hands. “He looks so perfect. Look at his little hand.”

Stopped at a red light, he finally looked at the image. “As long as he doesn’t look like Hux, you’ll be fine.”

She snorted, rolling her eyes at him. “Kylo, we were going to wait to tell you, or ask you, or whatever, but we’ve been talking about names. And I know…I know we’re putting a lot on you again but really, being a goddad is just showing up to the christening until he actually knows what’s going on. And you are good with kids and…Are you okay with us naming him Benjamin?”

He guessed what was coming by how she spoke. Narrowing his eyes slightly, he lifted his shoulders as the light turned green. “Why wouldn’t I be? Someone should have that name. It’s just not me.”

She sighed and put her hand on his knee. “Armie wanted me to ask you why you haven’t legally changed your name.”

Another shrug. “George said it would look strange on the application and they’d have to do more work on the background check. I didn’t want to look suspicious.”

He could feel Paige’s hand tighten before it pulled away. “Aren’t you worried about those years
that you were gone?”

The drove in silence as he gathered what he was preparing to say if that question came up, when it came up. Childhood was at the core of development. Childhood was how everyone built his or her personalities and reactions. The fact that most of his adolescence was spent in terror hadn’t stopped him at this point. The fact that he had another dose of trauma in his early twenties wouldn’t stop him either. He’d worked through it, worked through it as best he could. There was still more healing to do but he could manage his reactions better. He could talk about them in healthier ways. And not all of his experiences were solely negative. Understanding pain and how others could be capable of evil could be used for good.

“Of course I am. But I know George believes in me.” They were finally at their house. He parked in the empty driveway and took another moment to shake his head. “I can always get a job at the school, scaring the kids, if all of those blows up in my face.”

Paige only smiled. “Come inside and have some tea or something. I know you don’t have a busy afternoon.”

He left the car and brought his mouth into his collar again. It was his best defence from craving a cigarette. He was still working through his headache as he trailed after Paige, kicking at the driveway.

He froze when he heard her suck in a breath when she stepped around the corner of the house. Two strides brought him to her side.

The backdoor was wide open, pried open. He could see the marks on the metal and then dropped his eyes to the new snow that had fallen since they’d been gone. There was only one set of prints. And it only led inside.

He shoved his car key into her hands. “Go to the car. Lock it. Call the police.”

“Kylo,” her arms reached to stop him as he was starting for the door, “Kylo, you can’t go in there. It’s probably just kids or drug addicts. You can’t go in there by yourself.”

He looked at the hand on his arm and saw his own reaction reflect in her eyes. “What if it’s him Paige? Go to the car. Call the police.”

Stepping back, Paige shook her head and then quickly disappeared around the corner of the house. He needed her to move without thinking. He needed her to be safe. She would listen to him.

He pulled out his phone and knelt down next to one of the footprints. He was going to disturb them by going inside, but it needed to be clear and to scale. He had a measuring tape on his house keys; he’d found it at the dollar store when he was trying to waste time at the mall but still study people. Lining it up silently, he took the shots with his phone as quickly as he could. If he smudged too many of them or the snow started to melt, he’d lose the evidence.

Still, when he reached the door, he didn’t know what to do or say.

The back entrance opened into the dining room. As much as Hux and Paige had tried to change his father’s décor, there were still so many hints of his stepmother there. The dining table hadn’t changed. The vase that sat there hadn’t been disturbed. But he could see the wet footprints guiding him inside.
He slipped off his shoes and slowed his feet as he moved along the wall. He had a clear view into the kitchen. Nothing there. The living room didn’t look like it had been touched.

But there was a corner.

He’d need to turn and would be left open if he wasn’t ready.

Straining to listen for movement or breathing, he kept his eyes open for shadows and movement.

Nothing.

Until he felt a draft from the far end of the house. Beyond the kitchen, in the living room, the patio door was left open. The wet footprints led there and vanished into a snowy retreat.

He followed the path with his eyes, watching it lead away from the house and towards the sidewalk.

In the distance, he finally heard the police siren.

Sucking up his disappointment, he hurried to get back to Paige to make sure she was not panicking.

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Rey didn’t want to feel upset over her grade on her paper. She thought she had worked hard enough on it but it still didn’t get her the mark that she wanted. She instantly blacked out the 65% with her art pencil, not wanting anyone else to see. Kylo was there at home. Kylo could have helped her. But she still hadn’t asked him. It was so stupid. The next assignment, she’d ask him.

But Finn had still seen it. He gave her a half smile and showed her his 67%. “We can study together again, you know. Maybe together we can make this shit make sense.”

Shaking her head, Rey tried to smile. “I do better in art class and gym class. This is just English.”

Class had just started and she already felt deflated. The mark wouldn’t mean that much in the long run, especially if she finally asked Kylo for help. But distant memories of arguments between the boys over homework made it sometimes hard to ask Kylo for help with things like this. Kylo could be critical. But that was Kylo as a teenager. This was Kylo at almost twenty-five.

Maybe sometimes he smelled too good.

The knock on the classroom door made them all turn their heads away from either celebrating or frowning over their grades. It was always so weird whenever Hux showed up anywhere. And he was always there. At least she and Rose could feel weird about it together.

Mrs Yaddle probably should have retired years ago. Maybe that’s why she got a bad grade. She smirked to herself; the thought came in Kylo’s voice in the back of her head as she watched her teacher address the principal.

“I need Rey and Rose for a moment.” Hux sometimes wore a mask like Kylo. He’d be smiling tightly yet hiding everything. She could read him now too. So could Rose.

But the first thing Hux said as he closed the classroom door was that nothing was wrong.
“There was a break in at the house. He didn’t take anything. Everything is fine.” Hux hid his panic in the firm line of his mouth. “I wanted you two to know now so you are not shocked when you get out of school. I just heard and I…you both should know.”

She glanced at Rose before narrowing her eyes at Hux. “Was Kylo there?”

She watched Hux hold back rolling his eyes. Finally, he rubbed his face. “Of course he was there. If Paige weren’t there, he’d be playing detective right now. Instead I made him, I actually made him Rey, take her to her parents’ house. Nothing was taken. We’re going to…do something about this in the afternoon. He’s already texted me the security company you use and I…everything is under control. Everyone is fine. Go back to class and learn something. I have some things to finish up after school but I’ll drive you both home.”

Hux looked them both in the eye and then stomped down the hallway, back to his office.

“Was that totally weird to you?” Rose asked, reaching for her hand.

Rey took it, squeezing it in return. “Kylo wanted us to know that. He wouldn’t want us to know it if everything wasn’t okay.”

The words were as true as she could make them. And he was right. If they had spent the rest of the afternoon not knowing, it would have been a bigger shock. It was also a test. Kylo had been mentioning distractions more often the last few months. It was something George had snuck into his thoughts and he wouldn’t let it leave.

Rose dropped her head for a second and then sucked in a breath through her teeth. “Maybe they should have a gun.”

They stood silently for a moment before finally giving up and going back to class.

-=-

Snap sighed at him again, tapping his pen to the notepad. Of all the cops in town, it had to be him. “Why in the hell did you go in there alone, Kylo? You don’t have a badge or a gun. Walk me through what you were thinking.”

Sitting at the Ticos' table, facing Poe’s friend, he shrugged. “I don’t need a badge or a gun. I needed to see if he was still there. And he wasn’t.”

He’d actually been surprised to see Snap again. Throughout high school, he’d been forced to meet him several times. And by the end, when they were leaving for school, it had been okay. Poe’s other friends, he still didn’t like, but that was in the past. Far in the past. They belonged in the past.

Snap sighed and shut his notebook. “We’re still looking around the house. We have the footprints. We have what you sent us. We’re going to look into it.”

“Has there been anything else in the area?” Kylo asked, eyeing him. “This wasn’t just kids. You saw the shoe size.”

Smacking his lips, Snap looked at the rest of the family at the table. They had quietly watched the two men arguing during most of the meeting. He couldn’t help but see their relief when Snap
stood. “Kylo, why don’t you walk me back to the car. Everyone here already knows that we are looking into it. Everyone knows that there will be extra patrols. Maybe you and me, we can talk a little bit more about what you’re thinking without getting everyone else worked up.”

He tuned out what Snap, in his tight fitting police uniform, said to the Ticos. He followed after him, keeping his head down as he left the house.

“Kylo, honestly, what the fuck? You show up back in town and suddenly you’re playing police? And don’t fucking give me that FBI shit right now. I have a gun and a badge. You still don’t.” He met his eyes and frowned at him. Slowly, his face softened. “I haven’t seen you since the funeral.”

He kept his eyes unfocused on the porch. “I know. I’m sorry.”

Snap scoffed. “No, you’re not. Come on. I think they’re more scared that you went in there by yourself than someone breaking into that house.”

The snow crunched under their shoes as they made their way back to Snap’s squad car. He leaned against it, shaking his head. He remembered working for Snap’s stepdad when he was nineteen. He remembered him hanging out at his house. Now, they were both grownup and had nothing in common anymore.

“I know why you went in there alone,” Snap finally said. “You don’t even have to tell me. Look, we’ve been keeping watch on that journalist for you. We’re going to investigate this on our own.”

“I can send you his police report.” Kylo looked up and then down again. Firming his resolve, he stood up straighter and met the other man’s eyes. “The shoe size looks like a match and I…”

Snap rubbed his eyes and started stroking his goatee. “He died, Kylo. Every crime that happens that is close to you can’t be connected to it.”

Blinking back to Toronto, thinking back to George’s words, he forced himself to keep his eyes level. “I still think it would be worth looking into. If it’s nothing, it’s nothing. I just know that Krennic is snooping around again. Maybe he wasn’t the one who killed him, but he is the only one who has a reason to be looking around that house. You have two leads. And if I’m wrong, then I’m wrong.”

Deep down, of all of Poe’s weird friends, he’d kept a soft spot for Snap. He couldn’t be angry at him for not falling into his paranoia. He could only be angry at himself for falling into another dangerous situation because of it.

A gentle hand gripped his arm. “I miss him too. Look, you’re stressed out about a bunch of things right now. Let’s have a drink tonight and we can talk a little more off the record.”

He had blinked at the grip and then looked up again. “I think I’d like that.”

Snap snorted a laugh. “Christ, you still talk like that. Look, I have your number. I’ll give you a call when I’m off.”

He couldn’t help himself from staring as Snap drove off, slightly tilting his head as he watched him leave.

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Hux brought them to her house and not Rose’s. When he stopped the car, he turned and looked at them with hard eyes. It had been annoying to sit and wait in his office when everyone was leaving. Finn had looked at her with big eyes and Kaydel was asking what was going on and if they were in trouble for skipping. All of that made Hux narrow his gaze; it kept adding a further edge to the situation.

“We’re having dinner here.” Hux’s mouth was firm. “Just go inside. I need to…just go inside.”

They both unclicked their seatbelts and she reached for Rose’s hand when they were outside of the car. For her part, Rey was still worried about whatever Kylo might have done. Hux’s shoulders had been straight the entire drive. Rey knew that Kylo was probably at the bottom of his list of concerns.

Taking the walk around the house to the back door, Rose’s hand tightened. “Can I stay at your house tonight?”

Rey squeezed back. “Of course.”

They had taken off their shoes and coats by the time that Hux came inside. “I swear to Christ, Ben Solo, get over here.”

She heard Kylo’s sigh from across the house. He rounded the corner from the living room and blinked quickly at her. We’re going to argue. Don’t let Rose or Paige worry.

Okay. She tried to keep her face straight but ended up frowning. Don’t argue too much.

I can’t make any promises. His response came as he crossed the kitchen to follow Hux outside.

She heard them both yelling the moment the door closed.

“Mom? Dad?” Rey called out, still holding Rose’s hand. She had to do something. Of course Kylo wouldn’t listen.

“Hi girls.” Han sat in his chair, trying to make it look like any other day in their living room. “How was school?”

Rose instantly left her side to hug her sister on the couch. “What happened?”

Rey let her shoulders drop, seeing the concern in Han’s eyes. She knew what Kylo must have said to them, what had been on his mind. Paige hadn’t been crying but her face lacked its usual kindness and understanding. Even if Kylo had been there, he might not have helped. By the way the arguing outside was growing louder, Hux thought the same way.

But when Paige started talking about how they came home and saw the door, it really sounded like she was thankful that Kylo had been there. She’d felt safe even as he walked right into danger.

She sat on Han’s lap and kept her hand in his.

They were silent when they heard the backdoor open and close again. Both Hux and Kylo still had lingering redness in their faces but at least they stood close to one another. The quietness stretched on until Han cleared his throat.

“Leia should be back soon with dinner.”
Kylo left shortly after dinner. Rey was surprised that Hux didn’t go with him, but wasn’t going to question it. There had already been too many awkward questions over dinner. Han and Leia offered them the basement bedroom and they took it without question. Paige was downstairs resting and Hux left for the house next door to talk to his mother.

Sitting with Rose in her room, she kept trying to read but her mind was elsewhere. She grabbed her phone and scrolled through her pictures for a few seconds before texting Finn.

_Someone broke into Hux’s house._

**What? Really??**

**Yes, but don’t tell anyone. Rose and her sister are here. It’s kind of scary.**

**Are you okay?**

She glanced up at Rose, then turned her head towards the empty room across the hall. Not really.

_I know it’s scary but the cops will fix it. Or Kylo will fix it. He already looks like a cop._

That part made her bite her lip. _But he’s going to leave after summer. He’s going to leave again like he always does._

The message-typing symbol rolled for a minute, then disappeared. She glared at her phone until it appeared again.

_Maybe I can protect you when he’s not there?_

When she went to bed that night, sleeping beside Rose in her safe bedroom, away from everything that scared her, she still thought about how to reply to the message. Maybe by morning she’d have an answer.

-=-

They were at the cop bar. They knew everyone in there. It made sense why Snap brought him there and bought the first round.

“Thank you for texting me,” Kylo said, tracing his hands around his bottle. “Hux is staying at my house tonight. He could stay next door with his mom or with Paige’s parents but he at least accepted the offer.”

Sipping at his drink, Snap quirked his head. “I guess if they feel safest there, that’s what I’d suggest they’d do. But Kylo, you know there won’t be much we can do. It might be a break in, it might be a rich neighbourhood, but if nothing was taken…it’s not worth the resources.”

Drinking, Kylo mulled over the words. Of course he knew that. But he had to swallow his thoughts
about how useless the cops in his town were. He’d have to get along with so many other people in
the future that he couldn’t go creating trouble at home. “I understand. I don’t like it, but I
understand. And I know they appreciate whatever you can do for them. I do too.”

Leaning forward, Snap sighed at him. “We were watching Krennic. He didn’t leave his motel all
day. The rookie was watching him.”

Kylo hid his disbelief. “Like I said, if I’m wrong, then I am wrong.”

Snap lifted his bottle and he brought his to meet it. “I still don’t like how you have some police
report about him. And how you probably still have stuff about your case. And his.”

Of course he did. He didn’t look at it everyday, but he would when he got lonely or felt lost. He
took a long drink of beer, steadying himself for the coming conversation.

“Things would be very different if he was here right now,” he finally said, trying to keep Snap
from further broaching the subject by himself.

There was another long silence before the other man cleared his throat. “Look, I know we didn’t
talk much in high school and we gave him a hard time about you, hell we gave
you a hard time, but he loved you. And you really can’t let what happened keep making you charge into houses,
unarmed, with a pregnant woman hiding in your car. Okay?”

He didn’t need to be told that again. He hid his anger in a nod before finishing his beer. “I can’t tell
George I did that. He’d be pissed at me again.”

The conversation kept rolling once Snap bought another round, starting with how the FBI testing
worked and how he’d prepared for it. They touched on Snap’s training and how he felt alone and
aggravated at having to work with his stepdad. Kylo kept trying to keep the topic about him and
life in their town, wanting to avoid high school. But Snap nudged him towards it, asking why he
and Poe never went to any school dance. Ever.

“He made me go to one and I hated it. He saw that I hated it and just swallowed the hurt. So we
just skipped those days after that,” Kylo answered, shrugging. “We didn’t go to prom either, if you
remember. Not mine or his.”

Smirking, Snap shook his head. “I’m sure that you guys found more romantic things to do than
self-consciously stare at one another in the gym. Like watching bad movies and making out in
empty theatres.”

“Not always,” he answered before taking a long drink. He stared at the material of the booth and
managed a small grin. “Sometimes we’d make out in my car if some old guy came into the theatre.
Old people have nothing better to do than ruin teenager’s lives.”

Snap was smiling before he sighed. “I’m glad we can almost talk about this without getting sad.”

Folding his arms, he couldn’t form a response so he settled for nodding. He really could just date
anyone he wanted and didn’t. As long as Liza stayed out of his life, he was perfectly fine in his
decision. She had tried to apologize again but he could ignore her into dust. She even tried to stay
as Rey’s friend until Rey finally decided that it was too difficult. He was slightly worried that she
was doing it for him, but she could make her own choices and choose her own friends.

“It still hurts, but it’s getting better. We were just kids…”

“Kylo, it’s really fine. You’re getting on with your life in one way or another. At least you didn’t
end up flunking out of college and had to get your dad to help you get a job in your shitty hometown.” Snap was trying for a lighter tone, forcing him to tear away from traveling down that road again.

It was probably for the best to let the words stay unspoken. There were better topics that they had to explore.

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Kylo didn’t come as late as she expected, but she was still waiting up for him. Her reply to Finn rested heavily in the back of her mind. She heard him washing his face and brushing his teeth before stopping in her doorway.

“Why are you still awake?” he asked, dipping his chin. He was rubbing his shirt, probably trying to hide something that smelled like a bar. “You have school tomorrow.”

He sometimes tried to sound like dad. He didn't mean to. But he did. It made her smile in the darkness.

“Can you tell me what happened?” She slipped out of the bed, whispering as she moved around Rose. “No one would let us talk before you left.”

He frowned, but still led her to his room. Mom and dad’s door was still open. She’d heard Kylo set the alarm downstairs. He was still looking at her like he hadn’t quite figured out what to do or say.

He pulled her into a hug and she sighed into his chest. “It will be okay, Rey. They’re safe. Han and I will be there tomorrow to fix the security system.”

Holding him for an endless moment, she squeezed her eyes shut. She just wanted to be small again, to believe his words and trust them into infinity. But she was almost fifteen. She had her own mind and knew the world now. She knew that someone had killed a person who they both loved and was going to use that against them again. Like the panic she felt in the basement, she could only forget about it until something brought it back to the surface.

“You thought it was that guy, didn’t you?” She held him close to try to stop him from pulling away.

“Of course I did. What else would I think it was? But that doesn’t mean you should be afraid. You still need…you still need to go to school and be with your friends. We’ve talked about how to look for people who feel out of place. Trust your instincts. That’s all you have to do.” He pulled her tighter and then slowly stepped away. When he looked down at her, she saw the redness in his eyes. “I hate how you can’t live a normal life because of me.”

Slowly, she sat down on his bed. She wanted to sleep there with him that night, but she couldn’t leave Rose. When Kylo sat down beside her and put his arm around her, she let her head fall against his chest. “My life has never been normal. And it’s never been your fault.”

“I love you,” he whispered. “I love you so much and today didn’t make sense. I’m sorry that I did it again. I pulled you into it and Hux was just listening to me. I thought that you should know and…”
“Kylo, I’m glad that we knew.” She sat up, looking at him. “Just maybe help me with my homework this weekend? We’re reading that book I remember you hating in English.”

A slow smile crept across his face. “Yeah. Yeah I can help you.”

She sat in his arms until she felt tired enough to make it to bed and not think anymore.

Chapter End Notes

okay okay, the tags will be updated more. i’m slowly easing into the finn/rey relationship but the tag still stands. in the next chapter it will be more...there. i will update the tags.

hope everyone is keeping well and managing. i’m about to have a meltdown every five minutes so here we are.
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Rey starts out cautiously in her relationship with Finn. And Kylo finds a challenge that isn't the FBI.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She had a nightmare the night before Kylo was supposed to leave for his review session. It hadn’t come out of nowhere, but that didn’t make it hurt less. Since the break in, she was having a hard time managing the everyday stresses of school, home, and life. Even settling into March and the future that was ahead of them, Rey wasn’t feeling good.

And she knew that Kylo didn’t like Finn. He had a hard time hiding his emotions around her. To anyone else, he looked only mildly annoyed but the looks he bore were so much clearer to her.

Finn walked her and Rose home from school almost every day since everything happened at Paige’s. They’d stop at Rose’s first and then he’d take her hand for the rest of the walk home. He wasn’t afraid of any of the shadows or the idea that there might be danger out there. She wanted to tell him more about her life before but she kept parts of it private when they were hanging out in her room. Sometimes he’d stay for dinner. Sometimes he’d go home. Sometimes they talked about school. Sometimes she talked about being there. He knew many of the stories already. He knew about how she’d have extra help at school in the beginning, with therapists and meetings with doctors. He saw how sometimes she had a hard time not being in control. Even though they would sometimes argue, she hoped he understood why she’d sometimes be angry with him.

It was sometimes strange to think about how long she’d known the people around her. Before, kids came into her life and disappeared just as quickly. The only constant had been Kylo but the world had been so big for so long now.

But Kylo saw Finn kiss her on the porch one day after school. It had been a warmer day and she’d slipped off her gloves to take his hand. Standing outside of the door, she wondered what he was thinking about. And then he kissed her again, lightly pressing his lips against hers. She had wanted there to be fireworks or flashes, but there was only a tiny spark. It was enough for her. She liked him. She liked having him as a friend and now that he was something more, it felt comfortable. It was a sweet, calm feeling. It had been over a year since the last time and she wanted there to be something more from it but it had to be enough. When Kylo described his first kiss with Poe, it seemed so much more magical for him, but also more bewildering. She had been scared to ask him about it but he almost didn’t look sad when he talked about it. She often missed seeing them kiss. Kylo always looked so relaxed in those moments.

She really shouldn’t be thinking about Kylo as she was kissing someone else and felt guilty.

The parts she couldn’t find in Kylo any longer, maybe she could get them from someone who she trusted and cared about. It had been the same for Kylo. It was really only fair.
After she hugged Finn and he left, stopping to glance over his shoulder to wink at her before he rounded the corner of her house for the front walk, she went inside with a small smile on her face. But she knew that Kylo had been watching them. He stared at her from the kitchen, looking at her before shrugging and then giving her a small nod.

He understood. He had to understand. He’d given her this world, this freedom, and she was going to explore it.

But the nightmare shook her. Her skin was still crawling from the imagined terror and hopelessness that her mind had churned up. She was trapped underground, sucked under the floorboards, and Snoke was chasing her in the dark. She couldn’t see him but the sound of his voice was still the same. The deep growling that had haunted her since was born scratched at her ears until she screamed, but no sound came out. He reached out and grabbed her and she felt herself being absorbed into him.

“Kylo?” It was three in the morning. His plane left at noon. Of course he wasn’t asleep.

“Is something wrong?” He’d been scrolling through his phone, the light making his face look softer in the dark.

“I…” It suddenly felt so stupid to say that she had a bad dream. She was almost fifteen. She almost had a boyfriend. She settled for frowning.

He nodded and put his phone down, reaching for her hand. “It’s okay.”

She wanted to feel the old comfort again when she curled up against him and willed herself to be small again. Sighing, she reached for her childishness, the same feeling she’d just denied herself. “I know why I had the dream. I should be able to handle it.”

“I don’t mind.” He settled his arms around her, kissing her forehead. “I really don’t.”

“What will I do when you’re gone again?” Her voice felt small and his arms tightened instantly.

His breath warmed her neck. “I can’t ask where I’m placed, if I go through. But we’ll never be that far apart. You’re safe here. Han and Leia, Hux and Paige, Rose and…Finn. They can help you if you feel like I’m not listening.”

Trying not to frown, she shook her head. “What if I’m worried about you?”

She could almost hear his mind working, trying to find an answer. “I…you can’t let that be so big, Rey. We’ll talk about it this summer, before I leave. If I go through. There are still so many ifs. I will worry about you and think about you all of the time, but you need to…you need to think about yourself. I’ll be okay. It won’t be like it is in the movies. I won’t be getting shot at everyday.”

“I never liked those movies,” she answered, nuzzling her head against his bare chest. “I don’t think that you did either.”

He made a noise in the back of his throat. “They tried too hard. I’ll mostly be sitting at a desk. If I get in.”

Shaking her head, she finally shifted to look at him in the darkness. “You will. I know you will get in.”

His small smile made it easier to sleep when it finally came to her. And even though he told her not to, it still bothered her whether or not he slept.
Either he had a cigarette or he threw up.

Staring at the office for the last hour made both started to seem like viable options to Kylo. He could vomit and then cover it up with a cigarette. He only had coffee that morning so it wouldn’t be more than that.

He settled for leaving his rental car and sucking down a cigarette with shaking hands. George could be forgiven for handing him the package that morning, even though it meant breaking a promise.

He’d come this far and really, honestly could stumble at the finishing line.

Phase II. He had to get into the next stage. Being so close and being able to taste fulfillment, he really only had himself to blame if he said the wrong things.

George knew the reality and still kept encouraging him. He had mental and physical scars. Only some of them could be hidden. He wore a dark blue suit on George and his mother’s urgings. Just don’t wear black, Ben, it’s not a funeral. Well it could be, he had wanted to snap. What could he really do if he was rejected? Take up Hux’s offer and work at the school? That would mean getting his teaching license and giving up.

Sighing, he checked his watch again. He still had another hour to wait.

He had given himself more than enough time to sort out his thoughts and be at peace with himself. He’d taken Maz out for coffee yesterday and wouldn’t let himself try to manipulate her for answers into what would entail the next day. It had such an innocent title: meet and greet. Of course it did.

You okay, Ky? It was a strange mix of Poe and Rey’s voice in his head. Both of them depended on him. He just didn’t like the idea of his imagination conjuring up the muddled delusion. He’d done his best to force himself to interact with many, many people the last few weeks. He should stop leaning on what his head could conjure up and what they had really said to him.

George had told him just to speak the truth and to respond with true honesty. Don’t overthink the questions. His past was his own and his true strength rested in how hard he had worked and what he’d been through. He’d seen and tasted death. He had been young and rash but had shown a clear maturity in how he thought now.

It felt so dumb to think that his biggest concern had once been if he had a boyfriend.

He knew the building. He knew the floors. Being eighteen and almost nineteen still echoed in his head. If he could freeze a perfect moment in his head and live in it for the rest of his life, it would have been the entire process of that internship. It had meant living with George and George teaching him not to be a hopelessly awkward teenager. It had meant showing Rey that he could be gone and still be okay. It had also meant hopelessly missing both her and him. There were only so many times he could go over the whole thing in his head: he’d loved him, he’d lost him. He’d learned the lessons that he had set out to learn: don’t be so protective, don’t take up so much space but still, most of all, enjoy every second together.

When he finally realized those facts, his time with Rey had felt easier, despite what had almost
happened in August. She had a boyfriend now. She was taking the same steps that he’d taken when he was a teenager in looking for someone who could maybe help her continue down the road to healing. He still didn’t trust that boyfriend but he went back to the pain he’d seen in Poe’s eyes every time that he’d followed him or made him miss spending time with his friends. He was there for Rey when she needed him but let her spend time alone with Finn.

Swallowing, he narrowed his eyes at the building.

How could he not utterly fail this?

Why on Earth would the government ever want to give him a badge and a gun?

He quietly stepped back and was about to open the car door and run when a voice across the parking lot stopped him.

“Hey!” A young, female voice called. “Are you waiting for your meet and greet too?”

He turned and straightened his shoulders. A young woman with a softly dark complexion smiled back at him from her car. He could still see the steam rising. She’d just got there. Also early, but not as early as he had been.

“Yes,” he answered. “I was just getting cold.”

He didn’t need to make an excuse, but he still felt like he needed to make one.

The woman shrugged and started towards him. He instantly took out another cigarette, hearing her heels click across the pavement.

“It’s freezing out here,” she said, finally standing close enough to reach out her hand for a smoke. “If you don’t mind?”

Smirking, he handed her one. “I’ve already been here an hour.”

She inhaled and then coughed. “An hour? Really? Christ. And I thought I would be early. And how are you standing out here without a jacket?”

He didn’t have an answer. He just shrugged. “I’m sweating so much that it feels nice?”

“Isn’t that the truth.” She stuck out her chin and reached out her hand. “I’m Jannah.”

“Kylo.”

He shook her hand, feeling the firm grip that she gave. “Interesting name.”

“There’s a story behind it. If we both move on to the next round, I might tell you.” He lifted his eyes and felt a warm glance in return. “How the hell are we going to do this?”

He wasn’t exactly asking her. He was asking the voices in his head. But she was there.

“We’re just going to do it, right? For our country?” She tilted her head and grinned at him, showing off the gap in her teeth.

He slowly exhaled and nodded. “Yeah. Exactly.”

But his country was the last reason he was there.
“Is Kylo here?” Finn asked after hugging her hello.

Rey shook her head, enjoying the tingling warmth she got from his embrace, despite the chill from the spring air that still clung to his coat. He was her boyfriend now. The texts and the kisses meant that she had a boyfriend. She was really like everyone else; she could do this. “He’s in Virginia. He has some big meeting about his application tomorrow. He’s really nervous but he’s with George so it will be okay.”

“That’s good.” Finn exhaled quickly. He still looked around the house like he expected Kylo to jump out behind a corner. “Sorry, Rey, but he can be really scary sometimes. He just stares at me like he’s going to strangle me or something.”

Nodding, she stepped aside so Finn could take off his shoes. Their birthdays were that weekend and Kylo would be back for them, but depending on how the process went, he might not feel like doing anything celebratory for himself. That, of course, didn’t have to stop her. She’d have a party with her friends, she’d decided. Kaydel, Rose, Finn, and a few other girls from dance would come over and they’d have the basement to themselves. There were still some spots that needed to be fixed but it looked so much better now. They’d replaced her dance bar with a higher one and Kylo’s weight set had also been upgraded.

The most important thing had been making it brighter down there. The new lighting made it not feel so underground anymore.

“Is he worried?” Finn followed her into the kitchen and up to her room. He looked down at his feet as he asked the question, almost making her sigh. He was trying hard not to be afraid of Kylo, even though she knew that he was. Anytime they were alone in her room, he’d jump and move away if he heard Kylo in the hallway or downstairs. “I mean, it’s all gone pretty well so far so he probably doesn’t have to be. He already looks like he wants to arrest me so…”

“He says that this is the biggest step so he’s been really stressed out.” Sitting down on her bed, she let Finn be next to her, brushing his dark hand against her pale one. She wanted to focus on the touch and not how worried she was for Kylo. The bruise on his arm hadn’t returned, but once he started doing something harmful it was hard for him to stop if he didn’t focus. He’d quit smoking. He really hadn’t drank that much since he moved home. But the little things that he did to hurt himself never really went away.

Even when they talked about self-harm in therapy, or back with Ransolm in group or on the phone, it was always about why people who are struggling want to hurt themselves. Kylo used to say that he did it to breathe; sometimes, he missed pain. She’d still sometimes be tempted to stop eating; it was easy but also frightening to skip lunch. The girls in her dance class would almost always skip meals and plan out what and how much they could eat. She’d seen their little diaries and feel very drawn to the organisation that they’d put into it. But then she’d always think about how weak she would feel. Before she started on the pill, she had to take iron supplements to keep from getting dizzy. Kylo had been caring and sweet during those times. Even though he was still worried about what he’d almost done in August, he’d send her texts or talk to her through anything. He didn’t want to not be there for her, like he had done almost four years ago.

She still hadn’t told Finn that she was on the pill. She really only told Rose and Paige. Other than mom, she was the easiest to talk to. Paige understood that she was worried. It wasn’t just to keep her periods lighter and take away some of the pain. And if she told Paige, she’d tell Hux. She’d be
protected at school.

Finn seemed to notice how quiet she was and put his arm around her. She leaned against him and sighed. “Do you…do you want to talk about it?”

She shrugged. “Not really. It’s Kylo’s life. He might call later so maybe we should just stay here and watch a movie or something. Maybe we can play that game so I can beat you.”

Dad had already offered to give them a ride to the theatre. She’d have to tell him.

Now that she was almost fifteen, she was slowly thinking about learning how to drive. It didn’t really mean as much to her as it had to Kylo. She’d do it when she felt like it. Her fifth birthday had been the first birthday party that she’d ever had. How was it ten years ago?

“Yeah, that’s cool. And like, you can be worried if he’s going to move away again. Everybody does, I guess. But he came back before.” Finn said. “Oh, I’ve got to tell you about this show I was watching…”

Finn started telling her about race cars and she smiled as best she could, trying to care about what he was interested in. That’s what she was supposed to do, right? They were supposed to care about what the other was interested in?

“Kids?” Leia stood in her doorway after knocking. “I’m just making sure that you still want spaghetti and sauce for dinner tonight? We can still do something different.”

“No, Mrs. Solo. It’s my favourite.” Finn spoke with a smile, then took her hand. “Right?”

“Yeah, mom. It will be perfect. Can I help?”

Leia shook her head. “No, sweetheart. I’ll be downstairs if you need anything.”

She should be downstairs helping. Kylo never did much in the kitchen but she had always liked helping. Well, in a way, Kylo did. He’d always be there when she needed him and he could get out of bed. She missed having to be picked up to reach a shelf or have him take over cutting up something. He would be able to take care of himself when he lived alone. It wasn’t like he was helpless.

Finn reached for her hand and she managed to smile.

She had to start letting go of some of the bigger things. The thoughts about Kylo were unfair to Finn, she repeated to herself. Kylo would keep pushing forward and she wasn’t being left behind. He said that often enough. It should be enough to believe it and let go and enjoy her life. They’d have their birthdays together and they’d talk more. She looked forward to it.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked, squeezing lightly.

“Just…stuff.

Finn gave her a long look before leaning over to kiss her. His tongue started to press into her mouth and it made her pull away.

“Are you okay?”

Rey swallowed and nodded. “I’m going to go help mom. Come on.”

Finn waited on the bed for a long moment before she heard his feet behind her.
Kenobi looked at his papers then up at him again. He stroked his beard and then sat back, grinning. “So tell me about George.”

“What?” Kylo answered before he really thought about the question. “I mean…of course I can. What do you want to know?”

“When did you first meet?” The examiner smirked and sat back in his chair, daring him to expose himself.

What did he really have to hide? “I met him when I was fourteen after I was recovered in California. And I hated him. He stood for everyone who had left me behind. But then I stopped being an idiot and realized what he was trying to do so I started listening to him. And that got me here.”

Kenobi’s face was still blank, looking down at the papers instead. “I can see that. But that was over ten years ago. Tell me how you know George now.”

Sucking in a breath, Kylo exhaled slowly. “I know him like a mentor. Like the father I wanted. But that changed over time. Now we are just…friends. And I have a better relationship with my own father because of it.”

Tilting his head, Kenobi nodded. “That is interesting. Can you expand on that?”

Which part? “Expand on being friends?”

“Yes.”

Kylo looked down for a second and wanted to scream. Instead, he just looked up. “We talk about what we do and who we are. I’m staying at his house right now and he’s stayed at my home. It’s what…it’s what friends do.”

Finally, he saw a reaction. Kenobi smiled. “That’s true, isn’t it?”

Of course it was. “Yes.”

Quirking his lips again, the other man studied the papers. “Let’s talk about your Masters thesis. There is one part I found particularly interesting…”

And it just kept going, thankfully onto safer subjects like the psychology behind murder.

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“Happy birthday, Rey!” Liza greeted her with a warm hug. “It’s been forever since I’ve seen you.”

Liza had invited her for lunch a few times in the fall. At first, Rey tried to pretend that nothing happened. She liked the strange pieces of advice that Liza had; she had seen the world and knew so
much more. There was another side too. She also had to know if Liza had been serious, if she was in any way in love with Kylo. Liza didn’t really give a real answer. She said that she liked him, despite how he treated her, and he was really hot. And he was good in bed.

Maybe she went to lunch with Liza to see if those feelings were still there.

“Thanks. It’s not today but…thanks.” She sat down and watched Liza do the same, shifting the menu into her hands.

“How’s school?”

Rey felt lighter when she started telling her about how it was good in some subjects, but not the best in others. Liza answered with small grins and nods; she’d felt the same. Sometimes it was just hard to focus. They really did have so much in common that it made Rey regret trying to shut her out. Why had she done that? It was another thing she had just done for Kylo.

They ordered. They ate.

It was a nice place and Liza had promised to pay.

Everything was fine until Liza asked about Kylo and Rey was reminded of why she initially wanted to be there.

“He’s…he’s at his FBI interview. It’s today. He’s really going to do it.” She wanted to be proud and in the back of her mind, she was. And like he said, she shouldn’t let him take up her entire life.

“It still seems so weird, like, all of the stuff he’s been through? He really needs to figure out so many things about people before he does something like this.” Liza stabbed at a few bits of salad and paused to chew them. It was a long pause and Rey took the time to sip at her iced tea. “How’s your boyfriend?”

Biting her lip, Rey shrugged. “He’s good. He’s nice. I guess he really is my boyfriend now. It’s kind of weird. He used to just be my friend but now we hang out more and…he likes kissing me.”

“Does he want to sleep with you?”

Liza’s question instantly made her stomach hurt. “I don’t know. We haven’t really talked about it. We just…kiss. Maybe the other day, I think he wanted to make out when we were alone in my room but I…it made me feel weird.”

Putting her elbows on the table, the blonde shrugged. “Sex really isn’t that scary, Rey. As long as you’re safe and like the person that you’re with, it can be really awesome.”

Fiddling with her napkin, Rey felt herself blush. “I think I want to wait until I’m older. It’s…shouldn’t be such a big deal. Kylo used to think…”

She cut herself off when she saw Liza’s eyebrows go up.

“I can tell you what it’s like with him. He already hates me so I don’t care. The first time he seemed so desperate, like he couldn’t wait to get my clothes off…” Hearing Liza start to describe having sex with Kylo in a busy restaurant made Rey both uncomfortable and, to her horror, curious. How Kylo’s hands felt. What it was like to kiss him. How he smelt. The sounds that he made. She knew those too from a distant memory and it made her shiver.

“It’s okay. I don’t…yeah he’d be really mad if I knew more.” Rey made Liza stop before she could
go further. It was so private; Kylo would have flipped over the table if he’d been there and heard their conversation. Rey’s hands were fisted in her skirt, trying to keep her anger inside. She would be able to let it out later but maybe Liza was saying those things about him just to see if she’d react.

When Rey left that last lunch with Liza, she decided that Kylo had only ever slept with one person in his life.

All he wanted to do was take a shower and go to bed. He wasn’t even hungry. The thought of food made his stomach tighten even as he slumped against the steering wheel of the rental car.

His tie had been the first thing to go when he got back to the car. Whatever happened next was up to how they interpreted his responses. Maybe he should have waited. Maybe he needed more experience. It would be easy to fall into misery that night; the entire interview was either unreadable or had only given him reason to believe that he’d failed. But the point of the process was to be sceptical. He couldn’t fault Kenobi for being critical.

Looking up, he saw the light on inside. At least George was home. He’d make him eat and he could decompress, shedding his doubt and fear before escaping to the guest room to call Rey. And maybe his parents. And probably Hux and Paige. At least to check if everything was okay with the baby.

When he put his key in the door, he swallowed as his unease rose in an instant. Neither the upper or lower lock was set in place. He’d locked them when he left that morning. He’d set the alarm and did what he always did when he locked a door: he’d double checked it and tapped the doorframe. And he knew that George would always lock the door, even if he was home.

Gritting his teeth, he nudged the door open.

“Oh hey, you’re here.” A young, dark-haired man looked up at him from the couch. He checked his watch and grinned at him, blue eyes looking him up and down. “Dad’s not here yet.”

Slipping off his shoes, Kylo still eyed him, trying to figure out the look. He already knew who he was. “You’re Gregor.”

The man, clearly George’s son by the colour of his eyes and shape of his nose, nodded and stood. “Yeah, hey. I guess it’s about time we met.”

The name had come from somewhere in the back of his mind. A distant conversation and old picture of a much younger version of the man before him flashed in his mind. He’d grown up too. But really, they hadn’t needed to know one another up until that point. George hadn’t wanted this. Or it could be another test.

Kylo accepted the handshake but kept his eyes narrowed, despite the warmth of the gesture. “George didn’t tell me that you’d be here.”

Shrugging, Gregor returned to the couch and muted the television that had been jabbering in the distance, relaying some repeating sport result. “I didn’t know myself until this morning. I was supposed to go down to Florida with some friends for spring break but some things happened and I
He knew George well at this point, but the private parts of his life had only slowly been revealed over the years. His oldest son went to Georgetown, but he rarely saw him. His younger children lived with their mother in North Carolina. The bits and pieces that he’d learned, he cherished. George knew every detail about his private life and here he was, awkwardly eyeing his son.

It must be a test.

“I wasn’t really being interrogated.” Kylo finally said, shifting his weight.

He remained at the entrance, still figuring out his options.

Gregor snorted and stood. “Whatever. Interviewed. Come on, do you want a drink or something? I think we have a few hours to kill before dad gets here.”

Following the other man, Kylo watched how he moved. He was obviously comfortable here. Or maybe he didn’t care. The bottle he grabbed from the bar was expensive and he poured too much. Careless. Disrespectful. And Kylo wasn’t in a place to stop him. Or maybe this was the part in which Kylo was meant to take control.

“So are you allowed to talk about it? Or is this one of those top secret, if I tell you, I’d have to kill you things?” Gregor sat down at the dining room table and leaned back. “Come on. Relax. I don’t give a shit about these things.”

“They were just reviewing my application,” Kylo answered, reluctantly sitting across from him. He took a long swig of his drink and shrugged. “It was just as stressful as I thought it would be.”

Nodding, Gregor smoothed his hair. “How old are you now? Twenty-five? Twenty-six?”

“I turn twenty-five this weekend.” Kylo raised an eyebrow, waiting for Gregor to answer the same question.

“I’m twenty-three. So for half my life, dad has always picked you over me. That and work.” Gregor briefly narrowed his eyes then shrugged into a sigh. “Not that I’m bitter.”

It was a direct and strange honesty that Kylo had expected.

“You can feel that way. George…I didn’t know he had children until I was eighteen. But I don’t think you should blame him for that.” He finished his drink. “And I’m fine if you blame me. Guilt is one of my favourite emotions.”

Chuckling, Gregor raised his glass to him. “You know, I don’t have any hard feelings. It was work before it was you but at least with you, dad gets the son he wanted. You’re not pissing away your life for a degree in philosophy. You’re not partying all of the time. Whatever problems I have, I made them myself. You want another?”

Kylo held the look but managed to nod. “I think you’re being too hard on yourself.”

Gregor set the bottle in the middle of the table after filling both of their glasses. “No, I know who I am. I’m a fuck up in his eyes and I’m fine with that. His standards were fucking impossible to meet. And he was never around even before he split with my mom. I was better off living with her. There was no one around to shout at me and when he did, I could just hang up the phone.”

He had rarely seen that side of George when he was growing up, but he’d been exposed to it more
the last couple of years. But being driven wasn’t anything negative. Determination was something
good to learn. “So why are you here?”

Gregor raised his dark eyebrows. “I need money. Why else would I be here? I need to retake some
things in the spring term and I’m hoping I can guilt him into paying for it. It was fucking
impossible to get student loans so I’m on my own to get my worthless degree.”

Another concern he’d never had to face in his life on the outside. “I’m sure he will help you out.”

His phone finally buzzed. *My son will be there. I apologize for not giving you enough warning. I
will be late but I will pick up dinner. It will be about an hour. If he gets under your skin, I won’t blame you.*

“That him? Telling you to ignore me until I go away?”

Glancing up, Kylo frowned. “He said he’ll be picking up dinner on the way home.”

Gregor was chewing on his thumbnail, keeping his eyes level. “So, I guess we’ve got some time to
kill. Do you like sports? Or movies? Music?”

The conversation started out stilted as they both worked through being in the same space for the
first time. Kylo accepted a third drink but turned down the fourth when they relocated to the couch,
stretching out and relaxing as best they could. Gregor started talking about his degree and he
finally saw another emotion other than uncomfortable obligation. Kylo thought back to his former
students and classmates. There was the same passion there when they talked about subjects that
they legitimately enjoyed. Required courses didn’t always bring out those emotions. Gregor had
changed his degree track several times, winding through English, history, and finding landing with
philosophy. It wasn’t really aimless, Kylo had to tell himself. He had found something he finally
enjoyed; not all roads were straight. He knew that all too well.

Everything felt fine until he shrugged off his suit coat and rolled up his sleeves, still aching to
change into something other than his suit. Gregor’s eyebrows went up at the scars staining his
arms.

“You know I’m sorry about what happened. Dad didn’t tell me everything and I was a bitchy
teenager so even if he did, I wouldn’t have listened.” Gregor looked at him with what he read as
sympathy. “Whenever I get down on myself, I try to think about the shit I know you went through.
What the fuck do I have to be sad about?”

Rubbing his wrist, Kylo bit his lip. It was like how it always was with new people. He’d never
escape it. But he could deal with it like he’d learnt how, harshly, over the years. “Well I…”

Like a reprieve from above, he heard a key in the door and tried to hide his relief. Gregor caught
the look and scoffed.

The interview felt almost easy at that point.

-=-

“Everything okay, sweetie?” Han was in her doorway.
She was on her bed, looking at the ceiling again. “I’m just thinking, dad.”

Sitting down, Han took her hand. “Well, like I always ask, good things or bad things?”

Smiling, she sat up. It was nice that mom and dad were home so often now. Mom would sometimes be out for work, but dad was always there in a way that he hadn’t when she was smaller. It made her wonder again how hard it must have been for them when she was at her saddest, feeling the worst. They had her and Kylo to worry about and the world kept turning outside. How had they done it?

“Mostly good things.” She managed to grin. “I’m thinking about my birthday. We have to decorate the basement soon. Mom told me to remind you to take me to the party store.”

“Right, got it. You know, the party store is my favourite place.” Han’s sarcasm made her roll her eyes. He hated the party store. He hated shopping anywhere that wasn’t the autoparts store. He could spend hours there looking at lawnmowers. “But we’ll get you what you need. I can be bored for a half an hour.”

She giggled and nodded. “It won’t be that bad.”

He sighed and squeezed her hand. “No, it won’t be bad. I can handle it.”

She didn’t want to ask, but had to. “Has Kylo called yet?”

Han shook his head. “I have no idea how these things work. He could still be in the meeting for all we know. But he will call when he’s done. Don’t worry about him, sweetheart. He’s got a lot going on but he’s okay.”

Exhaling, Rey nodded. She really had other things to worry about. “Finn’s coming for dinner. It’s still okay, right?”

She watched him work the thought around his head. “Of course. It will be nice to see him.”

Dad wasn’t a liar but clearly he didn’t like it.

-=-

“Grey, you should serve our guest first.” George’s words were low but Kylo still heard the sharpness.

Gregor was about to pour himself another glass of wine. His head whipped first to his father and then to him. Kylo tried to offer a shrug off acceptance but that just made the other man roll his eyes. “Fine, whatever.”

He poured Kylo a glass before filling his own. “I’m going to drink this in my room. If I can be excused from the table.”

The conversation had been civil up until then. But Kylo had been waiting for the turn. He’d seen the small glares hidden at the corner of George’s eyes whenever Gregor went on for too long about a topic neither of them were interested in. Kylo had started to see the rebuke coming when Gregor grabbed another bottle of wine without asking, twisting off the top while still talking.
“You’re excused.” George waited long enough.

Gregor was gone without another word.

And George put his head in his hands. Kylo glanced around before filling his wine glass. “Thank you, Kylo. Thank you for putting up with him. I know where and when I went wrong. But it’s hard to have it shoved in your face.”

Sipping his glass, Kylo nodded. “He has some things to work on. But he’s intelligent. He will figure it out.”

He heard George laugh lightly, shifting to take his glass. “Not before he switches majors for the fourth time. I really didn’t mean for this to happen. In my mind, I don’t compare the two of you. But to him, my ex-wife, everyone else, I picked you over him.”

Not knowing what to say, Kylo started clearing the table. George followed, taking what he could carry to the kitchen. They could hear dull music coming from upstairs and George set the plates he was carrying down hard on the counter. Kylo did his best to shrug it off, keeping his hands in motion to fill the dishwasher.

“If you want something else to think about, Owen called me before I left the office. They’re very impressed. You have nothing to worry about.” George leaned against the counter, smiling at him lightly. “But Phase II will be challenging. You can worry about that instead.”

Blinking, Kylo managed to nod. “I…I can’t wait to tell Rey.”

---

Kylo called after dinner. They were watching a movie on the couch and she hopped to her feet when she saw it was him. Mom and dad both sat up and she took a deep breath before answering. Finn kept his eyes on the screen. He had tried to hold her hand earlier and she had brushed him away, embarrassed to do anything around Han and Leia. He should have known that.

“Hello?”

“Hey.” He didn’t sound sad. He sounded relieved. She grinned instantly. “I’m…I got through.”

“I knew it.” She wanted to jump. “I’m so happy for you. I love you.”

“I love you too.” He sighed and she felt her smile falter. “I…what if…I don’t know. I haven’t heard from them officially but…Rey, it will be okay. Once the training is over, we’ll know where we are.”

“I know.” She nodded, looking around the living room. Mom and dad needed her. Finn needed her. She had to decide for herself once all of the what ifs were ironed out where she wanted to be. “I love you. We’re watching a movie. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”


She hung up and looked at Kylo’s parents, her parents, and smiled again. “He got through.”

Suddenly, the movie wasn’t very interesting anymore.
He could finally shower after speaking with Rey. She sounded happy, proud of him, but he wanted to talk longer than the short conversation. He knew that Finn was there. He knew exactly what was going on. But the thought didn’t make it easier to be away for the next couple of days. The conversation from a couple of weeks ago rose in his mind and he had to shake it off. He’d been allowed to date, or whatever they’d been doing as teenagers. Rey should have the same freedom to explore love and her body. He quietly hoped that Finn would treat her with the same kindness that he had experienced. But only time would give him that answer.

He’d changed into pyjamas and knocked on the half-opened door to George’s office. “I’m going to bed.”

Looking up from a folder, George nodded. “Sleep well. I’ll see you in the morning.”

He had to pass by Gregor’s room on his way back to his. He could still hear the music and finally let it annoy him enough to say something.

The door opened after one knock. “Yeah?”

He narrowed his eyes. “I’m going to sleep. Can you please turn off that?”

Rolling his eyes, Gregor crossed his room, hitting mute on the computer. “You don’t have to sound like him too.”

He was slightly drunk and already annoyed with having to be away from Rey and her boyfriend. He didn’t need to put up with this. He stepped inside and shut the door. “I already said that I don’t have a problem with you. And you said that you don’t have a problem with me. Why are you like this?”

Gregor sat down heavily on his unmade bed. A mess of books and notebooks were mixed in with the sheets. Folding his hands behind his head, the other man gave an annoyed sigh. “Look, I’m just dealing with some shit right now. I’ll be gone tomorrow and you won’t ever have to see me again. I’m fucking done with him.”

Folding his arms, he watched as the other man’s face for a moment before he firmed it into a frown. “You can talk to him. He wants to listen to you. I can see that.”

The younger man looked at his bare feet and shook his head. “Don’t you get tired of him telling you what to do?”

Pushing aside some of the books, Kylo sat beside him. “No because most of the time what I want to do is the wrong thing.”

“I didn’t mean to…I don’t,” he paused to groan. “I’m not always a jerk. I got ditched by my friends and ended up here. With you and him. I’m pissing everyone off. I’d leave tonight if I wasn’t drunk. Because he’d fucking arrest me in a heartbeat if he got the chance.”

Kylo tilted his head. “Things don’t get better if you don’t talk about them.”

“How many times have you heard that over the years?”
Kylo smirked. “Hundreds. Thousands. The amount of anger I’ve carried around over the years…it really only got better when I let more people in. I still have bad days. But I know that I can keep going.”

Gregor met his eyes. “Thanks. I’ll…whatever. I’ll work on it.”

The conversation was over and Kylo could finally go to sleep. The amount of thoughts in his head at the moment would mean it would take several hours to sift through them all and put them all where they belonged.

So he wrote them out like he always did. Sitting up in bed, he carefully charted out the day. He’d made a good impression; he was into the next phase of his career goal. He hadn’t misspoken when he discussed his research and his studies, as well as the other work he’d done in between. He didn’t have to question his physical fitness. Quitting smoking was for the best in the end but fuck did he want a cigarette at that moment. Because his thoughts turned to Rey spending time with that boy. She’d known him her entire life on the outside; he should know how to treat her. But still the thought made him nervous. He needed to be sure he’d be comfortable with the situation before August. He needed to make sure Rey was comfortable with it all. She still worked too hard to please other people. He knew that because he’d felt the same when it came to people who entered his heart.

There was a light knock on his door and he squinted in the dark. “Come in.”

Gregor entered, his head mostly down. “Dad says you’re right. I apologized.”

His arms were folded as he glanced up behind dark lashes.

Shifting in bed, Kylo tried to hold back his satisfaction. “I can be right occasionally.”

Sighing at the response, Gregor opened his mouth only to shut it again and lick his lips. He met his eyes and then quickly looked away. “Yeah, sure. See you in the morning.”

-=-

“Maybe one day soon, I can spend the night?” Finn asked the question as he slipped on his shoes. His mom was waiting outside. He’d called her even though he clearly didn’t want to.

“Finn, I…” She didn’t want to have that conversation right then. It was still so new, so different. “Dad says you’ll have to stay in the basement if you do.”

He shrugged. “I’m fine with that. It’s all good, Rey. I just want to spend more time with you. You’re so pretty and nice and…I really like you.”

Licking her lips, she nodded. But she still kept her distance, standing at the top of the stairs of the back entrance. “I like you too. Goodnight. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Finn bit his lip and nodded. “Night.”

-=--
Kylo caught him watching him over breakfast. He looked more relaxed but still tensed whenever George moved or spoke. Gregor didn’t say much but was more telling with his body language as he sipped coffee.

Kylo hadn’t planned much before he left the next day. He was mostly thinking about sitting in the guest room or walking around, daydreaming more than planning. He was surprised when Gregor offered to show him around while George was at work, to take the short drive into DC.

George kept from looking at him when his son made the offer. “Then I can leave dinner up to you.”

When they were alone, Gregor finally exhaled, loudly. “This is going to be fucking impossible.”

“It always feels that way.” Again, Kylo cleared the table, watching the other man stare at him. “But I thought you were leaving.”

Gregor shrugged. “Nothing to do there. Everyone is gone. And it’s been a while since I’ve been to some of the museums. I hope you don’t mind.”

He kept licking his lips. It wasn’t fully hidden, but not clearly obvious either. It was just a quick motion; he probably didn’t even know he was doing it. He saw the way Gregor was studying his arms and legs each time he moved. He knew those looks. He’d ignored them from others all of the time. Two types of ache made him turn and finish his coffee before putting the mug into the dishwasher. He did not want to date anyone; he was done with relationships. Alone with his family and friends would make it easier to get through life without unneeded complications. Alone with Rey.

But seeing her kiss that boy had made it nearly impossible not to crave that feeling. Intimacy and need could only be pushed away and ignored for so long.

Leaning against the counter, he stared at the other man across the kitchen. “You want to sleep with me.”

Gregor bit his thumb before moving to stand. Kylo swallowed as the other man crossed the kitchen, stalking towards him. The younger man was only a few inches shorter than he was. The combination of dark hair and blue eyes set off his other features: the cheekbones and chin. Kylo suddenly didn’t want to play the game that he’d just started when a pair of hands settled on his hips.

“Maybe you need it.” Gregor’s look darkened as he invaded his space.

He kept his hands planted on the counter. “I wasn’t flirting with you. I’m not interested…”

But the second Gregor interrupted his words with a rough kiss, he was returning it. His hands were around him, dragging him closer, instantly demanding the feeling to be deeper. His heart racing, he groaned at the touches and at being pinned against the counter.

“Sure feels like you’re interested,” Gregor leaned forward to whisper in his ear. “You walked in that door yesterday and I wanted you. It’s like I’ve known you my entire life.”

He had to suck in a harsh breath as delicate kisses travelled up his neck. He was in another place, at another time, losing himself in a different person at the slightest affection. “I don’t…”
Slowly, Gregor backed off, letting him breathe. “You don’t want this.”

“No.” He smoothed his shirt. “I tried something like this once and it was not a solution.”

Biting his lip, Gregor nodded, shuffling back. “Then I guess we’ll actually have to go to some museums.”

He left him alone. Kylo waited until he heard a door shut upstairs before sliding to the floor to grip at his hair. Viciously, he bit his arm and screamed into his sleeve.

-=-

Finn was waiting by her locker and Rey felt a small bit of joy blossom in her chest. “Hey.”

“Hi,” she said.

He leaned forward, kissing her hello. There weren’t that many people in the hallway. She shouldn’t have felt as awkward as she did and tried to push it down. When she pulled him into a hug, the feeling was almost gone.

“Did you have a good night?” he spoke into her hair.

“Pretty good,” she answered, stepping back. “Is Rose here yet?”

He shook his head. “Hey, I texted you good night and you didn’t answer.”

Frowning, she checked her phone. There it was, the unread message from him buried under the read ones from Kylo, Rose, and Paige. “I didn’t mean to, Finn. I was pretty tired. You know I would have answered if I was awake.”

But she had been. She was lying. And it came out so easily. She just didn’t want him to be hurt by her mistake.

He seemed to shrug it off, smiling and grabbing her hand. “It’s okay. I just wanted you to know that I missed you.”

Nodding, she squeezed his hand. “I missed you too.”

She slowly pulled her hand out of his, pulling away so she could get into her locker.

-=-

He was more than thankful when Gregor excused himself from the table. Only this time, loud music didn’t follow from upstairs.

George looked at him with raised eyebrows. “You can tell me what’s going on now.”

Keeping his face blank, Kylo turned. “We talked. It was a good day. It’s been…I’m not good at
meeting new people. And we could talk. It was a good day, George.”

He hid his emotions at how grating the day had been. He let Gregor unload on him the entire time they walked around the air and space museum. He seemed to consciously avoid days when George was gone that he knew had been spent with Kylo. But hearing the words awakened a familiar ache for him. Even when Rey finished school, or if she wanted to move earlier, he would likely be gone a lot of the time. And with how things were going now, she probably wouldn’t need him around. They were still tied together, forever bound in the past, but the future would challenge that again. He couldn’t leave her alone in an empty house, glaring at the walls if he was across the country.

But every time he fell silent or looked distant, Gregor would brush his hand and smile at him.

Even making dinner had set his back rigid. It had been so long since he made a meal with someone who would lightly touch his side, or move around him, or just be breathing and joking beside him.

Back in the moment, George sat back, his chair creaking. “He’s always been social so I understand. I’m glad you two could get along. If you can convince him to keep talking to me, I’d really appreciate it, Kylo.”

He helped clean up the kitchen, talking with George about the schedule for the next round. There would be more assessments, more meetings, and more review. It almost felt routine to be nervous about continuing on down the path that he chose over ten years ago. He was already preparing himself to dive into it, ignoring the pull he felt from the room across the hall.

George stopped him when he tried to say goodnight and excuse himself for bed. He gave him a small, unwrapped box. Opening it, he smirked at the cufflinks inside: tiny, gold clips with the letter K on them.

“They are subtle, but you’ll need them.” He clasped his arm and then handed him another, wrapped package for Rey.

He could only thank him for the small gift and embrace him. His flight left at 8 a.m. so he really wanted to sleep and prepare for flying back. Everything was already packed. Now it was just to get through the night without anyone knocking on his door.

Sitting in the chair in the corner of his room, he finally texted Rey again.

George gave me a birthday gift. There is one for you too.

It took a few minutes to get a response. Oh! Thank him for me. I can’t wait for you to be home.

How was school?

I went. It was okay. You can help me with my homework when you get back. I get it but I think I’m wrong.

He managed to smile at his phone. I would love to help you. I am sure that you are not as wrong as you think.

Finn says hi.

Narrowing his eyes, he exhaled. Has everything been okay with him?

Another long pause. It’s been great. Love you!
He stared at the words until he heard someone clear his throat from the doorway.

“Texting Rey?” Gregor was in loose shorts and a t-shirt, his slight body hidden in the larger clothes. He wondered how long he’d been standing there.

“Yes. I’m going to help her with some homework when I get back.” He kept his head down as the other man shut the door silently. He heard him sit down on the bed and finally looked up. “The grade she is in now was the first one I came back to. I remember everything. It’s hard to teach her and not just tell her the right answer.”

“Yeah, I get that. Whenever I talk to my brother or sister I just want to scream at them. How are you this stupid? Don’t you know the answer? Oh wait, you’re six and seven. Of course you’re dumb.”

“Rey isn’t dumb,” he answered quickly, aware of how the other man was sitting and staring at him. “She just has trouble focusing on some things. I want her to know that she can do it. She isn’t worried about college yet but she will when her friends start talking about it.”

Gregor licked his lips again. “Yeah, I get that.”

Kylo held his eyes and let the silence stretch on. “Why are you here.”

“I wanted to say goodnight,” he said before leaning forward to put a warm hand on his knee, “and see if there was a way I could properly say goodbye to you.”

Yes, let me come in your mouth.

Yes, let me hold you down and fuck you and hear you cry my name.

Yes, take all of this fucking frustration and ache away by touching me until I come again.

“I don’t think that’s appropriate.” He reached down and removed the offered hand. “I…I am really fine alone.”

Sighing, Gregor stood and stepped away. “I don’t think that you are but I wanted to give you the option. I’m going to sleep in tomorrow so you don’t have to worry about saying goodbye to me again. So goodnight and goodbye and all that.”

“Goodnight.” Kylo answered.

They held eyes for a long moment that could lead anywhere. All Kylo needed to do was stand up and he’d feel the satisfying rush of holding and kissing another person: someone who wanted him.

But he didn’t.

He watched the other man shrug and leave the room.

Again, he bit his arm and took pleasure from feeling a different sort of pain.

—
Waiting for boarding, Kylo absently flipped through old pictures on his phone to try to erase the entire encounter from his mind.

He didn’t need to think about anyone else. He had his memories.

He was staring at his picture when a text popped up: *hit me up the next time your in town.*

“You have no idea how hard this is,” he said to the ghost on his phone. “No fucking idea.”

Chapter End Notes

It’s my birthday today! So I’m celebrating by posting a chapter that is a bit messy, but keeps pulling us forward. Standard warnings, other than brief m/m content and awkward teenage handholding.
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Rey goes camping with Finn. Kylo goes looking for trouble.

See chapter notes for warnings (and kindly check the tags and skip the chapter if it ain't up your alley.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rey looked at the tiny bundle in the bassinette and tilted her head. Benji was there; he was soft and pink and all too real. The light dusting of dark hair looked different now than the initial pictures. They couldn’t see him in the hospital last week. They both had been sick; they all had been sick in their house and it had been frustrating not to be able to see him right away. Kylo had almost looked relieved to have a cold and not have to visit his friends and their new son at the hospital. And Rey felt oddly proud of Hux telling them not to come even if he had wanted to. He’d been more and more nervous as the term went on, taking longer lunch breaks with Kylo or pacing the halls the week before everything changed. Finally, on the day that it happened, she and Rose knew before everyone else.

And he was finally home. Finally in the room that she’d helped decorate months ago with paint and stencils, giving him a happy place to grow up in. He was just so tiny with a scrunched up face and dark eyes. She had held him earlier and he had been so warm. She could hear Han and Leia continue talking in the dining room with Hux and Paige. But everything else was quiet except for the tiny breaths from the baby.

“Was I really this small?” she asked, looking over her shoulder.

Kylo finally stepped forward. He’d stayed at the edge of the room until her voice forced him closer. “You were a little bigger. Then you started getting smaller and I was so scared. We needed…then he gave me formula so you wouldn’t die.”

He’d held him first but looked afraid to touch him. Still, he’d done it and Rey saw the soft look come over his face before he blinked it away, turning and smiling at Hux. Then, he handed him to her and she got to smell the soft notes of a new baby for the first time.

She didn’t want to wake him, but it was hard. She wanted to make sure that he was still breathing, even though she could see the small rise and fall of his chest. Don’t wake him up, Hux had said. He looked exhausted. He was taking the next week off from school but then he’d be back, probably looking even more tired. She knew some boys who would be getting detention instantly if she kept goofing off like they were. At least Finn wasn't one of them.

“You were scared. You told me before.” She looked over at him again. “But I never thought about how frightening it must have been. I didn’t understand before.”
Kylo bit his lip and reached for her hand. “I was too young to realize what was really happening. I just had to keep you alive. That’s all I knew, other than I got more food suddenly and didn’t get hurt for a while.”

Squeezing his much larger hand, Rey watched him look down at his godson again. “I couldn’t have done that when I was ten. I tried to think about it when I was ten but I was so mad back then…”

“It’s okay, Rey.” Kylo just shook his head. “You didn’t have to.”

The baby was still asleep and they left the room, her hand still in his, re-joining the others in the dining room to finish their coffee.

“It’s a good thing that both me and Kylo look terrified,” Hux said the instant they came into the room. “It would be weirder if we didn’t.”

Kylo sat down, pulling her onto his lap in a simple gesture that was both confusing and comforting at the same time. He was thinking about too many things; he felt better by planting his chin on her shoulder. “It’s already weird enough. But he looks perfect.”

She glanced over at mom and dad and smiled, even as Kylo’s hands tightened around her. “When can I start babysitting? Please. Please. I already passed the course.” She turned to Paige and tried to read her tired face. “I did really well on the infant part, I promise.”

“I believe you, Rey,” Paige answered, grinning in return. “I want you to get to know him too. And you will do a great job. We’ll let you know. Maybe you and Kylo can watch him together?”

“No,” Kylo answered, his head snapping up. “I mean…not yet. I…” He groaned and dropped his chin again. “I really am, happy for you. It’s just…weird.”

Han cleared his throat, making them all turn. Except for Kylo. “It really is something, isn’t it? You two, you were only weeks apart. We brought him home and then there you were, Armitage. We thought the other neighbours were going to go insane before we did.”

She knew that Hux kicked Kylo underneath the table because he jolted up to glare at him. “They probably did, dad. Why did you think that they all moved?”

Rey looked at Paige and they both rolled their eyes.

“Boys, stop it,” Leia cut in. “Thank you for letting us see him. And whenever you need anything, you know where we are. And Rey, when he’s a bit older, I think that he’s all yours. Because, honestly, you two, you’re going to be tired all of the time. And we’ll take him. We’re already used to being tired all of the time.”

Paige and Hux laughed and Kylo just pulled her tighter.

-=-

He just wanted to read, alone, in the basement. He didn’t want to deal with the people roaming around upstairs, probably debating on who should talk to him first.

“So here’s where you’re hiding.”
Of course it was Han. At least he had a beer in his hand for him. He’d made a good time on his mile run that morning. He could have a drink and not feel like he was lazy. “You knew where I was.”

His father had given up shaving since he’d retired. He’d only do it when he felt like it. And he looked happier for it. “There’re not that many places to hide in this house. How are you doing?”

“My best friend named his son after me and made me the godfather. I need to get used to it. That’s all.” He took a long drink from the bottle, silently applauding his father for his taste in beer. He sighed into the silence that Han left him and took another drink. “I won’t be there for him. I’ll be gone. I won’t be there for them. I’ll be gone. What were they thinking?”

Han, in turn, gave up lurking against the doorframe to sit on the bed. They should have replaced it with one of the frames they had in storage but it was a good bed. It had lasted all of these years. He didn’t want to change that room and now was wishing that they had: smaller bed, maybe a foldout with an armchair in the corner. He would rather sleep at Hux’s or a hotel if Luke was staying there at any point. No matter how hard Han and Leia argued, in Kylo’s mind Luke was not welcomed in that house. He hadn’t spoken to him since the letter. He did not want to speak to him.

“They’re thinking that they love you and that you love that baby too. If it helps, that’s why you’re scared and afraid.” Han sighed and then rolled his eyes. “Christ, Ben, we put up those security cameras. The cops found nothing. That fucking reporter is gone. We can’t put them into lockdown forever.”

“But dad…” he started and then stopped, taking a drink and sorting through his thoughts. “So you get it?”

Han snorted. “There’s a lot to get, but I get this part. Ben, we’re looking out for them. We’ll be okay when you’re gone. And then when you’re done, you’ll get the people that are out there trying to hurt our family.”

Glancing around the room, Kylo sipped at his beer again. He stared out at nothing, doubting everything that he’d worked so hard for. Putting them at risk didn’t used to be part of the plan but he hadn’t considered that when he was younger.

His father reached for his leg and he accepted the touch. “We’re upstairs, trying not to listen to Finn and Rey up in her room. Come up there and stop being in your head for a while.”

He narrowed his eyes at nothing. “Give me a few minutes.”

Exhaling, Han made him almost roll his eyes. “You know I’m also terrified about him and her.”

Looking at him, Kylo sighed. “If she trusts him, we have to trust him. You trusted us. We were… fine.”

After a long pause, Han nodded again. “I know, son. It is how it is. I will be upstairs with your mom if you need to talk more.”

He didn’t want to.

But he waited only five minutes before going up to see them.
Finn grabbed her hand when she stumbled on the walking path. She had tried to make sure that she wouldn’t slip, but still, he was there. The stupid log had made her almost fall.

School was almost over. And with help from Finn and Kylo, she was feeling so much better about her grades. And she was also feeling better about Finn.

He thought it was cool that she did yoga with their principal’s wife. She’d drop by after dance practice, most of the time getting a ride from Kylo. He was back watching her dance practices, still spending most of it on his phone. Finn always wanted to see new pictures of Benji. As much as Kylo hated getting his picture taken, and always complained about it, he let her take dozens of pictures of them together. And Finn smiled at every one of them.

Kylo had told them where to hike that morning.

Looking at her hand in Finn she realized that she should really stop thinking about him.

They reached a clearing and Finn took a deep breath, letting go of her hand. “This is a nice place.”

Looking at over the slowly greening hills, she managed to nod. Finn didn’t really like hiking and she didn’t either. But getting to the edge of the woods, she realized why Kylo told her to follow that path. The escarpment hadn’t changed. It was still a mess of hills and rocks that stretched on at the edge of their town. And she could share it with Finn.

Sitting down on the grass, she pulled her legs up under her chin. She liked the jeans that she was wearing but tried not to care that they were getting dirty. The last few months had been nice with Finn. Learning how to be more than friends stopped feeling weird when he figured out that she wanted to take things slow. She didn’t want to tell him more yet, but there were so many thoughts in her mind whenever she felt his eyes travel up and down her body. In some parts of her, it made her feel so attractive. But in the other parts, she didn’t know what to think.

Those parts, at least, Kylo could fill in.

She’d stop in his doorway and linger until he smiled and asked what she wanted to know. And then he’d finally look away from his laptop, phone, or book and try to tell her how to react when she felt uncertain. All she felt was unsure so his little moments of connecting with her made her recognize how deeply he felt at the time he was hiding so much from her. It also made her think about the parts that she left out when she talked to him.

He had never really lied.

Maybe he had, but she wouldn’t have understood it. She remembered thinking that boyfriends were about being in love. She hadn’t realized how hard it had been for him then and how hard it was for her now. He was worried about being touched or reacting in the wrong way. He pulled away when he wanted more because he didn’t trust his body.

At the same time Kylo was opening up, telling her how he felt, she felt herself being pushed aside by the wave of his feelings. He’d been afraid and she was too; but he seemed to feel something deeper for his boyfriend than she did.

They only had a few more months to figure it out and then he’d be gone again.

“What are you thinking about?” Finn sat beside her, picking at the grass. “School?”
She turned her head and smirked. “Not really. I’m thinking a little bit about Benji. And maybe how much I’ll miss Kylo when he’s gone.”

Gone. Gone used to mean something else. Now it just represented a pause before a return. Could she make plans for that in between? He’d be back at Christmas. That’s all she knew. He’d be done in January and then come home for a while before he knew where he was placed. It could be anywhere. It would probably be Alaska; she and Finn had done a report about Alaskan industry and she kept looking up how many unsolved crimes there were in Alaska. She even asked him if he thought he’d be sent there and he looked confused about where the thought had come from. He’d been talking a lot about George and something that had happened when he was there in the spring. He was getting paranoid about that. God, she thought to herself, stop thinking about him.

“You know he’ll be back, sweetheart.” She turned at the word and for a moment Finn looked nervous. “Can I call you that?”

*Just don’t call me sweet pea,* she thought. *That’s his.* “I think I like it. And I like you.”

“Yeah?” Finn grinned. It was that perfect grin that made her know that what she had just said wasn’t a lie. “I like you too.”

He leaned over and she kissed him as he leaned closer to her. It made her think about how many times she’d kissed him instead of waiting for him to kiss her. It had always seemed fair between the people in her house. Han would kiss Leia when she got home from work. Leia would kiss Han when he came in from the garage, dirty and grumbling about something before smiling and taking her hand to spin her around without music to dance in the kitchen. Catching an unguarded moment between Poe and Kylo when Kylo would lean down to kiss him first and then lean back just to see him smile back. But Poe could kiss Kylo without any reason to. That’s what their kitchen was for.

Why had she ever been so angry that they were in love?

As she kissed Finn, she reached out to put her hands around his neck. Was she in love? She liked her boyfriend. He listened when she needed to talk. He helped her at school. He liked stupid pictures of her, Kylo and Benji. What more did she need?

He gently pressed her down against the grass and she instantly tensed at feeling his body on top of hers. She broke away from the kiss and her hands froze against his chest, fisting in his sweater.

“I’m sorry,” she said, taking a deep breath. “I’m…”

Finn rolled off of her and seemed to huff before he shook his head and smiled at her. “It’s cool, Rey. We’re…it’s okay.”

Frowning, she shook her head. She wanted to keep looking at the clear sky but turned to him instead, studying his brown eyes and handsome face. She never realized how nice it was to look at him before they started dating. But the closer Kylo got to leaving, the more she wanted to get closer to Finn. It was only her own fear that stood in the way. “I think…I think I need more time. I want more Finn, but it’s hard for me.”

“Yeah, I know.” He took her hand and nodded.

He didn’t know that she was almost lying. She wanted to know how it felt to have caring hands caress her. She’d felt those urges when she kissed Ransolm, even though that embarrassment burnt deep. The same feelings rose when Kylo had, out of some form of frantic loneliness, caressed her face and leaned down to start something that had been so wrong that it was almost for the best that
he turned it into torture for them both. It must have been bad because they didn’t talk about it any more. Maybe Kylo didn’t even think about it any more.

He had the FBI academy to think about.

And whoever he kept texting when he thought no one else was looking.

Kylo was going to leave in August. August. He wouldn’t be there to help her and it weighed her down like a brick. When he first started talking about all of this, it seemed too far away. It was something that she wanted for him but also didn’t want. He’d just moved home and now he was going to be gone again.

“Do you know why it’s hard?” she asked, turning to Finn.

He swallowed and she saw him wipe his tongue over his teeth. “We’ve known one another for a long time, Rey. I mean, we went to kindergarten together. You were my first real friend. I almost liked it when you got mad at me because you were so cute when you yelled. I know I liked Rose, and I guess I still like her as a friend, but when I figured out that I liked you more, it made me think about when we were kids and…yeah. I’ve liked you because I know things are hard for you. It makes me want to be a better person, I guess. No one else has ever made me feel that way before.”

Rey’s heart fluttered. She wanted to kiss him again but held back. “I’m sorry Kylo keeps getting in the way.”

Finn shrugged. “He’s like your older brother, right? What else would an older brother do but watch out for his little sister?”

Even as Rey smiled, she felt inside that what he’d said didn’t equal half of what Kylo meant to her.

=-=

Stop txting me about the baby. I hate babies & so do you.

I do not hate babies. Tell me I look awful here.

Lol u look hot. But also like ur going to kill it. Is it urs?

Fuck you.

Fuck u right back.

It is my godson. What do I do with this?

I dunno. Dont shake him?

Kylo stared at the messages and then deleted all of them. Again.

But he still didn’t erase the number.

=-=
“I thought we could do something this weekend.” Kylo was almost tanned. He’d been running with his shirt off in the late-June sun, his skin a few shades away from pale for once. “Maybe take a trip. We could go to the city or something.”

Rey had waited too long to tell him. Shifting her feet, she briefly clenched her teeth. “I’m going camping with Finn and his parents.”

Kylo blinked, wiped his face and then frowned for a moment. He worked through the emotion and then shrugged. “That’s…okay.”

“But we can do anything this week. We can go to the zoo.” Rey fixed her tank top, pulling it down to stop her hands from moving. “I’m going to miss you when you’re gone but he invited me and…”

“It’s fine,” Kylo answered quickly. “When do you leave?”

“Thursday morning.”

It was only Monday. Thursday would be there before they could think about it. “Okay. We can go to the zoo tomorrow. I heard they renovated the wolf enclosure.” Kylo smiled tightly at her and went up to the washroom. The door shut and locked and the shower started.

She sighed and left to sit on the porch. It was already too hot inside. June was almost gone. July was coming. And then he’d be gone.

*I finally told Kylo,* she texted Finn.

*Did he look mad?*

She shrugged to herself. *Not really. He made that face though.*

*I told you not to worry but it’s okay if you are. Do you want to hang out tomorrow?*

She looked up at the small frosted window into the washroom. *I’ll let you know.*

Deciding that she’d ignore the next message, she turned on her music. Sighing, she left the porch for the lawn. Slowly stretching out, it felt good to move her muscles. There was no dance class over summer. It was up to her to keep up her flexibility. She thought about doing yoga with Paige and Benji and smiled. His tufts of dark hair and chubby cheeks as he watched them stretch on the mats in the living room.

And then Kylo would pick her up and drive her home, letting her tell him everything new that Benji could do. He looked more comfortable when he held him now that he was a bit bigger. And she saw that his background on his phone was of her and the baby. He finally changed it.

Sighing, she kept stretching until her head finally cleared.

-=-

*What are you doing this weekend?*
Sitting in my dorm room doing fuck all. My weed guy is ut of town & I have spring courses. wats up?

I want to see you.

Oh yeah? ;) When?

He bit his lip at his phone. Thursday evening to Sunday morning.

Text me the flight info. Ill pick u up. ;)

Kylo put down his phone and instantly regretted the exchange.

But he still bought the tickets.

-=-

She was finished packing, she thought. She probably brought too many things but she’d never been really camping before. She’d stayed at a cabin by the lake, but she had never had to sleep on the ground before. Finn had told her what to bring; they had the rest of the things that they would need. Mom and dad knew where they would be staying.

Looking at her bag, she frowned again. “Kylo?”

He was across the hall but she heard him shift off his bed to come to her room. “Yeah?”

“What else should I take?” she asked, pointing at her backpack. “I already have the sleeping bag.”

His eyes had been drawn to it first. “Did you just pack shorts? You should have one pair of long pants. There will be mosquitos and if you go hiking, there’s poison ivy.”

She nodded. “I have my shorts and my pants. And mom bought me hiking boots yesterday.”

“Towel?”

She smiled and tilted her head. I packed my towel and bathing suit.

It took him a moment to focus his eyes and reply. Then you should be okay. Don’t forget to pack your medication.

“I’m going to miss you. Maybe we can go somewhere when we get back.” She switched from blinking. It was late and she didn’t want mom and dad to think that she was worried or that they were silently arguing.

Kylo gave her a small smile. “As a family. I’d like that.”

He lingered, looking around her room. She’d printed out about a dozen pictures of them with Benji and put them up on her wall. There were also pictures of her and Rose, and her and Finn on her collage. There was also an old polaroid that she’d saved of him and Poe, looking so much younger than she remembered. But she liked those pictures. They were so much better than what he used to have on his wall. He turned his eyes to her and just seemed to stare for an endless moment. Was he upset about the pictures? She was about to ask when he finally sighed. “I’m going to shower and
go to bed. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“Okay.” She looked down before she could read more into his eyes than was probably there.

-=-

Gregor held the same handsome confidence that he remembered from the spring. Kylo had done his best in those months to push the temptation away and now, standing there in the airport, he regretted his decision again. He’d felt it the entire flight. He’d felt it taking the cab to the airport, telling his parents and Rey that he was going to see George.

He thought about him on the flight too. This was wrong for so many reasons and he struggled with his impulsiveness and jealously.

“You’re actually here.” The other man grinned. “I thought you’d text me and say ‘gotcha’ and I’d go home like an idiot.”

He shook his head. “I thought you wouldn’t show up either.”

“I thought about it but I was willing to risk it to see you again.” He reached out, putting his hand on Kylo’s shoulder. “Let’s go. Parking costs way too fucking much here.”

Kylo followed after, willing himself not to panic.

Gregor’s car was a mess of food wrappers and piles of books and plastic bags. Kylo raised an eyebrow at the sight.

“Don’t judge me, Kylo.” Gregor winked. “Let’s go.”

The weather was still warm and sticky even as evening settled in. Kylo wasn’t hungry but accepted stopping for dinner. Gregor kept eyeing him and Kylo still hadn’t decided what he wanted. They were free from George’s house but what did that make them? The circumstances were only pointing in one direction; and the danger made it enticing, despite how his heart kept pounding harder.

“I start at the academy next month,” Kylo said when they were seated at a dingy pizzeria. He really didn’t want to eat, but as long as they were in public, nothing could happen. He had to draw this out as he rambled through his thoughts.

“Oh yeah? That’s cool—joining the fascist club, invading everyone’s privacy.” Gregor rested his elbows on the dirty table and leaned forward. “You haven’t told my dad that you’re here, did you?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know why I’m here. What would I tell him?”

Gregor’s foot brushed his under the table. “You know why you’re here.”

He refused to blush. “Maybe I really enjoyed going to museums with you?”

Gregor snorted and looked like he was about to slide some smart retort at him but was interrupted by the waitress.

Dinner went by slowly, Kylo trying to drag out every minutes while also avoiding the subject.
What he should have done was rent a car. He'd have been able to get away at anytime if he had put more thoughts into this plan. But the way Gregor moved around him told him that he wanted him there. There had been a spark between them that Kylo was too curious about not to let die, like he should.

Gregor kept talking once they left and parked the car at the far edge of the student lot. It was strange to be on another campus, one that wasn't his own. He'd really only visited Hux a few times when he lived in student housing and now he was crossing another university towards Gregor's room.

There were a few other students in the lobby, mostly focused on reading or looking out the large windows into the summer air. He had been so thankful to have never been forced to live around so many other young people. There had mostly been students in their building but they tended to keep to themselves. He never said a word to them but they still left cards in the mailbox that he still hadn't read.

Gregor winked at him when they took the elevator up to his floor. He looked the same; maybe his hair was a little longer but his eyes were still crisp and blue. And he kept licking his lips again.

"It's pretty quiet right now. It's mostly me, some other dummies who failed things, and the international students. I like it more when there are more people around but I'm stuck here for now." Gregor's door was identical to the ones that lined the hall. Kylo hadn't thought to ask if he had a roommate or not but was thankful to see only one name on the door.

But inside the room, he got another surprise.

“I can get a hotel,” Kylo finally said, eying the small and utterly disorganized space.

Gregor made a face. “Fuck no. If...if you’re really going to be this uptight, I can crash in the lounge. But before that, we can get drunk and talk. I mean, it’s what you want.”

He was already in motion, shutting the door behind him to enter the room. Kylo put his bag down and moved to pull off his shoes but decided against it. It was too warm in the unkempt room. Too much trash. How could he breathe in there? “I’d like to get drunk.”

He didn’t know where the words came from but it must have been from the part of him that had been blocked for so long. He hated fighting attraction. He had finally accepted, almost a year ago or more, that he could feel something for both men and women as long as they had something within them that were worth his trust. Poe had been the centre. He taught him that sex wasn’t all hurt and pain. Liza taught him that he could run his hands down a woman’s body and not be filled with anxiety that he would hurt her. He couldn’t compare sex between one man and one woman. He’d only come inside one of them. And that had meant trust.

But now he was with a new person, someone who he wanted to trust. It was George’s son. But he was also his own person.

He was back in the hotel room with Liza. He had to do better this time.

Gregor smiled and moved to the mini-fridge. He grabbed two beers, handing him one. “Then let’s get drunk. I have some weed too if you want…”

He accepted the bottle but shook his head. “I’m going to be tested in August. I know how long it lasts in the system but…”

Rolling his eyes, Gregor sat down on his mess of a bed. “Yeah, whatever man. It’s fine.”
Kylo, not knowing what to do, sat down on the floor and pushed a pile of notebooks aside. “I shouldn’t have…”

“Fuck, Kylo, no. You’re here. You’re looking like...Christ. Tell me what you want. Because I know what I want.” He shifted his legs and slowly narrowed his eyes.

What did he really want? It should be easier now that he was there but the conflict in his chest hadn’t settled. Glancing out the window at the evening settling around the campus, he sipped on his bottle.

He had control for now. That’s what mattered.

Standing, he reached for Gregor’s hand and put it on his hip. The rush was instant when the hand gripped him closer. “I need to kiss you soon.”

“I need you to do that too.” Grey tipped his head at the words, looking at him from beneath heavy lashes. His lips looked soft and he hoped they would feel like they had in George's kitchen.

Maybe he would be able to give them both what they wanted, but he needed a bit more time. And probably alcohol.

-=-

She still didn’t have reception on her phone and she’d promised Kylo that morning that she’d text him. But he was at George’s. So he would be fine. He’d be gone in a month and Rey had felt guilty the second they were on the road.

Finally shaking her head, she put her phone back in her jacket. It was cold anywhere away from the fire.

The drive had taken forever and they made it to their camping site with just enough daylight to set everything up and start a fire. Finn saw her put her phone away, turning the marshmallow on his stick.

“I didn’t know we wouldn’t have a connection out there.” He quickly looked back at the fire. His stepdad was still stacking wood at the corner of their lot. His mom was getting water for the morning. They seemed to do this so often that they knew what they should do. Rey was trying to figure it out and hoped that she would before they left. Maybe she could come back with them one day.

“It’s okay,” she said. “Everyone was okay when I left. And if anything happens, they have the number to the station.”

Finn nodded. “I don’t think that anything will happen but if it makes you feel better, then it’s good. Hey, this is done. Do you want it?”

She couldn’t resist taking the warm and sticky bit of sugar from the edge of the stick. They were planning on making smores but forgot to buy chocolate. Marshmallows were fine on their own. She didn’t need to eat that many to get full.

It was her first night alone with Finn’s family. She’d been to his house but would rather spend time
in her room, with Han and Leia nearby. His room wasn’t that neat and the basketball posters made
her distracted. But the last time she was there, she saw the card on his desk that she’d given to him
on Valentine’s Day so many years ago. It must have been her first Valentine’s. Her writing still
wasn’t neat yet.

Looking up at the stars, she smiled at the lingering sweetness in her mouth. “I never want to live in
a big city. I like that we can see the stars where we live.”

Finn craned his head up, following her eyes. “I think I would be fine living in a city. It gets kind of
boring to have nothing to do. But maybe I’d miss the stars too.”

She looked back at him, studying him in the firelight.

They’d be sharing a tent that night. She’d helped set it up, putting down the blue sleeping bag from
the top of Kylo’s closet on top of the air mattress. There was a gap between them but it still made
her want to text Kylo about what she should do.

She’d have to trust herself and trust Finn. That’s what she had to do.

-=-

He didn’t care about seeing Gregor’s face. It had been hot, fast, and the easiest decision at the
time. He thought about that as he looked at himself in the mirror after cleaning up. He needed to
get the smell of the condom off of him, erase the sterile odour. He refused to cry, daring his face in
the mirror to break.

He’d been inside him. He’d kissed him. He’d heard his name on his lips. He’d gripped his hips and
lost himself in the bliss of the moment.

And he couldn’t lose his mind. But if he shattered the mirror, he wouldn’t have to look at himself
anymore. Instead, he bit his bare arm and shuddered, ripples still coursing through his veins. Even
with a condom, he’d felt the same sensations so richly again. But it was a different body, a
different person.

Finally washing his hands again, he left the small adjacent washroom and was only a few strides
from the bed and cover, only having to shift around a few piles of stuff. He wanted to pause, to
decide if he wanted to get into the bed again, but being so exposed made his unease start to press
harder. And the washroom and shower were worse off than the rest of the room. Finally in bed
again, he clenched his teeth in the darkness and fought back the sickness that threatened to take
over. Rolling over, Gregor put his head on his chest. He lazily stretched, sighing as he moved.
Warmth spread within him at the gentle motions of a body beside him.

Slowly, Gregor’s hands wound up his chest, tracing his old scars in gentle motions. He seemed to
be studying each one, finding more reasons to stare at him. The kisses had been deep and hit him in
the right places. The touches were even better. He’d almost forgotten what it was like to have a
warm and wanting body beneath him who was so responsive and wanting. But now he was looking
at his scars, running his hand along his collar bone. “Fuck, you’re so fucked up.”

Kylo smirked, pulling him closer to kiss his forehead, needing to feel him again. He shivered when
Grey cuddled closer, giving off pure warmth. “Just inside. The rest is mine.” He stroked down his
soft face, watching blue eyes turn warm in the dull light from the moon. When they’d been texting,
he thought about the distant kiss in George's kitchen. And now that he had been inside of him, it almost felt like a good decision to be there. He sighed, enjoying the sensation of skin against skin. "I like you."

“Oh yeah?” Gregor smiled before leaning against him. He could almost see the blush and felt the feelings burrow deeper at the motion. “I’m going to need you to fuck me again in a few hours. Because you’re fucking fantastic.” He tilted his head up, balancing his chin on his chest with shining eyes. “Or maybe I can fuck you?”

He only had to give him a dark look to see the flirtation die. He had to cling on to the affection from before not to fall into panic or anger. Maybe it all had been a mistake and he'd fucked the wrong person again. A look would have to say the things that he wasn't ready to give up at that point.

“Okay, sorry.” He dropped his head down again. “Is that just a hang-up or something you want to talk about?”

The soft hand caressed his chest again. He should open up more. They’d just shared one another. He should know.

“Not right now.” He stroked his hair, taking in the feeling and letting the thought die. He was searching for reasons inside that would explain why he felt more than just annoyance about the man beside him. It had been liberating to sleep with someone again, to feel the need and be able to act on it without being gripped by terror. Maybe it was the way Gregor seemed to speak his mind without worry. He had concerns in the world but didn't let them bother him. It was something he needed to work on and needed to embrace the moment more. And he had earlier that night by daring to give in to sex. “I need to sleep.”

He heard Gregor sigh before kissing his cheek and leaving for his washroom. The irritation flooded back in an instant. Good, he needed to clean himself up before he touched him again. Kylo was beginning to wonder when the last time he’d washed the sheets or done the laundry. The small room was filled with mostly unorganized junk and clothes that it was really pressing on his ability to stay floating in the afterglow.

Closing his eyes, he tried to focus on the punch of exhaustion that having an orgasm gave him. If he could fall asleep, then he could start putting this mistake behind himself, if it indeed turned out to be one.

-=-

They spent Friday morning in bed, kissing to the point of frustration, but finally left for lunch. Grey's hands had been demanding, touching him everywhere and giving him something he missed for too long. He never had to think twice when Grey was on top of him. Kylo enjoyed the thrill of teasing but going further again so quickly left him with a growing ache in his heart. He had a perfect moment in the corner of a quiet café to confess everything but the words were hard to find. It only hurt to think about the one time he and Poe got close to having a more equal sexual relationship. He had wanted to please him, wanted him to know how it felt to be inside him, but just couldn’t relax. And Poe had held him, saying that they would never have to do that when the gnawing memories of loss wouldn't let him be. They had one another and that’s all they needed.
Still, other than a few failed attempts, it was always Poe beneath him, letting him be in control. What if he’d been lying? What if he hadn’t really always liked it? What if he had wanted more and was just waiting for him to get more comfortable? The time he spent waiting could never be returned now that he was gone.

“Hey, are you listening to me?” Grey asked, nudging him under the table. “Come on, wake up.”

“Sorry,” he answered. “Rey hasn’t texted me. She’s away with her boyfriend and…that whole thing.”

Licking his lips, the other man nodded. “I’m still trying to figure out how you and her fit together, you know? Dad talked about you both but for a long time, for me, she was just some little girl. Her and dad don’t have the same thing that you do.”

He couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable again but tried to shake it off. “He’s helped her too and I think that he’ll try to be there more when she’s a bit older. How is he with your sister?”

“Half-sister. Yeah, he’s…he likes hugging her. For some reason, he likes braiding her hair. Whenever we’re all together, she gets the most attention. Me and Grant end up playing video games until he remembers that we exist. Maybe he thinks he won’t fuck up as much with Grace but who knows.” Gregor shrugged again and smirked at him. “But there’s, like, nothing going on between you and Rey? You told me you slept with that other chick so I know you’re not totally…”

“You don’t need to tell me what I am. I know I’m…whatever. Maybe it was easier when everyone thought I was gay, but I didn’t like that either. That was Poe’s thing. I was just with him. But with Rey…she’s beautiful. She’s strong. I had to raise her in hell and then kill to get her out, to stop him from destroying her. He had this look in his eyes and I…needed for it to stop. I feel bad that I kept some food for just me and her. I knew it was coming. Somewhere inside, I felt something was weird for like a month and I had to be strong enough to stop him. I don’t feel like I’m her dad or her brother but it’s…something more. I don’t know what it is, but without her, I’m not me.” He took a long drink of his coffee, ending the dryness in his mouth. “Whoever I am anymore.”

Gregor was nodding and looked like he was following his thoughts, as twisted as they were. “Well, you’re a guy who likes what he likes, loves who he loves, hates what he hates, and overcomplicates it all by thinking too much. And I like that. I’m a philosophy major so I like this deep stuff. Hating our dads when we were kids, the weird parallel thing we have with my dad…I have a little sister, but you have the teenage version of a baby that a psychopath kidnapped. Things kind of…depart there.”

Kylo managed to chuckle when Gregor grinned at his attempt at humour, or whatever it was. “I’m glad you get it.”

“Yeah, I’m…you’re easier to talk to than text.” A gentle hand covered his and Kylo sighed at the simple show of affection. “So, I have this idea about what I’m going to write about. I don’t know if you’ve read much about compatibilism, but I have this idea about free will that…”

Instead of saying anything more, he sipped at his latte and listened to Gregor talk about ideas for his bachelor’s thesis. Mostly because he kept his hand on his.

They had sex twice that night. And after the second time, Kylo finally broke down.

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Carrying the water from the camping station was harder than she thought. Carol kept looking back at her, making sure that she was okay. Rey felt her arms getting sore but knew that she could make it. It really wasn’t that far. Their campsite was close enough to the station that Rey knew that if anything happened, she could run for help. Maybe Finn had asked for that, or maybe it just happened. Inside, she hoped that it was something he had done for her.

She couldn’t wait to go swimming later that morning, after breakfast. Not being able to shower was harder than she thought it would be.

“You didn’t need to help me Rey.” Carol had a nice smile, her curly hair under a bandana and face free from makeup. It was the first time she’d seen Finn’s mom being so natural. Rey had packed her makeup kit but now it felt like just extra weight. She knew that she had a pimple on her chin but everyone else was dirty too. Finn still said he liked her that morning despite the blemish. “But I’m really glad that you are. We should have made the boys do that.”

“But they’re making breakfast,” Rey answered, grinning. “I want to see what Finn can make.”

They had left when Finn and his stepdad were setting up the grill. There would be sausages and beans, toast and whatever else they had for that morning. They needed the water for washing their hands and to do the dishes for lunch and dinner. Being outside, in nature, she realized how close she had lived to the bottom for so long. The outhouse at the far edge of the camping grounds still smelled awful and Rey kept having to pull her shirt over her mouth to use it. It reminded her so much of Snoke’s house that after using it for the first time, she thought she was going to lose her mind; she didn’t just want to throw up, it was so much more. Her body had started shaking. She couldn’t breathe. Everything felt dark suddenly and she couldn’t find the light; the windows were still boarded shut and she had never seen the sun in her life.

When she managed to get back to their campsite, Finn saw the look on her face and left the rope he had been working on to hug her. He told her that it was okay, that she was safe. He didn’t say it like Kylo did, but it was so close that she let it sink into her heart until it took root.

She returned to camp still thinking about that kindness and smelled the fresh breakfast.

It still felt weird to be around his parents in a different way than friendship but she was hungry and decided not to think that much about it until she’d eaten.

She didn’t need a reason to smile. The birds were chirping and she heard the sounds of other families chatting in the distance. She left her phone off in the tent. There was no connection and she couldn’t really charge it until they were back in the car later.

Carol didn’t want help doing the dishes so she went to change to go swimming. She still felt a pang of remorse at not doing her part but Finn’s mom said that she’d done enough. Had she really? She’d just carried some water.

She’d just done up her bikini when the tent door open and she jumped back, reaching for her towel. “Finn!”

He instantly covered his eyes. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Rey. I didn’t mean…”

Exhaling in small bursts, she tried to let go of the panic. They had slept across from one another last night. He’d left the tent when she changed into pyjamas. But suddenly she regretted just having her black bikini. She could have taken another bathing suit. When she had been packing, she
wanted to be more flirty. She wanted to feel Finn’s eyes linger on her to set off the spark inside of her. Now, the idea made her want to wrap herself in her sleeping bag and have no one look at her.

“It’s okay,” she finally said after wrapping the towel around her. “You can look now.”

His guilty look remained when he uncovered his eyes. He was already changed into red trunks. They made his legs look longer and Rey tried to focus on him rather than her own misgivings. “Are you sure?”

Managing to tilt her head and relax, Rey nodded. “I was surprised. That’s all.”

He reached for her hand after snatching up his towel.

Together they followed the path down to the beach, talking about how glad they were that school was over and they had so much of summer left to find fun things to do. She was going to try to start running more; maybe in the fall, she could try out for the track team. Dancing had made her legs strong and she had decent stamina. As long as Kylo was around, she could try jogging with him. Finn made her promise to go to the basketball courts with him and she said that she would. He wanted to teach her the rules so she wouldn’t feel so bored at his games in the fall.

His hand brushed her stomach when she shed her towel on the coarse sand of the shore. “You’re so pretty, Rey.”

She let him pull her into a kiss and she smiled into it. He didn’t go further than the warm pressure of her lips and she sighed in his arms. “I like you. You’re…I like you, Finn.”

He grinned at her. “I bet I can swim out further than you.”

In the end, he could. The water was cool but every time he looked at her, she didn’t feel the chill.

-=-

Kylo woke up alone in the bed and rubbed his eyes, trying to refocus. The smell of the room hit him first with memories and he swallowed hard. the haze in his head wanted to pull him down, forcing brutal thoughts to return. He had to keep himself from throwing up. He wasn’t going to be sick about this. Scratching at his eyes, he tried to get the last of the remnants of tears from them.

Gregor probably left because he realized how pathetic he was. Breaking down and weeping after love-making was not very attractive, despite how he held him.

He should get dressed and leave.

He was pulling on his pants with his shirt undone when the door opened.

“Hey, you’re up.” Smiling, Gregor handed him a coffee before kissing him lightly. It was like nothing had happened.

Kylo accepted the cup and the kiss. He blinked before letting his panic start to wane. “Thanks, Grey.”

He sipped at the cup and cringed at the taste. It was coffee, but the amount of sugar made it taste like syrup. Gregor was hanging up his jacket and missed the look so he had his chance to hide his
disgust. He’d just have to drink it and live with it.

“They took my coffee machine,” he said shortly, turning and sitting on the messy bed. They'd made it that way, getting off in each other’s arms until Kylo lost control of his emotions. “They’re all fascists. The guy down the hall still has his but they’re really out for me.”

“That explains all of the trash.” The dozens of coffee cups spilling over the rim of the waste-paper basket beside the desk had really bothered him the night before.

Gregor chuckled at him, smiling before he spoke. “Don’t bitch at me. I do it like once a month. That’s enough.”

“Still.” Kylo sipped at the coffee and wanted to complain again but he held back. Sitting down next to the other man, he frowned. “I wanted to apologize for last night.”

Gregor reached out to squeeze his thigh. “Kylo, it’s okay. I like getting fucked by you. You’ve got… I don’t know. You’re complicated. You’ve got all that shit from that guy you killed. And then you’ve got even more shit from your ex. But hey, it’s cool.”

Kylo wanted to lean into the touch but was breaking down the words at the same time. “There’s… I didn’t just kill him — he was a rapist and a murderer. And about Poe, he died. We didn’t break up.”

Gregor shrugged him off. “It’s still cool. I mean, whatever. I don’t care that you called me his name last night. You work through your shit and keep telling me how to run my life. It’s fine, whatever.”

Heat hit his face in an instant and he set down the disgusting coffee on the floor. “I’m not telling you how to run your life. I’ve just been making suggestions about talking with George and organizing more of the future. It doesn’t take that long to clean a room. It doesn’t take that much work to see a therapist once you start going. I used to think it was the worst but now I depend on it.”

“That’s exactly why I don’t want to talk to my dad or see a fucking therapist. I don’t want to depend on anyone.” Gregor stood from the bed, looking down at him and glaring. “And what the fuck does your future look like? Becoming my dad? Look at his fucking life and tell me how good that plan looks. Have your kids and family hate you because all you do is chase after lost causes? How much fucking good do you actually think he’s done in the world, Kylo? He has more unsolved cases than solved! They only gave him a promotion because he wouldn’t retire!”

“Don’t fucking yell at me!” Kylo shot up. “You’ve had all of the chances in the world and you’re just fucking them away because you don’t try! You could be anything and you live like this! Grow the fuck up!”

“Don’t fucking yell at me!” Gregor shot back, anger tingeing his eyes. “You’ve never had to fucking grow up. You’ve had your parents bending over backwards for you and you still cry out for my fucking father when I needed him. You treated your boyfriend like shit and then he was fucking murdered and then oh, fucking boo hoo, everyone feels sorry for you. And then what do you do? You keep getting what you want. You just take up people’s time! You want to be alone but you couldn’t take a minute of truly being alone. That’s why you’re here! You are just like my fucking father. You think you’re picking up someone who you can help and just end up with more trouble from someone who is worthless!”

Kylo shoved him without thinking, sending him back against the desk along the wall. The glare he
got in return made him brace his legs for what was coming.

The other man lunged at him but Kylo caught his arm and pressed it behind his back, pinning him to the bed with his knee in one swift motion. He pushed his weight down, leaning down to growl in his ear. “I know who I am. He made those choices too.”

Trying to get out of his grip, Gregor squirmed. “You’re a fucking prick. Fuck you.”

“I’m not letting go until you calm down,” Kylo spoke the words to them both. His chest was heavy and he wanted to keep fighting. But he couldn’t. Gregor was almost as tall but nowhere near as strong. He’d picked the wrong battle. He wasn’t hurting him, but knew he was making him uncomfortable.

Finally, the other man went still and huffed. “Fine. Whatever. My problems are with my dad. Not you. I’m sorry. Can you please let me go?”

He shifted his weight. “I can pin you again if you try anything.”

“You’re the one that shoved me…but fine. Truce. Uncle. Whatever.”

He let go, stepping off the bed. The other man sat up, fixing his clothes. He rubbed his arm and glared at him.

“You’re not worthless,” Kylo said. “Not knowing what to do doesn’t make you worthless.”

Gregor’s face was still firm, hot eyes still wanting a fight. “You say that like you believe it.”

“I believe it because I lived it.” Kylo clenched his fists, waiting to have to subdue the other man again. “And I’m still living it.”

Shifting to his knees, Gregor stared him down. The way he was breathing. The way his shoulders changed. His face shifted from hate to need in one heated look. “Whatever you’re living, whatever you’re thinking, I would really like you to fuck me right now.”

The look and words had thrilled him in an instant but he had to fight the urge. He was falling into it again. He had been drawn into an argument. But he had to shake his head out of the old feelings. This wasn’t like it had been. He had reacted poorly, but then he’d tried to stop it after that wrong response. Inside, he wanted to get the rest of his energy out in bed. Grey was licking his lips, reminding him what it was like to kiss him, to get blown by him. But that wasn’t the right thing. It couldn’t be.

“I can’t do that,” he finally replied. “I want to. But this was what used to happen when we argued. I can’t do that again.”

A flash of disappointment crossed his face but still, the other man nodded. He sat back again and lightly tapped the bed. “Maybe you can tell me about it.”

After taking a minute to think, Kylo finally sat down on the bed and sighed as warm arms encircled him. At least he’d knocked over the disgusting coffee as he moved.

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She woke up early in the morning when she heard something rustling outside of the tent. For a moment, she couldn’t feel her body. Her hands felt planted at her side and she couldn’t find her voice. She couldn’t scream if anyone came into the tent. No one would come rescue her if she couldn’t cry out.

Then she heard Carol and Roger talking, followed by the sound of wood being chopped.

It was just Finn’s parents.

Everything was fine.

Rolling onto her side, she looked over at Finn across the small tent. She could reach out and take the hand that had fallen off of the air mattress for comfort if she wanted it. He would want her to wake him up if she had been afraid. They needed to talk about these things more.

They had cuddled last night when they went to bed, leaving his parents to snuff out the fire. Finn had an extra blanket in case they needed it so they spread it out over them and held one another, talking about the day and how it was strange not to shower and just swim in the lake. She regretted not bringing dry shampoo. Her ponytail felt disgusting every time she fixed it.

When he started kissing her, Rey had to figure out where to put her hands. She finally found his back and pulled him closer for a second, making him deepen the kiss. Her insides instantly craved a deeper contact. They were alone. It was warm and safe in their tent; the campground had fallen quiet and everyone was with family and friends. She knew she was turned on and shifted against the heaviness that built in her panties. It was exciting to have him so close. But the second his hand felt up her pyjama top, her breath caught in her chest and she pulled away.

Then he closed his eyes and nodded. He cupped her face and kissed her goodnight before shifting away to sleep on his mattress.

She thought about that moment as she took his still-sleeping hand.

She’d have to apologize again at some point today but would have to wait for the perfect moment.

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“We should go out tonight. I mean, you leave tomorrow afternoon. You can fly hung over.” Gregor was fixing his hair in the mirror, yelling from the washroom. Kylo was sitting on the bed — the bed that he’d made while the other was out getting a late take-away lunch — and could only look at the book in his hands.

They’d ended up having sex again. After the talk and the tears, he finally needed to give into the feeling of being close to someone. He had numbly tossed another condom into the trash, too tired to feel guilty. His body had needed this but time was running out on this weekend and he almost didn’t want it to end. Losing himself in Grey’s body, meeting his eyes as he groaned at the roll of his hips, was such a perfect release. He liked spending time with him even if he could say frustrating things. The physical side was close to perfect; the other side needed some work. Grey had to figure out a lot of things in his life but he hoped he could help him with it without arguing all of the time. The words had been softer after Grey realized Kylo wasn’t about to back down. But after a nap and lunch, he didn’t want to think or do anything that night. What he really wanted was to stay in bed and have someone hold him.
Still, he also had to let him do what he wanted.

“You can go. I’m just going to stay here and read.” He heard Gregor take the short steps from the washroom to the bedroom. His hair had already looked perfect but now he was even more attractive; words and talking had brought that out, not anything he’d done to his dark hair. He managed to smile at him. “But I’ll be here waiting for you.”

The blue-eyed man fixed his shirt and frowned at him before shrugging. “Okay. If that’s what you want. I’m… I’m going to call some people and get dinner with them. There’s the extra keys on the desk. You know the address if you want to order anything?”

He nodded.

“Okay, cool. I’ll try to be back… I don’t know. Before midnight?” Kneeling on the bed, Gregor crawled over until he was kissing him. It was a quick and hot kiss, like a promise of things to come. He sighed as they parted, taking in the satisfied smile from the other man. “But if I’m late, don’t wait up.”

With a wave, he left.

He actually left him.

And Kylo dropped his head to his book, fighting the urge to follow him.

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They followed the edge of the lake as the sun was starting to set. She had tried to say that she was sorry for making them stop making out last night, but Finn had just smiled it away. He said that it was okay at least ten times after that, making her feel worse.

They should be back at the campsite, helping pack up everything that they could. It would be a long drive back and they had to leave early. But Carol had said that they could go for a walk before they ate the last of the food. Tomorrow, breakfast would be at the tiny diner on the highway home. She’d finally be able to text mom and dad. She’d be able to talk to Paige about Benji. And of course, there would be Kylo.

“How many times have you been here before?” she asked when Finn stopped to try to skip a stone along the water. After a few tries, and a couple different shapes, he finally made one work. He grinned at her after the rock skidded along the surface of the lake.

“We used to come here before I can remember, with my real dad. But, you know, he left and my mom didn’t want to come for a long time. But we started coming here when I was seven or eight with Roger. He’s… sometimes I don’t like his rules. I don’t like calling him dad either but I haven’t seen my real dad in forever so I might as well start calling him that before I move out.” He picked up another rock and repeated his trick, getting an extra skip that time.

“Do you miss your dad?” She thought about her own, real father at the same time she asked the question. He was in a grave in California. He’d only known her for a few days. Who knew if he had even held her in that time. She wished that her grandfather would at least talk to her, let her get to know who her parents were. But it had already been a couple years since that conversation. The brief glimpse of him a year ago had only told her that he was still alive. Maybe he was sick. Maybe
he died. When Kylo got back, she’d have to ask him help her write an email to George to ask the question in the right way.

“It’s weird. I know he’s out there and alive but I kind of don’t care. He left me and mom and Roger has taken care of us since then.” He found a giant rock and looked at her with a bright smile. “Get back. You might get wet.”

She really didn’t want to get the last of her clothes damp; she’d be wearing them home tomorrow. Snorting, she took a step back and watched him pick up the stone. He grunted under the effort and tossed it into the water. She managed to clap as he cheered the giant splash that he made.

As the water stilled, she took in the silence that followed with a small smile. Even if she felt like she’d never be clean again, she had to remember that there was a warm shower and bed waiting for her when she got back. Bee would hop up and she could cuddle with him, making sure that he hadn’t been lonely with just mom and dad to pay attention to him.

Finn spotted a small flower on their walk back to camp for dinner. He tried to put it behind her ear and she softly shook off the gesture.

If it was in her hair, she might lose it.

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The door rattled and then opened. Kylo woke up and glanced at the clock. 3 a.m. He sat up and sighed before he heard two voices giggling in the darkness. He switched on the light beside the bed and saw a stranger with Gregor in his arms, kissing him and instantly snapping away with the light.

“What is going on?” he asked, brought up instantly from sleep into panic.

“Oh fuck,” Gregor slurred, glancing between him and the blond he was leaning against. “I forgot you were here. Hey, Kylo, this is…this is…I don’t know. Jim?”

The other man was equally as drunk. Instead of looking shocked or embarrassed, he waved at him. “Holy shit, a three-way. I’m down.”

“What? No.” Kylo got out of the bed. He’d spent the rest of the evening organizing and cleaning the space. He’d listened to several audio textbooks and put his hands to work at the same time. The room was an actual room now and all of his effort was going down in flames. “Get the fuck out.”

When he stood up to his full height, the other man finally jerked back to reality. “You didn’t fucking say you had a boyfriend.”

He backed out and closed the door behind him, leaving only the two of him alone.

“What the fuck, Kylo?” Gregor glared and pulled off his shirt, tossing it to where the pile of clothes used to be. When it fell onto an empty chair, he swayed slightly. “Did you clean my room?”

“Of course I cleaned your room. I thought…” He rubbed his face and had to turn to bite his arm hard to keep from hitting him. When he let go, he was almost back in control. Facing him again, he frowned. “Aren’t we together?”
“What?” Gregor was sitting on the bed, tugging off his pants. “What? No. I’m not…my dad is a fucking FBI agent. I’m not dating a fucking FBI agent. This is just…whatever. I get to have sex with you and you can, whatever, forget whoever you’d rather be fucking.”

Turning, Kylo felt his entire body go cold. “You’re drunk and you don’t mean that.”

Snorting, Gregor shed the rest of his clothes. “I’m drunk but of course I mean it. What did you fucking think, Kylo? That after one weekend, we’re dating? You cleaned my room because you thought that, didn’t you? Like, after this, I’d go back with you and meet your family and do whatever you said? Move in with you in a house across the street from my dad? That’s not me. You wanted this weekend. You wanted this. That guy? That guy you kicked out? I already fucked him at the club since you won’t let me fuck you. That’s why we’re using condoms, you fucking retard.”

Stuck in place, Kylo could only stare at him.

He’d told him so much and he’d felt nothing. He’d been used. He’d let it happen again.

“I need to leave.”

He reached for the clothes that he had already laid out for the next day. Everything else was packed. He pulled them on, moving without thinking twice. It was all in a small carryon. He could go to the airport now and just sit there. Everyone cried at airports. Anyone who hadn’t cried in an airport had never done anything real in his or her life.

“Kylo, Ky, come on, you don’t need to go anywhere.” Gregor reached for his arm, leaning over from the bed to stop him. Kylo glared hatefully at the hand, but it didn’t flinch. “You’re going to turn this into a thing, aren’t you? Just…you can have sex with someone you don’t love. It happens. This isn’t the, whatever, upside down or wherever you were. Your boyfriend is still dead and the love of your life is still fifteen years old. Fucking deal with it.”

Finally, he jerked his arm free. “No wonder you disappoint your father.”

He stood up taller, glaring at him.

And the other man returned the look with equal hate.

He lingered for a moment longer, double-checking that he had everything. It was a fulfilling sensation, to have someone drunkenly watching him linger after saying something like that. He had his phone. He had his clothes; nothing left there but the memories.

Leaving the room with a long, dark look, he shut the door and left another disaster of his own creation.

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Sitting in the backseat of the car, Rey yawned. It was another early morning and she was tired of feeling dirty. It wasn’t the old way she felt when she had truly been grimy and unclean. It was just not showering for a few days because she was doing something normal that other people enjoyed.

“Everything okay back there?” Roger asked.
Finn was asleep against her but she could smile for him. “We’re just tired. Thank you for taking me on this trip.”

She knew that Finn’s stepdad wasn’t always the nicest man. Finn would complain about curfew or having to do chores. Finn wanted to spend the night at her house and not just for a sleepover with their other friends. She was thankful that his parents and hers told them that it wasn’t right. Still, they had been allowed to share a tent. She knew that they checked on them all of the time and were up listening for anything and it made her feel safer in those quiet moments.

“We’re glad that you could come with us.” Carol smiled. “But it’s going to feel good to shower.”

Rey grinned, resting her head against Finn. “It’s the first thing I’m going to do when I get home.”

Really, the first thing she was going to do was text or call Kylo but they didn’t need to know that.

Closing her eyes, she tried to sleep away the hours of the long drive back home.

-=-

“Hi George.”

He kept his eyes shut, waiting for the other man to reply. “Good morning, Kylo. How are you doing?”

He looked around the boarding area and sighed. “I’m not good. I made…I’ve made a mistake. It’s…I don’t know how to tell you about this.”

He heard George come inside. He must have been on the porch. “Well, you’ve made other mistakes. And we’ve talked through them. It can’t be that serious.”

But it was. It was all going to crumble into dust. What had he done?

“I slept with your son.”

The silence that followed was what he deserved. He heard a chair creak and knew that George had put the phone down. He heard a sigh when it was picked up again. “You’re both adults. And he hasn’t been exactly open with his…love life since he came out when he was seventeen. But if you’re dating…”

“We’re not.” He looked up at the board and rolled his eyes at being delayed. He’d been there for endless hours, debating when he could make the phone call. “That’s the…George I cared about him. I found another distraction. I haven’t been focused.”

Another sigh. “Kylo, our biggest enemies aren’t always lurking in the shadows. Sometimes, they’re our own hearts. We both…we both fall in love too easily. I’m not angry about this. It’s stupid but I’m not angry. I’m more worried about you. Grey…he wants to take care of himself. So I’m going to let him. But you …don’t feel alone right now.”

He was more numb than alone. “It was just a weekend but…I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“We both know you have two ways of thinking. And this is one on the bad side that we need to keep working on. And the academy will help you with that.” George wasn’t angry. George was
still going to help him. He thought that this would be it and it just confirmed again what everyone always told him. But he wasn’t special; he didn’t deserve this care. Dropping his head, he tried to focus on breathing. “I haven’t been a good father. Maybe if I had been, we’d be having a different conversation right now.

Tears threatened to spill but he blinked them away. “I can’t fall in love with everyone I sleep with.”

“There are people out there with different histories who feel the same. It’s a common emotion. You know that. But there are also people out there like my son. Sex is just that. It’s a moment, not forever. I fall more into your line of thinking and Grey is…he’s reckless.” George’s words had always soothed him. He needed him so much in that moment and it made shame hard to ignore. “You’re never wrong in who you choose to love. And it’s not wrong if they don’t love you back. He honestly doesn’t know what he’s missing out on.”

“I just…” he knew he was crying now and wiped a tear away instantly. “It’s like I’m a kid again and…I made this choice. I wanted…I don’t know. I don’t know what I wanted.”

“You wanted to be loved. And you are,” George said, firmly. “Don’t take this as a failure. Take it and learn from it. Study your own patterns and behaviours and put it into context. It will help you in the future when we need to focus on how others think. You’ll be able to put yourself in so many shoes and it will be an asset. This isn’t weakness. I don’t tell you who I’m dating, or trying to date. I’m also…I feel alone too. The girl, because really, she is…she’s your age, Christ. The girl I’m dating, I know what I’m doing wrong. And I keep doing it. We all make mistakes. Don’t let this set you back.”

George wasn’t weak, but still made mistakes. It was something he’d known for a long time but still had trouble attaching it to him. Letting the thought sink in, he finally nodded to himself.

“I won’t,” he answered. “When I’m home, it will make sense. I liked him, George. I don’t think he’s a bad person.”

“Neither do I. But that doesn’t mean he doesn’t make poor decisions.”

Finally, the board changed and he had the updated time, but still hours away. Of course. “I’ll…I hope I can still stay with you for those few days in August.”

“Of course. You have your key. I’ll talk to you before then but know that I care about you. And I’m…thank you for telling me.” He had expected George to be furious but the sympathy was still obvious in his voice.

“Bye.”

He hung up before he could find more things to say to regret. Rubbing his eyes, he put his phone away and decided that he needed to find something to do other than feel miserable. Was it really so crippling to be rejected? Normal people dealt with this all of the time.

After ordering a coffee, he sat down in one of the chairs near the counter. They were more comfortable than the excuses that were in the boarding area.

In the middle of rethinking whether or not it was even worth ever trying to find solace in another person again, he felt the familiar sensation of eyes on him. Out of the corner of his vision, he could see an older man. He was fixated on him, staring. The thoughts from earlier vanished and he snapped his head to get a full view of the face. There was a flash of recognition for him and he glared hard at the man, rifling through the thousands of faces from his past.
The man’s face didn’t flinch. He just stared back. And Kylo was too tired to deal with being taunted at that moment. Standing, he quickly changed seats, taking the one opposite from the stranger.

“Do you want something?”

The other man finally reacted, a brief sigh rattling out of his mouth. “You’re Ben Solo. I thought I recognized you, but it is you.”

“And who are you?” He was confirming the accusation with the question but he didn’t care.

Shaking his head, the man lowly put up his hands. “I’m not…look, I’m not here to start a fight or an argument. I am, I was, hell, Conner Dixon was my son. He was there with you in California. I saw you a few years ago at one of those reunions. We were never allowed to talk to you but we still know who you are.”

He couldn’t fold his arms but Kylo slowly relaxed his shoulders. “He called him Ushar. He had red hair.”

“So you…you remember him?” The man’s face changed. He almost looked relieved to hear that his son still existed in someone else’s mind. “I would have thought you would have done everything to forget about that.”

He had but that didn’t mean that it worked, or that he had to tell him that. “He…he was there for three years. We weren’t allowed to tell one another our real names. It had to be the names that he gave us. Some kids tried but he’d…he didn’t like that. But when I was helping the FBI, I learnt everyone’s names. He died a year before I was strong enough to escape. I’m sorry I couldn’t…I’m sorry.”

He should stop talking. This was how he’d get himself into more trouble, give himself more problems. This man didn’t know him. He had no reason to be kind to him. He’d probably feed all of this information directly to Krennic and he’d be back at his door, bothering his family.

“It’s…it hurt for a long time. When you came home and he didn’t, it didn’t seem fair. What did he do wrong, what did you do right…there were a lot of angry people who never wanted to see you again. It was all we could talk about and we…we sort of forgot about our own kids for a while and just hated you. It wasn’t everyone, but most of us.” Mr. Dixon stopped and sighed, before shaking his head. “But then on that five-year anniversary, there you were. You were growing up. Then at the ten-year one, you were an adult. It’s not your fault that Conner will be eleven forever.”

He looked down at his coffee cup and held back a frown. “I’ve felt guilty about it to, sir. Life hasn’t been easy but I have it and your son doesn’t.”

A careful hand lightly settled on his arm. “Well, then you’ll just have to keep going. That’s all we’ve done.”

Meeting his eyes, Kylo studied his face. The lines, wrinkles, and grey hair showed what sort of life he’d led. It hadn’t been easy for him either. “Yes. I should get going.”

“Yes, I won’t keep you, Kylo,” Mr Dixon withdrew his hand and said. “Have a safe flight.”

Nicking his head, Kylo took his coffee and his bag to return to the waiting lounge. Putting on his headphones, he waded through other things to feel bad about.
Rey had finally got the smell of campfire out of her hair after a blissfully relaxing, hot shower. She was finally able to text Kylo and he said his plane was delayed, but he’d be back after dinner. It had been a good weekend for her and Finn. Flipping through her pictures, she sent one to Paige and got a picture of Benji smiling in return. He was going to be so big by the time summer was over.

Her hair was dry when Kylo got home. She heard him talking to dad in the living room and went down to see him, Bee following behind her. He was also happy that he was home. He’d probably get a big breakfast the next morning because Kylo wouldn’t tell anyone that he’d fed him and then he’d still come to her or dad and beg for more.

“I’m going to do some laundry. Do you have anything?” He looked really tired and it was easy to see that something was wrong.

Did he have a fight with George? Did he get bad news? The unease made her turn quickly to climb the stairs again. She could wait to hug him hello.

“All right.” She had a pile that she was going to wait to wash in the morning but if Kylo wanted to do laundry that late, she might as well help him.

All of his clothes were dark. She’d have to save the whites for the next day. That was probably good because she suddenly realized that he’d have to touch her bras and panties if she didn’t sort them out. She left her lighter clothes on the chair in her room and took her smoke-soaked clothes downstairs. She had to shrug off curious eyes from Han but the look she gave him in return meant that she was going to figure out what was going on. He understood and she got a wink in return.

“What happened?” she asked from the stairs, watching as he shoved the clothes into the machine, softly grunting the entire time.

He reached for her basket and shrugged as she took the final steps to the bottom. He was quiet, adding in her laundry with his. “Tell me about your weekend first.”

Sitting down, Kylo watched the machine start to spin to life. He drew his knees up, almost to his chin and stared off into the blur of water starting to fill the washer. Her worry deepened and she sat next to him, taking his hand. Maybe he just had a bad flight. Still, he was asking her first. He wanted to know.

“It was nice. Finn’s stepdad took us fishing every morning. I didn’t catch anything but it was nice to be up so early. I like seeing the sunrise because the world is so new and quiet. I didn’t want to watch him gutting the fish so Finn took me for a walk by this lake after. I think we should go there one day because I saw all of these hiking trails. But we shared a tent together. I was scared at first that he’d…try something that I didn’t want. But he just held my hand.” Leaning against Kylo, she thought about what it was like to wake up next to someone who wasn’t him. “I still think he wants more and I don’t want it to go too fast.”

He put his arm around her. “You need to talk to him about it and not be embarrassed. It feels really stupid but it feels worse if you don’t say anything. And if he doesn’t respect you, it…you can wait and find someone else who will.”

“I know. Mom says the same thing. I have therapy on Tuesday and I know what I want to talk about. I have…sometimes I dream about having sex. Sometimes it feels nice and warm and other
times…it turns into Snoke between my legs.” She rested her head against him. “I hate how he touched me before anyone else could.”

“He did the same to me.” He leaned against her. “The hardest thing to talk about, for me, was telling people that he raped me. The shame, feeling disgusting and helpless…most people can’t understand that.”

It was a familiar heavy silence that they shouldn’t need to fall into so often. She could only watch their clothes start to spin, water sloshing around them. “He hurt so many people. I can’t believe he’s really dead.”

“He is. I killed him.” Kylo’s voice firmed, letting grief fall away.

Licking her lips, she tried to turn the sadness into sunshine and remember what it was like to be free from pain. Being outside and seeing a butterfly for the first time and not having a word for it. Seeing Kylo reach his hand into a fountain and almost smile at feeling such clean water for the first time in so long. She ran her hand against his knee, needing to touch something that kept her in the moment. Her nightmares couldn’t hurt her if she was really there. He’d taught her that.

But still, worry pressed on. Thinking back to how careful Finn had been with his hands but not his eyes when she was in her bikini, she needed to tell Kylo what she was thinking. “I think he’s waiting for you to be gone to tell me what he wants.”

Kylo sat up straighter, shifting his arm. “You need to ask him about that and get a real answer. But even when I’m…away…Han and Leia will be here. Hux and Paige too. But if you’re having that thought…”

“It’s more like a feeling. But we’ll…we will talk about it. I like him. He likes me. This weekend made me happy.” She tried to smile, knowing that he needed to know that she was okay. Still, the sensation didn’t last long. “You weren’t at George’s, were you?”

“No.” His head fell. “I made another mistake.”

“Was it Liza?”

He shook his head. “It was someone I cared about but he didn’t…he didn’t respect me back. So it was just a weekend that I have to learn from.”

Rey bit her lip. “But you tried again. That matters.”

She knew that even though Kylo acted like he could be alone, he really missed being in a relationship. It used to bother her, when she thought that no one would ever like her enough to want to spend time with her alone, but it was different now. And the way Kylo was acting, he had liked whomever he had been with. Glancing at the washing machine, she exhaled and put her hand on his knee.

“I’ve felt how you feel right now, Rey. I didn’t like how my body wanted one thing and my mind wanted another but it took time and now…I thought I was clear about what I wanted and he thought differently. Maybe that’s why I want you to make sure that Finn knows how you are thinking. I like having sex, Rey, but it took me so many years to trust myself that I wouldn’t hurt anyone and that I wouldn’t panic. And I thought I found people I trusted too. Now I feel stupid about being with Liza and now Grey. They aren’t…” he paused to close his eyes. “They aren’t bad people for not wanting the same thing as I did.”

“You’re not a bad person either.” Rey was still letting the thoughts seep into her mind but had to
He shifted so their eyes could meet. “It’s something that I share with another person that I care about. Even with Liza, in those moments, I thought about how kind she could be when we were kids. Grey made me feel wanted, like I wasn’t broken. I like being able to help another person feel good and to feel the same way. Most of the time, I just stress people out or annoy them by being how I am. There are still times when I want to stop, remembering what he did to us. There are still times when I don’t know what to do with my hands or I’m worried that I’m causing pain. It’s not perfect every time because no one is perfect.”

He left out the name that hurt the most but they both heard it. Rey swallowed, letting her eyes drop before looking at him again. “I know I shouldn’t be so nervous but it sounds so hard. I’m worried about feeling the wrong things too.”

“I worry about that too for you.” He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “My first time was really awkward and messy and…” He sighed and shook his head, blushing. “But we both felt the same. We were ready when it happened and it got better after that. If you feel like you want to wait, then let it take time. I was seventeen and didn’t really feel…free until I was twenty.”

Memories of what Liza had said about him echoed in her mind, how Kylo’s hands got more confident over time. She shouldn’t know that and needed to forget it. “I won’t let him talk me into anything that I don’t want to do. I promise, Kylo. I’ll be okay. I trust him.”

“That’s what you need the most.” He kissed her forehead and pulled her into a hug. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you what I was doing again. I wanted to know if it would be…serious or not. And it wasn’t. Even though I wanted it to be.”

“It’s okay,” she leaned back to say. “I have a boyfriend, Kylo. I never thought that I would have one. It’s okay if you want one too.”

He snorted and then smirked. “I won’t have time for one soon so maybe this was for the best. I want to have this month with you and everyone else. It really wouldn’t have been fair to him.”

He seemed to be working out his thoughts as he spoke and Rey felt a spike of happiness as he took himself through his darker impulses to find the other side. Smiling, she touched his face, running her hand down his cheek like she used to do when she was small and needed him to know that she understood. “We can take Benji to the park tomorrow. Paige said she has to help her parents with some things in the afternoon. I haven’t seen him all weekend and I miss him.”

He leaned into the touch and grinned in return. “I’m tired of borrowing their car seat. We’ll buy one tomorrow. I looked one up before I left.”

Even though they’d both come downstairs filled with anxiety, they went upstairs thinking about the next day. Inside, Rey was still counting how much time they had left together but was quietly thankful that she wouldn’t have to share him with anyone else for a while. There might be one day when she would have to, but she hoped that she’d have her own partner to balance out her feelings.
Standard references to past events, babies, and m/m sex.

I've updated the tags. If this isn't for you, you've been warned. I thought about locking down the comments but whatever.
Rey had written out a countdown on her calendar, the one with the pretty horses. When she told her therapist about it, she recommended that for every day that passed, she should write a good memory from the day. It didn’t have to be about Kylo; if she could remind herself of the other positive and healthy things in her life, then it would make the time that he’d be gone pass by quicker.

He was leaving on August third. She had five of her memories but had many more to make over the course of July.

One day had been him taking her for a run, making her get up before it could get too hot out. He slowed down when she asked him to. But it made her feel strong when she could keep up with him; her conditioning was good but his legs were so much longer. Hearing him breathe beside her and keep giving her encouraging looks as they wound through their neighbourhood towards the park was another bright spot. Sweaty and breathing deeply, then they spent part of the afternoon looking at clouds until they were just sweaty. And he didn’t get bored. He looked at her and gave her a small smile, thanking her for reminding him that his imagination shouldn’t just be filled with untouched, dark corners and sadness. She was still his light and would always be.

Another day had been Kylo making dinner for the family. She knew that he did it mainly to show them that he could survive and live on his own. He’d almost always living with other people since he got out; their old way of existing was long gone, dead as the dust that Snoke was. She knew more about cooking and cleaning. He kept things organized so he wouldn’t have to care about housework. Looking at what he was making, she saw the focus he put into it and realized that there was something more to what he was doing. He wouldn’t accept her help but he let her sit on the stairs and would sometimes ask which step he was on or if he’d forgotten anything.

An afternoon with Benji was mainly about him but Kylo was a big part of it. She showed him how to change a diaper and instead of looking disgusted or annoyed, he watched carefully and nodded. Really, it was totally gross and she wouldn’t have been mad if had wanted to leave. But he didn’t. And the next time, he did it alone. She watched and didn’t want to think about what he had been forced to do to take care of her those first few years. As far as she could remember, she always knew how to use a toilet. But this was Benji. He had a big house and loving, great parents. And Kylo loved him. He cuddled him more. They watched a movie at Hux and Paige’s with Rose that night and Benji fell asleep on Kylo’s shoulder and he didn't want to move. When Hux and Paige got home, Kylo almost looked like he was willing to spend the night, motionless on the couch if the baby could sleep that way.

There was finally a bad day that turned better towards the end but she still wrote it down. It had
been too hot in the house and everyone was slightly mad at everyone else. Finn was being annoying on the phone. At first, he wanted to do something with her but then changed his mind when his friends wanted to go paintballing. She was already annoyed when Kylo got into an argument with dad about putting new siding on the house. It had been an okay evening on the porch up until that point but then Kylo got a plan in his head that he couldn’t let go of. It was really not that bad of an idea. She had been able to climb down the house four years ago; someone would be able to climb up. Han suggested doing just one part of the house and Kylo left for fifteen minutes to calm down. She tried to be on both Kylo’s side and dad’s side but settled on being on whatever ended the argument. Kylo came back, apologized, and sat down on the swing instead of going to bed. It still felt strange when he could avoid exploding. He’d been working on it more. He didn’t throw things as often now.

Another day and it was her turn to wake up in a sad mood. A bad day could still sneak up out of nowhere sometimes. She didn’t even need to have a bad dream to start thinking about being there. It was getting further and further away but now that Kylo was getting ready to leave this part of his life, it made the ache start to pulse again. It was a beautiful, sunny day and she just wanted to be in bed and watch movies on her laptop. Finn kept texting her and it was finally her turn to toss something across the room. Kylo heard the thump in the hallway and stood up from his desk, the chair dragging across the floor. He stood in her doorway, holding her phone and raising an eyebrow. She didn’t have the energy to shrug; instead she just glared at him. It was his fault that she felt this way. Sighing, he shut her phone off and put it at the side of the bed. He didn’t blink words; the way he moved was enough. She slid over and he joined her on the bed, watching the silly movie about a teen girl switching bodies with her mother. She heard him chuckle twice.

Those had been the days that she’d remember, not the ones that she’d miss. And there was still the rest of July left for them.

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She helped Leia pack the last of what they would need for the long weekend. It was less than a week, but they could really only get the rental that they wanted for that long. Or, the rental that Kylo wanted. He was paying for it. Or more like the fund was paying for it.

The more she talked to Finn and Rose, or even when she talked to Zorii on the phone, she realized how much she’d benefitted from having both a stable family and the endless money in the fund. She couldn’t tell anyone that somewhere she had a million dollars. It didn’t feel real. The money hadn’t mattered for so long because she hadn’t cared about it. But Kylo had been hyper aware of it since he was sixteen. Nine years ago, Kylo had been busy with so many trials that having a sum in his head made it easier for him to manage all of it. It wasn’t like he was stupid with the money. He just liked that he and Poe didn’t need to work or care about tuition.

Looking at the back of the SUV, she felt a dark thought rise and it hurt to push it away. That money had went to nothing.

“I like doing this when it’s morning,” Leia said, looking at what they had packed. The extra sheets, the extra quilts, all of the coolers and food…the bags that Rey didn’t like were the alcohol but mom and dad deserved a break too. June had already been too hot and now July was settling into the same mood. “What did he have planned again?”

Leia had been tired most of the summer, more than she usually was. She wasn’t working but would
still go up to the office to ‘help’ as much as she could manage. The partner that took over was in
over her head; Leia would have her over for coffee or tea in the afternoons when it dipped after 4
p.m., it turned to wine and laughter. Leia had a way of talking to people that made them both want
to be better, but also confident in what they could do. It didn’t always work for everyone, though.
Kylo had told her to quit going to the office so often one morning, coming back from a run and
seeing her on the computer with her glasses on. And she had just snapped back, telling him to stop
doing whatever he knew was wrong or at least stop hiding it from everyone. He had only glared
and slammed the bathroom door shut.

It had really been too warm in the house and it would be good to get out of it.

So mom had seen his phone always buzzing too.

Looking at what they had packed, Rey shrugged. Bee was with Hux and Paige. He’d already
discovered how interesting Benji was and Hux and banned him from the room. He claimed to have
allergies but Kylo had pointed out that it hadn’t bothered him before. The way they talked made
her smile. They were going to miss one another and wouldn’t say it. “There’s a place he wants to
stop for lunch and to pick up the rest of the groceries. I think he’s worried that he thinks he’s been
lazy for a while.”

Leia rubbed her bare shoulders, reminding her to relax with the touch. “We both know he hasn’t
been. His ideas about the house and what we do…I know it’s so he can focus later but he’s
worrying about nothing. We’ll be leaving soon. You should go say goodbye to Finn.”

Rey dropped her head and tried to hide it, but it was too late. She looked up at her and grimaced. “I
was just thinking that I would text him. Kylo doesn’t really like me biking over.”

She’d done it a couple of times since the weather got warmer. Winding down the street with the
wind in her hair, she looked at all of the houses and thought about the people inside. Kylo hadn’t
said anything but would always make sure that her bike was locked up in the garage when she got
back. He was worried about Finn more than her going out in the world. His fear wasn’t about what
she was doing but more about who could be out there.

“Rey,” Leia’s voice was serious, making her shift her weight in her pink sneakers. “Don’t let him
tell you what to do. And don’t think that you need to plan everything you do around him. Right?”

She needed to hear it. “Maybe I should bike over and say that I’m leaving soon.”

Leia shook her head. “It really needs to be what you want to do, Rey. Not what I’m telling you, or
what Finn is telling you or what Ben is wanting you to do.”

Getting caught up in Kylo made it hard to push through those feelings at times. She was starting to
think that on the good days, maybe he was a little bit more like the Ben he used to be. He could
take care of Benji and whisper small songs to him, ones that she hadn’t thought about until she
heard them again. A rush of memories knocked her back the first time she’d heard him; she was
coming into the living room and only heard his voice. It had been the same one that had guided her
so long ago out of the darkness. And it was back. She stopped then, just to watch them and see how
tender Kylo was when he didn’t realize that he was Ben.

He could also be overly curious about something and come into her room to tell her about it. She
never knew him as Ben but could see the looks on Han’s and Leia’s faces when they saw it
happening: a question about his phone or asking about the colour of a chair at grandma’s old
house. But the Kylo parts weren’t all bad. Those weren’t just all anger and sorrow; those were the
focused parts of him when he wanted them to be.
And the parts of her were just Rey. The only names that she had came from people who wanted to hurt her or didn't want her. Only her last name gave her hope because she shared it with who Kylo was in his heart.

“I know, mom.” Rey finally smiled, letting the thought settle into her chest. “Finn has been sort of weird recently so I guess…maybe I used Kylo as an excuse. It’s okay if I just text him, right?”

“If you think it’s right, then of course it is.” Leia nodded. “He’s known you for so long and we like him, sweetheart. What has he been weird about?”

What hadn’t he been weird about since the camping trip? “He got, I don’t know, maybe jealous when Kylo was hugging me when we went to the track. Maybe Kylo has been hugging me too much or something.”

Closing the hatch, Leia leaned against the back of the truck. “Finn needs to know that he shouldn’t feel jealous about that. Ben is…”

“He’s lonely,” she answered quickly. Maybe she said it too fast. “He hates being touched but likes…making other people feel good.”

Sighing, Leia folded her arms. “How do you feel when Finn touches you?”

Leia was just double-checking but Rey still needed to think about her response. “I like kissing him. Hugging is fine too. But mom, I’m worried that when Kylo’s gone, when summer is over, it might go too far and I’m…I just want him to be happy.”

“He should be happy to make you feel comfortable. You know your boundaries. And we will help you with it.” She took Leia’s hand as she finished talking. Leia was looking at the house and Rey knew that she was thinking about other things, some hurt from the past. “Let’s go get our boys and see if they want to leave any time this century.”

Rey was more than happy to follow, trying to keep her mind off of the sudden rush of thoughts the conversation had awoken.

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They stopped by Hux’s to say goodbye to Benji before they left. Kylo had kept quiet that he was really there to look at the security system at the same time. But cradling his godson made it seem like the best choice.

He was warm, strong, and safe. Holding him brought back being young and afraid of having another young life in his hands and how failure would mean death for them both.

Finally on the road, he let Han drive so he could stare off into nothing from the front seat.

There would be other family vacations. There would be other times that they would be together. But he’d wasted so many other chances for Rey to have memories like this by being a selfish idiot.

Everyone else was talking but he could only gaze out the window and watch the towns get smaller and more spread apart. When he caught the tail end of a memory, he turned away from the scenery to scratch at a random scar on his knee. He knew where it used to be but now it was smaller, faded
and errant on the side of his leg. He dug at it with his thumbnail, trying to forget where it had been and how it had come to stain his skin.

The pling of his phone made him stop before it started to bleed.

*Hey.*

He wasn’t replying to that message so he turned his phone to silent and stuck it back in the pocket of his shorts. There would be others and it made him bite the inside of his cheek. He could go fuck himself if he thought that he would answer now.

“We can switch when we stop for lunch,” he said to his father, forcing himself out of being angry at himself. “I want to drive.”

“We’ll see,” Han answered. “Maybe when we’re out there, you can show Rey how to drive for a bit.”

That perked Rey up from her phone in the backseat. “Really? Kylo can teach me?”

He shared a smile with his father and nodded. “It’s just dirt roads with no traffic out there. It’s the best place to practice.”

Turning, he caught the grin on Rey’s face. She wasn’t a child anymore. He had known that for far too long but it hadn’t hit home until that moment. When she tilted her head, he saw the woman that she would be in a flash of a future that he knew he’d be a part of. The shape of her cheeks, the length of her neck…she was already beautiful and it wasn’t going to be ended by a killer. Even if he was away, they had the security system. And Han was going to fix the siding. The second story of their house would stop being such a danger.

Really, when he was done with his training and had his placement, he’d have the power that he wanted to keep his family safe. He would have to be patient, but his influence would finally be more than just someone who was paranoid from a past life.

Tapping his hand against the dashboard, he turned back to looking at the swishing scenes beyond the car, out there in the world of strangers experiencing happiness, sorrow, and their lives in general. Maybe their state wasn’t as shitty as he always had imagined it was.

All he had to do was ignore his phone the entire time and he’d be exactly where he wanted to be: stronger than impulse and more connected with who really mattered.

—

Kylo was out on the porch, drinking with Han, but his buzzing phone woke her up.

The drive had taken longer than they had anticipated but the long lunch had been what they all needed. Rey had texted Finn that she was on the road an hour after they had left. And he hadn’t been happy. He had wanted to say goodbye in person. She could only reply that he had known when she was leaving and could have come by himself. It couldn’t always be her. He was silent after that. So when they pulled up to the dusty spot off the highway, she stormed out of the car to scream. Hugging herself, she was mad that he seemed to want to ruin this time with Kylo for her.
When she wiped away her tears and came into the roadside diner and sat next to Kylo, she was still working through the problem. Maybe she should be more physical with him. That would fix things, right? But it wasn’t what she wanted.

In the booth, Kylo had put his arm around her, and blinked the question about what was wrong. She answered that it was Finn, but she would figure it out soon. He silently reminded her that she could ask him anything. And that promise would be forever.

He’d said the right thing and made eating lunch much easier. When she’d sat down, she was almost ready not to eat anything. Sometimes it was hard to eat when thoughts got to be too big. But when the food came, even though it was too salty and too greasy, she was ready to enjoy the meal.

And she made Kylo smile when she stole a fry from his plate.

Kylo drove the rest of the way, after a stop for more fresh groceries from someone selling things on the side of the road. Kylo paid, adjusting his sunglasses and speaking Spanish to get the price down. His practice really had worked and they walked away with a good deal. It was a good twenty miles to the nearest store when they were at the plot. At least the cabin would have running water and she wouldn’t need to use an outhouse. The thought made her gag again.

She watched agitation rise and die in Kylo’s eyes when they finally got there. They had picked up the keys from the office and he’d signed off. But still, when they arrived and were unpacking, there was something wrong. He didn’t say what it was but he finally shook it off once they were done with the car and could relax in the small den of the cabin. There really hadn’t been any cars on the small dirt road there. It would be fine to drive there.

But Kylo kept scratching at his leg.

She thought she’d figured out what was wrong when they went to make the beds. Their room had two beds and both were too small for both of them to fit. They’d packed sheets for both circumstances but Kylo had wanted things one way. Now, it was like this.

But he had turned on music from his phone as they both made their beds. He told her about a new band he had discovered, something that he liked to listen to as he ran. He liked heavier rock music; she liked more pop music. When she named a band that she liked, he gave her his phone and she changed the sound to what she would have listened to. It felt so normal to be sharing the high ceilings and worn floors with music pouring out of his phone.

Dinner had been slow and easy on the porch, taking in the lake and feeling the breeze. Her and Leia were splitting one of the quilts that they had brought, both of them smelling grandma as they ate. And Kylo had stopped scraping at his knee.

She helped Leia clean up but was yawning the entire time. Night wasn’t really night yet but Leia still hugged her and told her to go to bed. After embracing Han and Kylo, she washed her face and changed into her favourite, comfy pjamas. After texting Finn again that she was sorry, she told him that she wanted to say goodnight. She put her head against her pillow and sighed, looking at the words. One of her first memories of being on the outside was Kylo figuring out a phone. Her eyes were almost drifting shut when he answered.

*I hope you’re okay. I miss you. night.*

He sent a kiss emoticon after and it made it hard to stay mad at him. She sent back her own goodnight message of a heart. When she put her pink device on the table between the two beds, she had spotted Kylo’s phone, sitting there charging. He rarely left it anywhere, but as her eyes slid
shut, she thought about how it only meant that he trusted her.

When she had fallen asleep, she’d spent the time hearing Han and Kylo and their conversation starting to float towards the future; Rey was tired of thinking about it. She’d rather think about holding Bee or imagining Benji learning how to talk. But something kept jarring her awake every time she was almost into a good mood, ready to slide into happy dreams. Why hadn’t Kylo put his phone on silent? Yawning, Rey reached for it without really thinking. If anything happened to Benji, Paige would have called her. But the phone had been buzzing for so long now that she just want to turn it off and go back to sleep.

*Why wont you talk to me. I said i was sorry.*

It was just a number. Not a name.

Oh.

She didn’t unlock the phone. It was Kylo’s and she shouldn’t be looking. He’d never look at her phone. Staring at her and Benji in the background, she watched the phone grow dark again. He could make odd choices but he needed her to step away. She needed to let him have his own space and not let her protective need take over. Still, he had it; why couldn’t she give it right back to him? She’d always liked holding his phone before she got one of her own. That’s when they had everything together. She didn’t even know his code anymore. But it was probably the same. And they still shared so much. He’d already told her that this person had lost his interest by being something else than he’d expected.

Kylo wasn’t lying. He’d just left out that he was still texting him.

After rolling over and closing her eyes, she hoped that it would stop.

Another buzz. It made her turn over and stare up at the ceiling of the cabin for a long moment before looking again at the glowing light to her side. There were two beds in the room instead of one and she was almost over how it had hurt for a moment when they arrived. She had a boyfriend. Kylo was leaving.

*I miss talking to u. I miss u.*

Another pause, then another text.

*Im sorry I fucked up. Ive been drinking I get it now.*

Kylo hated people who texted like that. He hated emoticons; he hated sloppy writing. He hated people who couldn’t *spell*. His texts could be short but he wanted to be to the point, not really rude to anyone who knew him. But she liked when he texted her longer things, taking the time to tell her something that would always be on her phone.

Before she could put the phone down, another text popped up again. *Talked to my dad. he said u told him. its ok. He wanted me to say sorry again and I rly am. Pls text me back ky.*

Snorting to herself, she grabbed her own phone and put the number in. She had to fix this if she was going to sleep.

*Leave him alone. He doesn’t want to talk to you.*

*Whos this?*
If Kylo had liked whoever this person was, he’d know who she was too. *It's Rey. We’re on a family trip. He doesn’t want to talk to you.*

*Oh hey rey hows it going?*

She had to roll her eyes. *I can’t sleep because you’re drunk texting him. Please stop. You’re being dumb.*

There was a long pause and she thought she’d won but then another text followed. *i just want to talk to him and tell him im sorry for fucking around.*

The words made her face hot. Kylo liked someone who cheated on him? Is that what happened? Kylo was a lot of things but he wouldn’t deal well with something like that, *someone* like that. She sometimes mixed her own issues about sex together with his and realized that she felt the same way; anyone that she let into her heart who later defiled it would be shut out. It felt harsh and mean when she thought about it but she couldn’t be nice forever. She wanted to be but the words from group, the ideas from therapy, and the harshness of her past made her realize that she could be kind but didn’t need to always be nice. Somewhere inside, she knew that surviving was really all she had left to do. Kylo knew that too.

*He liked you and you hurt him. He doesn’t care about you anymore.*

Another pause. *Whys he not blocked my numbr then?*

*I don’t know why he does blocked things sometimes.* It was true. She would figure out why eventually but sometimes Kylo’s choices still made her worried. Why had he been with this person? Was this really another Liza? Was it another person from high school that he had turned to because he couldn’t trust anyone else? Kylo really could date anyone he wanted. His hair, his eyes, his face and body…they’d go for a walk with Benji and she saw the moms in the park look at him holding his godson and she couldn’t hold back her irritation at those women. She almost liked it better when he wanted to be with guys. It made his affection towards her feel so much more special. His kind words about how beautiful she was weren’t about desire. The almost kiss had been from a core of affection; he’d been lonely and lost and wanted comfort from someone he felt ultimate love for, no matter the form. Still, he had been so worried that she would have thought he was out to do something horrible. But that kiss would have been innocent, she told herself now in its distant aftermath. She wouldn’t have let her attraction to him break the dam of her feelings; she wanted to feel his hands move down from her face to her body in that instant but looking back at it now, she would have stopped it. Right? All she had was what ifs. And if he’d kissed her then maybe he wouldn’t have fallen so hard afterwards. That’s how he earned the misstep on his phone.

*Dont u want to no who i am? ;)*

She did. But she shouldn’t care. *No. Go pass out so I can go to bed.*

*Ok whatever. Let him know i miss him and want another chance.*

She didn’t reply. Kylo could make the decision himself but he had already done that by ignoring the bothersome text messages. Didn’t he know that he had the academy to think about? And that he was with his family? How stupid was this person? She wanted to furiously ask him how dumb he was but held back. It seemed like he was done. Finally, both phones were silent.

In the morning, she already decided to block the number and find a way to complain about Kylo’s phone to him without letting him know that she’d seen the texts. That’s what she was silently planning when the bedroom door opened.
Closing her eyes she rolled over at the sound and grumbled at the intrusion, light from the den blinding her as she looked at the large form in the doorway. “Kylo?”

“Shh, I’ll be coming to bed soon. I just needed my phone.” He moved lightly around the room, watching the angles and shadows in the dark.

She groaned again and shifted under the sheets, seeing him at her side. “We have to get up at 6 a.m. Please come to bed.”

“I will. It’s fine.” He smelled a little drunk when he leaned over to kiss her cheek. She heard him instantly grunt as he started checking his phone. He tucked it into his pocket without replying and it made it so much easier to fall asleep.

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They got up later than he had planned but some mornings were meant to be spent hung over and making a long, lazy breakfast. He apologized to Rey about his phone when he had stumbled to bed the previous night, or closer to almost morning by that point. She had blinked awake, leaning into his hand to shake her head and ask if he was okay and who was bothering him.

It would hurt more later if he didn’t tell the truth so he said who it was and that he didn’t want to reply or block him. He deserved to learn a lesson; they both deserved it. Rey scrunched up her face, like she understood but still disagreed, before rolling over and going to sleep again.

He wanted there to be one bed but there were two smaller ones.

And he’d never ask his parents to switch rooms.

So he let her sleep alone as he passed out.

Now, she was fishing with Han down the shore, beyond the soft beach on the rockier part of the shoreline. He could see them but could only hear them when either of them laughed loudly. There wasn’t much to catch there but he hoped that he’d hear her excited shout at some point.

“What the hell are you reading?” Leia lifted her sunglasses and looked down at his book. “Why are you bringing a law book on vacation?”

He shifted his eyes from Rey’s form in the distance to his mother. “It’s for law enforcement. I only took a few law classes during undergrad. I need this.”

Sighing, Leia shifted back to her book. They’d dragged the heavy deck chairs with the shared umbrella down to the shore the evening that they arrived. He was immensely thankful for their effort now that the day was already blazing hot and his knees would have burnt long ago if Rey hadn’t made sure he’d put on sunscreen. He’d said the same to her, smudging sunscreen on her nose and putting one of his old hats on her head. Then she bounded off with Han, her legs looking long in shorts that set off how close to a woman she was.

He could forget those curves when she would get sad or angry at little things. He noticed it more during the summer than he had in the spring. Sometimes her smiles weren’t enough to keep what was underneath from spilling out. But she could always brush it off quicker than he could when he was fifteen; she went to her therapists and talked to them. She had her friends and support.
How had anyone put up with him then?

How had anyone loved him then?

Looking down at his book, he rolled his eyes at himself and the trail he was about to lead himself down. “It’s the textbook they used at the academy a few years ago. George sent it to me. It’s not hard to understand but I wanted…”

“You wanted to get ahead. It’s fine, Ben. I remember when we were asking Armitage for help before you came home and he looked so…ashamed that he couldn’t remember what he had just learnt. I was so happy when you two were friends again even though how it happened was so infuriating. But your grades…everything else was chaos but you have always made us proud. I still think about how you just forced yourself through it all and you always amazed us. You have always made us proud with your progress but those report cards really told us what you could do when you wanted to.” He let her words bleed into his heart and met her eyes with sincerity. She was reading one of the old novels that people always seemed to leave at rental cabins. He also knew that she’d brought a couple of old books to leave just in case she wanted to take one of the worn paperbacks home. He had always loved reading because he saw his mother doing it. It could be paperwork, some heavy real estate agent guide or zoning regulations for her work. It could also be what she read in the evenings; she’d read to him from anything that he demanded of her. He smirked to himself at a distant memory when he was six and forced her to read him the business section of the newspaper. How could he have ever thought that they didn’t love him?

But then he went away and his ability to read and write kept him alive but also brought another life into his hands.

Snoke’s dogma still resided in the back of his mind. He wrote about it, going through how he reacted in certain ways to things. He was still denying that part of his personality. It was always there: feeling worthless, feeling broken.

But in the real world, the one with lake houses and calendars with horses and walls with pictures of him on it, those things only burnt harshly when he let himself feel that way. He had his own opinions. They weren’t all from some voice in his head.

He tried to walk through other houses, ones he’d been to since he’d been fourteen. It bothered him when he was in a house without books. Mom and dad’s friends. Poe’s parents. People like that couldn’t really be trusted.

But Grey had books and he was entirely unreliable.

“Thanks, mom,” he answered, shifting in his seat to snatch his phone off of the top of the cooler. There was cold water there. Leia’s blood pressure had been off for a few months. If she got too warm, he didn’t want her to faint. Before looking at his phone, he passed her a bottle and she gave him a low look before taking a long drink.

He turned his attention to the annoyance on his silent phone finally. The messages last night had obviously disturbed Rey. She had woken up slow and groggy, grumpy like she hadn’t really slept. And it was because of him and his fucking need. Everyone he’d ever had sex with, willingly or not, would always haunt him: rape, murder, rebound, and a desperate mistake. If he was asked about the four people who’d had him—from destruction to renewal to neutrality—he could sum them all up by focusing on the man who had ruined him for everyone who ever dared to care about him in the future. The man who had taken his potential for normalcy out from under him had meant that he’d been falling ever since; the temporary stop had only been a pause.
He’d told Rey the real truth. Sex could feel the best when there was a real connection at the heart of it. But it would feel so much different for her. Maybe if he hadn’t felt his innocence vanish when he was seven he could have experienced what it was like to have someone else inside of him. But it was too late now. The only person who he had ever wanted that from had been ash for over four years and he’d been too afraid to give in to that part of their fucked up relationship.

But then again, maybe if he hadn’t been snatched away from being normal when he was small, he wouldn’t always have hateful voices in his head that made him latch on to any simple sign of affection and fall into a hole of love without really considering the consequences.

Fuck, he was out at the cabin to stop thinking about all of this.

Turning to his phone he let out a long sigh. He hated not getting messages instantly but it would have been plinging or buzzing constantly if he didn’t have it that way. Anyone who wasn’t Grey knew that they could call Han or Leia if it was important.

*I am still sorry about last night.*

*Not for texting you but 4 being drunk.*

*Cause I miss you.*

*Sorry for being a prick.*

*Dad says you’ll be here in Aug. Can I see you?*

*Fuck I like you too.*

*Just text me back.*

Narrowing his eyes, he deleted the desperate messages. Even as he did, he caught a flash of himself in the words. They echoed the distant texts that he’d sent to Rey when she was eleven. Those were the ones that made her run away. He was driving him away with the flailing and it should have felt better to see him suffer.

After putting his phone back to its place, he caught Leia’s raised eyebrows again.

“Don’t make me ask.” She looked back at her book and said, the annoyed tone clear in her voice. “I don’t want to ask if it’s Liza but…”

He grunted. “No. It’s not Liza. Everyone can stop asking that. It’s…someone. Someone I’m figuring out. Or have figured out. I don’t need it hanging over me for the rest of my time with you.”

“I think that’s a good idea. You’re going to have a lot to deal with and you’ll need to focus.” But then she sighed. “I’m also worried about her with you being away. It’s sort of hard to forget how angry she got when you two were living there. She couldn’t sit still in school and just hated her therapists. It was hard to see our sunshine go behind that dark cloud.”

Shame found him easily in that moment. “There are so many years of my life that I wish didn’t happen. And how I jerked her around then…I think I’m still trying to make it up to her. Maybe that’s the hardest part about recovering: it’s never really over. I wake up some days and still think I hear that man coming up the stairs to torture us. There’s always blood on my hands. I’m…whatever I’ve done wrong and whatever I’ll mess up in the future, she only had to live four years of that hell. I did one thing right.”
The echoes of Rey’s laugh from down the shore made them both turn, following the sound of her joy. Leia put her hand on his knee, squeezing it lightly. “You’ve worked hard. You deserve to have this dream come true, sweetheart. We’ve tried to parent you both like you were like any other kids, even though we knew it would be tough. Sometimes that worked, and sometimes that didn’t. We talk about this all of the time. Should we have tried to punish you more? It felt stupid to try to ground you when you didn’t want to leave your room. We were just so happy to have you back. It hurt to see what you’d been through and how it felt so real to you all of the time when you wouldn’t let us know what happened.”

They’d fallen down this road again, wearing out the same old path. What else was he supposed to say? “You gave me the chance to try to get what I wanted. I was consumed with being normal. I hated being teased and getting into fights felt good for far too long. I thought that’s what I should do.”

“It took you a while to figure it out. But you did. Just like you’ll figure this out.” Leia was still looking at him and he met her eyes. Mom was older now. So was dad. When he was fourteen, he thought about how ancient they looked and that was eleven years ago. Now they were retired, focused on raising Rey and doing what they could for him.

“You can change my room when I’m gone,” he said. “I can use the guest room.”

Leia laughed in a low chuckle. “Sweetheart, we didn’t touch that room for seven years. That room is staying as it is until we’re dead and gone and you finally have to…” She caught herself in what she was saying and grimaced. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

He wanted to be numb to the future, but it was really all he had. The past was, for the most part, too hateful. The only guiding light, since he had been ten years old, was Rey. Everything else could fall away because it was too painful to deal with anymore. Let it go, move on. Keep going because if he stopped swimming, he’d drown. “No. I understand. I still think you should have let me buy grandma and grandpa’s house but…”

“No, Ben. You would have just done that for me. Don’t confuse devotion with love. Buy your own house. Give us somewhere new to go to so we can make memories.” Leia adjusted her sunglasses, keeping him from seeing the tears she knew were forming in her eyes. “We will get all of that furniture we kept out of storage and ship it to Virginia.”

He snorted as he looked out at the lake. “I needed help renting an apartment. I have no idea how to buy a house.”

“Well, thank God your mother used to work in real estate.” She smiled at him and then looked back down at her book.

He turned and studied her for a moment before turning the page of his tomb, returning to courtroom procedures and the appeals process. The only other book he brought was his psychological criminal analysis textbook. What else was he going to read? He’d save writing for later that night, when he could put his thoughts on paper and talk to Rey at the same time. Even if they weren’t in the same bed, the room was still filled with her.

The calm was broken by a shrill shout from down the shore and he was on his feet and moving before he could really think about it. Rey was crying out for him and he was running without thinking, crossing from the sand onto rocks as his eyes and ears focused on her.

Han was on the ground and Rey was screaming for him.
“It’s fine, kids, it’s fine,” Han gruffly said, sitting up, flailing his arms out when he heard them both nearby.

Kylo stood over him, settling his breath. Rey still looked up at him in a panic. He looked at her, then down at his father. “What happened?”

Rey shook her head. “I saw him fall and…”

“I just twisted my ankle.” Han’s head snapped up at him and he reached out his hand to help him up to his feet. “It doesn’t feel broken. It’s…yeah, it’s not broken.”

Gripping his father’s hand, he watched him test out the leg. He winced, squeezing his hand hard when he pressed down.

“It could be broken.” Rey’s eyes were wide, wearing the same panic as before. “We should go to the hospital.”

Han wanted to roll his eyes, Kylo could feel it, but he held back. Leia joined him at his shoulder, eyeing her husband. It made Han get more flustered, pulling out of his grasp before he forced him back into it. He wasn’t letting his father go. Han still sighed. “I just stumbled on the rocks. Everyone needs to calm down.”

“We can look at it at the cabin.” Kylo found an outlet for his fear by finding some way to take control of the situation. Rey took Leia’s hand as he helped his father hobble along the rocks, mumbling the entire time that he was not trying to show off and it was not broken. Both of those things were probably lies but he only grunted replies as he held him up along the path back.

Finally back in the cabin, he let Han test out the injury. Kylo focused on his face, knowing that his father did not like admitting something hurt more than it should. He hoped that he would be able to read any change in how he looked when he put his weight on it again.

“I just twisted it. It will be fine.” Han looked at him with firm eyes. “Ben, really.”

Sighing, all he could do was look at Rey and hope that she could see the relief in his eyes. She did because she finally frowned and shook her head. “We didn’t even catch anything.”

He put his hand over his mouth to hide his laughter.

When he heard Rey giggle, he lost all of his will to hold back.

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They left Han and Leia in the cabin as the morning turned into a hot afternoon. Kylo had set his father up with an ice pack that he’d brought. He still had trouble with his knee from time to time when he ran. Now, they were swimming away the last of their anxieties.

The water wasn’t clear so it was hard to tell where she was underwater but for Rey, it was nice to feel weightless for a while. Seeing Han fall had shaken her; he was okay now but the water helped wash away the last of her guilt. He had just taken a few steps and then went down. She had just asked him to move to a different spot, hoping for better luck if they were further apart.
Her feet didn’t touch the bottom but she knew that Kylo was standing on the sandy floor as he smoothed his hair, rising up and brushing the droplets from his face. “At least the water is warm.”

She smiled, leaning back to look up at the sky. “It’s perfect.”

She kept kicking her legs under the water, but slowly settled back down. Her chin slipped under the surface and met his eyes again. He’d helped teach her how to swim. No one could take that away from them.

Kylo won when she dared him to see who could hold their breath longest.

It made him laugh again when he did.

They spotted another family at the next lot, also out swimming. There was a boat that kept drifting up and down the water. For most of the morning, she hadn’t really noticed that there were other people there except for them.

When she was finally tired, Kylo held her hand to help her out of the water. Not wanting to let go, she sat down in the low shallows and pulled him down with her. He didn’t have any of the usual lines of stress on his face. It was easy to drift with him when he let go.

“We should have done this more often,” Kylo finally said, watching her trace circles onto the palm of his hand.

“We did other things.” She looked up and smiled at him again. “And we still have so many more things to do.”

It had been one of the things that she had been telling herself the entire summer. Ahsoka told her to think that he wasn’t leaving; maybe their house was just getting bigger. She’d tried to tell her that before, when she was younger, and at first Rey had believed it. Then everything inside of her started screaming and she couldn’t keep imagining sharing a household together. Now, it really made sense. Wherever Kylo went, she’d be with him in his head. And she would have his thoughts too.

Shifting his legs, he nodded. But the movement showed off a lingering scar on his thigh. It had moved over the years. She didn’t know where this one used to be.

“I’m going to ask that Paige gets permission to film my performances,” she said, trying to pull herself back into the sun and the water. “I think it will be okay.”

“I still want to see them.”

Lingering in the water for a few more minutes, they listened to the dull hum of the motor from the boat circling the lake.

Kylo looked tired by the time they left the sun and water. He’d dried off and changed, but fell asleep easily on his bed. Han was sleeping in the living room and Leia was reading on the porch. The cabin was quiet when the day was at its warmest.

Curling up in a tank top and shorts on her bed, she finally checked her phone. She’d dried off and changed but would save the shower for later, maybe when she wanted to feel more awake. Huffing at how many messages there were, she started with the most important ones first. Paige had sent a picture of Benji at the park. Rey sent back a picture of Kylo sleeping and laughed at the response. They’re both napping at the same time!
Rose had sent her a couple of messages, making sure that she was having fun. She was with her dad in New York, mostly looking for cheap things to buy for no reason. We have only seen the Statue of Liberty. Nothing else. Ugh! Rey texted back that Han had twisted his ankle and she had freaked out a little. But it was fine now. Everyone was asleep and she was going to try to rest soon too. And that it sucked that her dad wasn’t letting her take any tours. There wasn’t an instant reply but she knew Rose would get back to her.

Finn’s messages made her happy at first and then she had to snort in frustration. Hope you’re having a great time! Tell Han and Leia hi for me. I played basketball all morning. you should SEE my layup now. Where are you? Are you ok? Hey, where r u? Can u text? I miss you. Biting her lip, she quickly went through how she’d left her phone in the cabin and how Han twisted his ankle. She told him that they went swimming afterwards and she had wanted to soak up the sun and couldn’t take her phone. Now, she was back inside and was about to sleep for a while soon, but she should be able to text the rest of the evening. She ended the last message with a heart, hoping that he wouldn’t be too upset that she had been busy.

So you don’t miss me?

The reply made her tighten her hands around her phone. Of course I miss you. I will be home soon.

Ok.

And that was it. Okay, he was mad but what could she do about it? She had told him how much the time with Kylo had meant to her and she had been so sure that he understood. Maybe when she got back, it would be easier to talk.

Kaydel had sent her a selfie in a bikini, also on the beach. Rey fixed her tank top and sent one back, smiling into the camera. She was tanned and her freckles suddenly didn’t seem so embarrassing. The heart in reply made her grin wider.

Then there was the last person, the nameless number that made her wrinkle her nose. U haven’t talked to him?

She wanted to ignore it but it made her itch too much. The sand from the beach had burrowed under her skin. Stop texting me please. He doesn’t care about you. Find someone else. Kthnxbye.

This person, whoever he was, really didn’t have anything better to do. this isn’t just about sex u know.

That made her grit her teeth. Of COURSE it’s about sex. It’s always about sex. I don’t CARE if you’ve slept with him. Get OVER it.

Wow jealous much?

She hated swearing. She tried not to do it as often as she could. Kylo didn’t care and said whatever he wanted to. You don’t know a fucking thing about me.

It didn’t look like he was going to reply and she closed her eyes, rolling her shoulders. She really wanted to sleep and wouldn’t be able to if her body felt this way.

Ok im sorry. That was stupid. U have a boyfriend. But ur also a nice person. Can u talk to him for me Rey? Please? Just ask him if he thinks about me because im thinking about him.

Letting her eyes fall on her phone, she shook her head to herself. If I ask him and he says he doesn’t care will you stop?
She got the reply that she wanted. *Yes I will.*

*Ok. I will ask him tonight.*

*Cool. Thnx.*

She finally had no unread messages and could close her eyes. From the other bed, she heard Kylo groan and roll over. His arm aimless reached for someone and he exhaled before grunting to himself and shifting again.

Leaving her phone on her bed, she moved to his. She lifted his arm and curled up against him, resting her head on his chest.

He woke up for a moment, looking at her with blurry eyes. “Hey, you’re here.”

“I want to sleep,” she answered, feeling his arms come around her.

“Yeah, me too.”

He was asleep again in an instant it seemed. Kylo didn’t snore but when he was truly tired, there was a small sound that he made in the back of his throat. They’d been in the sun all morning and afternoon. The room was warm and quiet, except for his breathing.

Resting against him and closing her eyes, she slowly joined him in sleep.

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“It really is just a sprain, Ben.”

His scepticism at Han’s words made him raise his eyebrows. “I guess you can walk on it. But I’ll have to drive home.”

They were watching the sun set on the porch, sharing more of the bottle they’d started at the beginning of the trip. Soon, they’d have to go inside and help with dinner. But after the late lunch of grilled cheese sandwiches when everyone woke up and wandered into the kitchen, there was really no rush.

They’d have to clean up and pack everything the next day after several hours of doing nothing. He was going to try to get a run in the next morning, following the winding dirt road that connected all of the lots. Then maybe more swimming with Rey or reading with Leia. Drinking with Han would have to wait until they got home.

“You’ll enjoy it. Don’t complain about things you like.” Han lifted his eyebrows at him, forcing him to smile. But Han’s look faltered for a moment, making him think that his leg was hurting. He was about to ask and Han lifted his hand. “It’s fine. I was…it was nice to see you look happy again.”

Licking his lips, he nicked his head. “I’ve been worried for a long time about everything. And it was nice to get away from most of them.”

“You’re going to do fine, Ben. You really don’t need to worry about us. There aren’t that many big rocks for me to slip on at home.” Han was trying to comfort him and it mostly worked, but there
were still too many dangers out there for him to fully let go of his anxieties. And he wouldn’t be able to mentally handle what he had ahead of him if he didn’t let more of them go.

Sipping at his drink, he shrugged. “If Leia had made us change the garden how she wanted it, there would be.”

“Don’t remind me.” Han scoffed. “That lawn is perfect how it is. I’m not digging it up for a rock garden. When your godson is old enough, he can mow it and we will pay him in popsicles. I have it all planned out.”

Sipping at his drink, he shook his head and looked out at the lake. “I’m sure you do, dad.”

But the mention of Benji made him reflexively check his phone. Paige had sent some more pictures and he promised himself that he would reply. And again, he had to delete another dozen messages from another number.

Standing, he shook his head. “I’m going to take a walk. I’d ask you to come but…”

Han rolled his eyes. “Go. I can get inside on my own.”

Narrowing his eyes at his father, he waited until Han nodded truthfully that he was okay.

Taking long strides away from the cabin, he turned his phone in his hand and mulled over not replying. He really did have better things to think about. He’d woken up in a soft mixture of dreams in late afternoon sunshine with Rey curled up next to him. He’d been aroused for a few hazy seconds, not knowing who he was waking up next to. It was a slight but firm body, sighing in his arms as he moved. When he’d shaken himself awake, his usual alarm didn’t hit as hard. She was attractive; dancing had made her body slight but still powerful. The sun had browned her face, showing every freckle that would have never surfaced if she had been forever trapped in hell. She deserved someone who could look at her and love every perfect spot. In that moment, in the sunshine, it was him. His body wanted her but his mind knew that he couldn’t ruin their bond again. He’d put it at risk so many times, brought to its precipice with almost kissing her.

Instead of doing anything, he just stroked her face. He hoped that Finn would hold her with the same care. If he didn’t…

He stopped at the edge of the short dock, not realizing he’d gone that far.

He didn’t want to think about how Finn could hurt Rey without knowing it.

But she trusted him. He had to trust him too.

Sitting down, he let his bare feet touch the surface of the water. The lake was cooling but he could still swim comfortably if he wanted. Maybe Rey would want to swim again when everything had darkened. He could show her how not to be afraid again.

But his pocket distracted him from his imagination.

If he was still as angry as he used to be, he would have thrown his phone into the lake when it started buzzing again. But instead of a text, it was ringing. He sighed when he saw that it was George.

“Hello George.”

“It’s actually me.” Gregor’s voice made him ache in three words. Now the phone was really going
“I’m hanging up. Fuck you for taking your father’s phone.” He let the words hiss out, glaring at the other side of the water, at the green on the other side. A hole could open up there and engulf him in that moment and he’d be happy.

“No, no, Ky, please I…he lent it to me. I wanted to talk to you. Maybe apologize?” Grey sounded sincere and he stilled his hand. “Are you still there?”

The stillness of the water, the warmth of the air: he was there, he wasn’t anywhere else. “I don’t think I care about what you want to say.”

“But for my dad you do?”

He sighed in response.

At least the other man didn’t laugh like he expected him too. “Kylo, I was a real shithead before you left. I didn’t really think about you other than, like, you were looking to fuck someone and I was sort of flattered that it was me. You have…I guess you have a hard time opening up to people so I fucked up there too.”

_I fucked up by choosing you_, Kylo thought. “Yes, you did.”

“Oh, look, I…” Grey paused to groan to himself. He was pacing around. Kylo knew it was at George’s house and imagined it being on the back porch, looking at the little grassy area and large pine trees while gripping at the railing in irritation. “Ky, when you left, I was totally like, go fuck yourself. You’re a fucking asshole with issues that I don’t want to deal with. But then I looked around…” His voice fell and Kylo sat up. “You cleaned my stupid room. You did my laundry. You put my books in the right order. Like, you got it that they should be by subject first. Anyone else would have, I don’t fucking know, ordered them by colour or some stupid shit. But you did that for me. And no one’s ever done something like that for me before.”

Kylo just stared at the lake. “That was before I knew who you really were.”

“That wasn’t…I mean…” A deep, long, sigh followed. “That’s not who I really am.”

_I know_. “So what? It’s who you were at that moment.”

Kylo could hear the sounds of waterfowl in the distance. The waves on the water lapped at the shore, slowing down time. Behind him, in the cabin, his family was making dinner. Han was still hobbling around but would milk this for all it was worth. Leia would have a glass of wine in her hand and Rey would be tasting the food, making sure it would be something that everyone would like. He had everything there; why had he needed that voice on the phone?

“What if I want to be someone better?” Gregor’s voice was low, tempting him into listening with less anger. He had to fight that feeling with both hands. “You know, like you want me to be? All that stuff about the future?”

He could only stare off into the distance, trying to find the reply that would not hurt everyone but still give him some peace.

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Kylo drove the entire way home and his phone was silent.

Rey felt better knowing that she’d helped him get rid of the annoying pest.

Chapter End Notes

I started this over a year ago. And I like writing it. I guess, references to the standard tag warnings.

I'm playing with an idea right now but I think the next chapter will be heavy. The plan is a time jump right after. And since this is getting longer and longer...

There's not much to comment on here but thanks to everyone who continues to follow this story. You're beautiful.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Rey tries to figure out how far she wants to go in her relationship with Finn.

READ CHAPTER NOTES AND TAGS FOR WARNINGS

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Like so many times before, Kylo was leaving her.

But this time held so much more permanence. She was also older now and in more control of her feelings. The times he left her behind when she was nine and eleven hadn’t felt this heavy.

Therapy had taught her that she couldn’t think of it as forever. People moved, people got jobs; hoping that everything would always stay the same wasn’t a frame of mind that was healthy.

Maybe she wanted to be a little selfish.

“I know what I’m supposed to pack but it doesn’t feel right.” Kylo looked at his bags and then back up at her, furrowing his eyebrows. “I will be able to bring everything else once I get my placement. If I get a conditional…

“Kylo,” Rey cut him off, tilting her head like she’d done the dozen times before when he started getting nervous about the future. “You’re going to do it. You’ve worked so hard. I…I know you can do it.”

Since the trip, since his phone quit buzzing, she’d felt her bitterness ebb away and a different sensation took hold. It had taken her the rest of July to realize what she had been feeling since he’d told her what was going on and since she’d had her exchange with the mystery heartbreaker. It didn’t mean that her own spirit was uncomplicated.

She knew that Kylo had spent the rest of the month trying to get along with Finn and it mostly worked, but then it stopped, outside of her own control. They went to the go-kart track again on a cooler day and Kylo had mostly watched but kept their times. Finn liked that Kylo was willing to take them there because his step-father wouldn’t. Kylo was too young to talk with the fathers gathered there and was too old to be a part of the young men running the place. She also knew that he could sense that it wasn’t really her thing; he was also there for her when she got bored with trying to push herself too hard. Like before, like the last time Finn got mad but promised he wouldn’t again, Kylo hugged her when she decided she was done. On the side of the track, he draped his hands around her, holding her close so she could cheer on Finn try to beat the other boys, most of whom were from other schools. She was fine with going fast; she was fine with driving the tiny car around the tight corners. She was even better than last time. What made her afraid had been Finn telling her what to do. The last time they had been there, he got mad when she beat him once. Now, she was more willing to let him win every time. It also hurt her to lose so
She had felt safer standing with Kylo, watching Finn do what he wanted. He won the little race and she had hugged and kissed him afterwards, sprinting to the gate in her shorts and feeling truly proud of him, her own emotions pushed aside. He had the best time of the day. And he had smiled at her, returning the hug by tightening his arms.

But when it was time to go, after lunch, he had sat silently in the backseat with her on the drive home. Kylo had been really trying to make conversation too. He liked driving; he knew a lot about it. If Finn would just talk to him, he’d learn that even though Kylo didn’t care about cars, he had endless knowledge about them. He’d spent part of the spring making her test him about car types and how to identify them from varying distances. There was more to the test; there was a bunch of psychological stuff about how witnesses’ memories could change about model and colour. He went on a strange rant about how some serial killer was missed because a cop mixed up the type of car. When he was done, his eyes suddenly softened and he dropped his head, apologizing for talking about something only he was interested in. It brought her back to some of her conversations with Finn; it was hard to smile back.

But on the drive, Finn had just given short replies, even about taking his driver’s exam the next spring.

When they were finally at home that night, after Kylo had dropped Finn off, she got the texts that made all of her feelings sorrowfully correct.

It was weird how he was hugging you again. Why was he just there?

It had made her frown, almost angry. That was one of her last encounters with him before they spent the last half of July apart. He’d been away at his aunt’s so she could breathe a little more. Still, she hated getting mad. The text had made her look at her Happy Wall; that’s what Ahsoka told her to call it. Getting back together with her had really saved her summer. Having her again, along with the calls to Ransolm and her other friends from Michigan, made Kylo leaving as easy as it could be. Her Happy Wall, along with her Happy Memories, meant that there were other people out there and that other people had feelings too. The way of thinking was something that she would always share with Kylo. She could be angry or sad but that only confirmed that other people felt similar things. Finn shouldn’t have been mad that Kylo wanted to hang out with them but he was allowed to feel that way. She had to try to make sure that she understood why he had those thoughts.

He hugs me. He loves me. He’s leaving soon so he wants to spend time with us. Why are you mad?

It took Finn too long to respond to that. She stared at her phone, almost hoping that he didn’t reply.

He’s not your brother, but he’s not your boyfriend either. I am.

Staring at her phone in that moment, in the dark, it made her want to run to Kylo. There would be so many more moments like this when he would be too busy to answer, too busy to respond, too far away.

He’d be at the academy. He wouldn’t be with anyone else.

She settled back into the moment and smiled again, running her hand along his quilt and looking back at Kylo’s bags. “Can I ask you something?”

He looked pleased with the question, losing some of his earlier frustration. “You can always ask
me anything.”

“So, I know you told me about the first-year statistics but I still don’t understand.” She pulled her legs up under her. She had been sitting on the edge of his bed, watching him pack on the floor. He was wearing a white t-shirt and grey shorts. The clothes were probably going to be left behind because everything else in his bag was black.

Sighing, Kylo turned away from his luggage and reached for her hand. “It really is up to them. I can get placed anywhere and then after one year, I can get a new placement. I can show you the numbers but they mostly don’t matter. George will…he wants me in his unit. I still talk about other placements because I’m worried that he will stop helping me if I mess up at the academy.”

She watched Kylo drop his head and scratch at the back of his head. “You’re also worried that they’ll make you cut you hair.”

Glancing up, he gave her a wry look. It was one of those rare, vulnerable Kylo moments that only confirmed how well she knew him at his most stripped down. Despite the mysterious corners that were still undiscovered, she still knew about his vanity and fear. “I don’t like my hair short.”

He was leaving the day after tomorrow. He’d stay with George for a couple of days and then it was to the weird FBI barracks. And then it would be six months. Except for a week at Christmas. That would be the next time that she would get to see him.

Despite the awkward problems that she had with Finn at the moment, she still ran her hands through his hair. “I’ll still like you with short hair. And it will grow again. I thought about cutting my hair short but it will be hard for performances.”

She loved thinking about the fall. She had added it to her wall. Pictures of Paige dancing and teaching were added to it all. Her wall made Kylo’s sad murder wall clash in her mind. He kept most of his good thoughts in his head but would rather stare at murder to remind him of some of the hurtful, hateful things out there. She wanted to remember happiness every time she opened her eyes. It would help chase the nightmares away.

“Benji likes your hair,” he answered, finally shifting to sit beside her on the bed. “I don’t want to miss you both so much.”

She wanted to shrug but instead she leaned against him. “He’s still just a baby. When you…when come back at Christmas he’ll be…I don’t know. He might remember you more.”

His hands hadn’t tightened around her like they usually did. “Rey, is…is how I touch you okay?”

Rey wanted to snap up, accusing him of looking at her phone, but it was just Kylo remembering something. It was him respecting her. “Kylo, I don’t know what do to without you.”

He finally put his arm around her. “I’ve been…I was gone before. Don’t I always come back?”

She let her head fall. “But this time you’re moving forever. That was just college.”

Quietly, he hugged her. “I know.”

It hadn’t just been college. It had been so much more than that.

He couldn’t stay in that house forever.

And she had to trust herself that she was going to be okay.
Slumped against the window, she sighed again. It made Leia reach back to put a hand on her knee. “It’s going to be fine, sweetheart.”

“It doesn’t feel that way right now,” she answered with a frown.

Seeing Kylo disappear beyond security, watching the pained smile that he’d given her transform into a serious and distant look in a flash, settled hard in her chest. She knew that distance was going to be the biggest problem, but in the background lurked another fear. He was going to be different when he came back. George had two sides: a soft and kind one that would always listen, along with a harsh and serious one that was entirely based on intimidation. That aspect of Kylo would only get stronger.

“They’re going to take care of him, Rey,” Han said and it made her try to sit up and listen. “They dug through everything in his background and decided he could handle it.”

George probably fixed that, she thought. Kylo’s psychological evaluation had been right after Benji had been born. He’d driven out to the same regional office as his exam and came back and didn’t talk to anyone the next day. But they didn’t turn him away. And then agents came by the house and interviewed Han and Leia. And then Hux and Paige. And she had felt beyond nervous that Hux would unload on them about how Kylo had acted for so long.

And they still wanted him.

She’d been so caught up in her own thoughts that what was happening on that side had felt blocked to her. She felt like she could talk to Finn but only so long before his eyes would glaze over and she had to change the conversation. Back to cars. Back to school. Back to not talking about feelings.

“I wonder what Liza said,” Rey said with a scoff. I wonder what the other guy said; I wonder what Poe’s family said, she thought.

“She was probably nice. They had a way of getting the truth out of us even if we didn’t realize it.” Han sighed. “I think he wouldn’t have made it through if he hadn’t grown up so much the last couple of years. I still think about him at the hospital, how he wasn’t really there that entire summer…but those bruises didn’t show up again all summer. Did you see how often he was wearing t-shirts?”

Rey managed to smile a little. “He was always taking his shirt off too.”

She heard Leia chuckle lightly in the front seat. “You missed it about a week ago, Rey. He didn’t realize I had some friends from my book club over in the morning. He just came in and was leaving his clothes everywhere, complaining to someone on the phone and froze when he saw us in the living room. What an afternoon.”

She could only remember Kylo glaring at Leia during dinner but he hadn’t said anything about it. Either he didn’t care or wanted to forget it.

She kicked at the sneakers that he’d left at the backdoor when they got home.

Despite wanting to take a nap on his bed, she went to her own to stare up at the ceiling.
School started again in a month. She had all of that time to spend with Finn or her friends, or with Paige and Benji. There were plenty of things to do and see; Kylo being gone was only going to be hard when she was alone.

“Rey?” Han knocked lightly on her door. “We’re going to do a barbecue tonight. Can you help me get it out of the garage later?”

Looking over, she nodded. “He told you to pick up more propane before he left. Did you do that?”

He shut his eyes then sighed. “So, do you want to go to the store?”

Grinning, she pushed herself off the bed.

Staying in motion would keep time moving forward.

And now that Kylo was away, she’d have to work a little harder at filling the hole that he’d left again.

-=-

She invited Kaydel and Rose for a sleepover. It would just be a girl’s night. She needed the time to talk about boys rather than talk to them.

Kylo had been gone for two weeks. Now that he was taking his courses, he couldn’t call or text as often. But at least he wasn’t going to be bored. He found out that he was the youngest one there just before he left George’s and had another attack of doubt. But now that he was there, realizing that his past experiences were just as valid as the others, he had calmed down.

The silence hurt at first but now it was a relief to know that he was settling in to what he had looked forward to for so long.

The silence from Finn was more annoying anyway.

He didn’t understand why she wanted to hang out with just Kaydel and Rose for once.

“I know he’s just jealous but…” she said, then sighed. “It’s not like I have a crush on Kylo.”

Kaydel raised her eyebrows and then grinned. “So it’s okay that I do?”

Rose tossed a pillow at her from across the couch. They had their sleeping bags and blankets spread out on the basement floor. They really didn’t have a bedtime but Han would probably come down in a couple of hours to get them to turn off the television.

“I’m allowed to joke, okay? I’ve had a crush on him since we were kids. Leave me alone.” She stuck her tongue out at Rose, who just rolled her eyes. “He’s always been nice to us even if it was weird sometimes. Like when he’d just sit there and stare at nothing.”

Rey had to shrug, but reached for another handful of chips. Eating would give her time to think about a response. “I do that too, Kay. It’s not that weird.”

Her friend blushed instantly and shook her head. “No, that’s not what I meant. I get it. I just don’t like it when you guys look sad when it happens.”
Rey didn’t know what to say to that. She didn’t like it either but sometimes there were still too many thoughts in her head. They would get stuck in Kylo’s too. It was sometimes the safest place to be.

She tried not to think about Kylo the rest of the evening. They watched another teen romantic comedy about silly misunderstandings and falling in love just in time. It made her think about Finn. He thought she was pretty and liked being around her. But he couldn’t have her all to himself.

Guilt rose in her chest again and she pushed it down. She couldn’t stay mad at herself forever about what happened. Kylo had forgiven her long ago.

She checked her phone when they were brushing their teeth. Finn had just texted her and it made her frown. Sitting on her bed, she scrolled through the messages and shook her head. How should she answer him?

“Are you okay?” Rose asked, moving to sit beside her. Rey just handed her the phone and frowned. “Oh. Well, he’s being really dumb. Don’t worry about it. Tell him goodnight and that it will be okay the next day. He misses you but he’s being really unfair.”

“Yeah, but…” Rey looked at her wall and refocused her thoughts. “It’s so weird. When we’re together, I like him. He listens to me and lets me talk about so many things. But when I’m with other people, he gets all…like this. I do miss him but it’s like he doesn’t trust me or something.”

Rose licked her lips, then nodded. “Well, you don’t have to date anyone if you don’t want to.”

Rey narrowed her eyes, suddenly hearing a different tone in her friend’s voice. “If we broke up…”

Shaking her head, Rose instantly stopped the thought. “I don’t want to date him, Rey. I really like him as a friend. He’s your boyfriend but if he acts this way…maybe he isn’t ready to have a girlfriend. Especially one like you.”

The thought stuck with her when they were back in the basement, turning out the lights to continue quiet conversations about how the rest of summer would go. They planned on going swimming at least a couple of times before they had to go back to school. And Rey would be taking care of Benji some afternoons.

It was still hard to get to sleep, even with the rest of August mapped out.

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After talking with Rose, and then talking more with Leia, Rey finally told Finn that she didn’t like how he texted her so much when she was with other friends. She didn’t say that she might want to break up, but he seemed to think that way. He was sweet and kind and careful the rest of August. And that made her even more worried; was he only acting that way out of fear of losing her?

Having a boyfriend really was hard.

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“How was the first week of school, kids?” Leia asked at dinner.

Finn looked up and smiled. “Pretty good. Rey and I are lab partners in biology so that’s going to be cool.”

The Friday night dinner with her parents reminded her of all of the times that Poe stayed over before he lived with them. She wondered how often Kylo was thinking about him. He’d written several letters, saying it was easier than waiting to use his phone or computer. He liked sending her something she could hold, he explained. But he had made a couple of friends. One was a young woman named Jannah who was helping him with the anti-terrorism course. He wanted to be focused on one thing and needed to have someone remind him that being well rounded was also essential.

But it was still weird to think about Kylo investigating terrorists. She messed up and told Kaydel about it and that meant so many questions about terrorism in history class. It really did seem that outside of her house, outside of their town, there were bad people everywhere.

“We have to dissect things,” Rey said, wrinkling her nose. “I don’t know how I’m going to pass that part.”

Han was already nodding. “You have your lab partner to help you. And Hux might give you a bit of a break if you talk to the councillor.”

“Ben’s worst grade was in biology,” Leia said. “But it got better when he explained what he had problems with. We’ll work on it together.”

Finn took her hand and she had to smile. She was just glad that she didn’t ask about college.

She’d already decided that she didn’t want to go for a while. Kylo told her to do what felt right, but he also hoped that she might change her mind when she found something that she wanted to study. She didn’t need to go to the university, but there were other programs out there. He’d help her find one when he was done. She could also just do nothing and he’d still love her.

Maybe she would change her mind before graduation in a few years.

Leia wouldn’t let her help with the dishes so she went to watch a movie with Finn in the basement. She left the door open and Bee bounded after them, taking his spot on her lap as Finn flipped through the television channels for something to watch. He finally found a fantasy movie and looked at her with raised eyebrows until she nodded.

“Thanks for dinner.” He’d already thanked Han and Leia upstairs. “Sorry I didn’t know about the biology thing. But I will help you out. You can just close your eyes and we’ll work on the report together. It won’t be for a while but it will be fine.”

She knew why cutting something up would make her uncomfortable. There would be a smell. There would be sounds. Even if it was a tiny frog or an eyeball, it would still be something that used to be alive and now was dead.

“I know that you’ll help me, Finn.” She smiled at him and he reached out to stroke her face. Bee grumbled at the intrusion and hopped away, his bell jingling as he trotted up the stairs.

Now they were alone.
He ran his hand up her leg. “I like you so much, Rey. I’m glad you still want to go out with me. I know at school I try to show off for the guys, but I would rather be hanging out with you.”

She tried to like his friends. Whenever they’d have lunch together, she still mostly talked to Ethan. He was the most normal of Finn’s friends, mostly because they’d known one another since they were kids. He was nicer than the other guys on the basketball team and the only one that seemed to really listen to her when she had something to say.

“I know. I like you too. But we can have our own friends.” It was a gentle reminder about the texting. She really didn’t want to have Han and Leia solve her problems but she had almost come to that point as summer ended. But now it was feeling okay again. Finn was busy with his friends and spent most lunch breaks playing basketball with them. So it left her alone to talk with Rose and Kaydel. Things were better now that they both had more to do.

Touching her arm, he brought her hand to his mouth to kiss the tips of her fingers. “I’m… I’m still sorry about being jealous and texting you all of the time. It’s like, sometimes I can’t stop thinking about you. The way you laugh, how you look. All those mushy things. I’m really glad that you’re my girlfriend. I’m only a little worried that someone will try to… I don’t know. Break us up.”

Closing her eyes, she returned to the thought again. He was talking about Kylo. He had to be. If she lied, he’d feel better and maybe he’d slow down. “I think he has a boyfriend in Virginia. He told me about him.”

“I wasn’t…” Finn started but then snapped his mouth shut. He dropped his head. “I’m trying really hard to not worry about him. He kind of scares me still. He’s just so big and he’s always touching you. I feel like when he’s around, I’m not tough enough to take care of you. Like he’s the only one that can keep you safe and happy.”

Touching his face, she stroked his cheek until he looked at her again. “He’s not the only one. And I… I’m a little jealous that he has a boyfriend again. But mostly because he won’t have as much time for me when he’s got a job and is dating someone.”

Kylo absolutely didn’t have a boyfriend. But the lie made Finn look so satisfied that it awoke worry within her. What she’d told Kylo, her uncertainties about what might happen when he was away, started to press on her again. So she tried to will it away with a smile.

“He’ll make time for you, baby. He’s… he’s really special to you.” Finn grinned at her then pulled her into a hug.

Despite her thoughts, it felt good to be in someone’s arms. Finn’s hugs were gentle but she didn’t feel as safe as she did in Kylo’s arms. Kylo’s body would just swallow her up. Finn was only a little taller than her. It was more equal; maybe that shouldn’t be that big of a problem.

The hug turned into a kiss and she was quickly caught up in her rapidly beating heart. Slowly, Finn pressed her down onto the couch, gently covering her body. She felt him bracing her hands around her shoulders, continuing to kiss her without making her afraid. But they were still as close as they’d gotten before. Not sure what to do with her hands, it was almost better to have Finn on top of her so she didn’t embarrass herself, despite how her nerves always gnawed at her as she felt him getting excited against her.

A warm palm touched the skin of her stomach and she froze. Finn had his hand up her shirt, cupping her breast and sighing loudly. It rocked her solidly; it couldn’t go further. She had to hide her wince but force a giggle. “Come on, Finn, please.”
She could feel his hands tense and then slowly run down her stomach. “Yeah, yeah. It’s okay. I mean…I like…I like your, uh, body. And your…”

“My boobs, Finn. You like my boobs.” She felt herself blush even as she sat up to look at him. He pulled away, sitting uncomfortably on the other side of the couch. “I don’t know why. There’s not really anything there.”

“Yeah, there is. They’re…you are pretty and good and everything. But I’d really like to touch them. When you’re ready. I keep forgetting that.” Finn tried to smile but she knew what he really wanted. The second his hand had brushed her nipples she felt the same rush. The fabric of her bra, the cute one with roses and bows, kept him from really touching her. It still felt too soon.

She tried to smile as she sat up more, pulling her legs up under her. They were in the basement again. Kylo would have hated it. “You…you just need to remember it, Finn. Please.”

He leaned up and kissed her, their lips meeting lightly. “I really like you, Rey. You’re so…everything. You listen to me. You’ve…I know I haven’t been perfect to you but you still don’t want to ditch me. But I understand. I mean, I think I do. It’s good to go slow. We’ve got the rest of our lives.”

That’s right. They did.

Upstairs, out from the September air, she thought she heard Kylo come home. But then she remembered that he was gone and the voice upstairs was Han talking on the phone and rattling around in the kitchen. He must have been out for a walk. Leia had gone up to her office, probably trying to give them more space.

He’d been gone for over a month.

It made her head drop.

Finn’s hand was there in an instant, warm on her back. “Hey, were you thinking about him again?”

“Yeah.” She tried to swallow, lifting her head. Why couldn’t there be stars on the ceiling there too?

“I miss him.”

Finn licked his lips. “Maybe we can do something that he likes tomorrow? Like, going hiking. I think that would be cool. It was fun the last time and if it’s something you’d like to do that would be…cool.”

In her mind, she imagined how it would go. Finn would be too afraid to speak and Kylo would be too angry or tense to be able to respond. They’d follow the trail and eat lunch in silence until Kylo would ask the right question, his eyes flicking to her in satisfaction as Finn responded. The image was so clear in her mind that it would help her get through it, even though Kylo would only be there in her imagination.

“He likes it. I know he doesn’t look like he likes going outside but…”

“Rey, it’s cool.” Finn ran his hand down her stomach again, reawakening the butterflies. “You can go say goodnight if you want. Hey, can I stay here tonight?”

Rey tried not to frown. “No, I’m…I’m pretty tired. And we can hang out tomorrow.”

Finn was forcing a smile, but seemed to get it.
But it hung with her as she climbed the stairs to phone Kylo, hoping that he’d be able to answer.

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She shifted in Hux’s office and looked down, feeling her face hot with embarrassment.

“I don’t have to tell you that you’re not in trouble, Rey. But I wanted to talk to you about what the councillor told me to make sure you’re not…” Discomfort passed over Hux’s face but he kept talking. “Being pressured into doing something that you don’t want.”

Glancing up, she nodded. The problem had started the day before in health class. Everyone got to write an anonymous question during sex-ed and the teacher would answer them. They’d been doing that for years now so it felt okay for her to hear about what her other classmates thought about sex. She wasn’t the only virgin in class and she really didn’t care. Inside, she hoped she was the only one who had been abused but no one ever wore those secrets on his or her face.

She was fine thinking about sex when she was alone and could picture the right things. When she was warm and safe in her bed or in the shower, she could touch herself and enjoy the shiver of excitement when her body wanted something more.

Sometimes, she still thought about Kylo in those moments.

Those were the only times that she felt ashamed.

The questions were the standard ones from a bunch of teenagers. The teacher would roll her eyes and not answer anything that was ridiculous, but some of them made her look around her class and recall again that other people had problems. I’m a girl, but I think I like girls. How do I know what feels right? Or another one: Everyone else wants to have sex but I don’t think I do. Is there something wrong with me? Then there were questions about STDs and pregnancy and how to be safe. There was one dumb question about condom sizes and everyone giggled. But then the teacher got a question that she quickly put aside and they talked about consent again.

And now, sitting in Hux’s office, she knew that the question had been about her.

“We can’t know who wrote the note but I think we both know who it might be. And I’m not doing this for Kylo. This is about taking care of you as my student and…friend.” He smiled lightly, hoping that she’d relax. It helped but just a little. “This will be private between us but I hope that you talk to Han and Leia about this. Are you feeling pressured into having sex?”

She kept her face as neutral as possible. “I’ve…Leia and I have talked about it quite a bit. You don’t need to worry. Or tell Kylo.”

“I won’t, it’s fine. This will really just be between us. The other part, that’s for you and him to discuss. But I’ve had this conversation with other girls here and I want to make sure that you’re okay.” He paused to take a sip of coffee, like this was normal to talk about. It had been normal for so long to talk about herself and her body. But since she started getting closer to Finn, it made her feel more anxious. He still stopped when she needed but the frustration was clear on his face when she just wanted to hold hands and not make out. “I just want to make sure that you’re okay.”

“I…” she started and then shrugged. “Some days, it’s like Finn understands. And then on other days, he touches me a little too much. I think some of his friends are telling him what to do. I hear
them talking sometimes. He isn’t the only one with a girlfriend but I think those girls are doing…
more than I am.”

Hux sighed. “Paige and I didn’t have sex until we were eighteen…”

“I know. She told me,” she interrupted. “I’ll talk to Finn again. I know…I know that I don’t have to
date anyone who doesn’t treat me right. But I don’t want to be afraid of this forever. Maybe no one
will ever like me enough to be so…patient. Like he was for Kylo.”

Hux shifted from his desk to take the seat beside her. He took her hand and she squeezed lightly in
thanks. “I talked about this with him before he left. Maybe that’s why I’m being overprotective
right now. I guess you don’t need another person telling you not to compare yourself to him. Sex
can be really complicated when you think you’re ready but you really aren’t. Why do you think
they were so upset that summer?”

“Yeah but they talked about it and worked on it,” she answered before lifting her head. “And then
they were ready together.”

Hux sighed and shook his head again. “He’d probably tell you to wait too if he was here. He was…
he really helped him in ways that I’ll never understand. But they did have problems too, Rey. We
can’t forget that.”

It had been easy to let the harder parts of their relationship disappear into fantasy so it was a good
reminder. And it also made her think about the small arguments she’d had with Finn. Things didn’t
have to be perfect. She also had more than enough adults around her to talk through her problems.

When she got back to class, Finn looked at her with raised eyebrows. And she had to lie and say
that it was about Benji.

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September and then October blurred together in days of school, dance practices, and spending time
with Benji. Halloween had been the most exciting it had been in years. She wore her cat ears from
one of her performances and so did Paige when they took Benji around the neighbourhood. They
were really only out for an hour, but they took more than enough pictures. He was dressed as a
pumpkin. The little orange costume looked too big on him but it made it even more cute.

Maybe it was just being around Benji and thinking about kids that had made her more excited to
see Finn than usual. Maybe it was from hearing from Kylo that evening. He was almost halfway
done. He had made friends and his instructors liked him. He hadn’t had time to be sad about that
many things, but when he was ending the call with a sorrowful sigh, he followed it with an I love
you.

December meant he could come home.

It was so close.

At the Halloween party at Finn’s that night, she was less afraid to be alone with him. It was mostly
the basketball team and she really only knew him there so alone felt better, away from the others in
his room. He’d actually cleaned up; there weren’t shoes everywhere. Everyone knew what they
were in there doing and for a moment, it was a bit exhilarating to have everyone talking about her.
It was only there for a moment and she would have to think more about that later.

She let him touch her breasts under her bra for the first time. He kissed them through her shirt and she shuddered at the feeling. Kissing him deeply, she rested on his lap and felt how turned on he was by someone like her. He grabbed her ass and kept kissing her, making her roll her hips against him. He was sighing a lot, almost whining as she moved. Her body was warm and she hoped that she could hang onto the feeling. He liked her. He respected her.

But he kept reaching up her shirt, and she kept having to push his hand away. She’d liked the touch but wanted to think more about how it made her feel. It had brought a rush of wetness in her underwear that told her that her body really wanted more. Her brain had to stay in control.

She parted from the kisses to give Finn a tight smile, holding his hands on her back. “I think…I think that’s enough.”

A flash of a pleading look crossed his face but he blinked it away. He kissed her cheek and nodded.

When she got home that night, she ran her own hands over her nipples, remembering the sensation. The way his lips felt through her shirt had been tender but also damp. If she hadn’t brought a sweater with her, she would have been self-conscious the rest of the night. It had been a good feeling. The next time they were alone together, she would have an easier time letting him touch her chest.

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She had two Thanksgivings that year: one with her family, and one at Finn’s the day after. Luke had come up and it felt good to see him for the first time in so long. He sat with her and they talked about the time that they had lived together. He seemed more relaxed now, not as demanding. He actually asked about Kylo and how he was doing. He was excelling. He wrote about how the days were the right sort of intensity. He really didn’t have much time to sit back and reflect a lot of the time.

But he worried about her and missed her and Benji.

She couldn’t wait for Christmas.

Thanksgiving at Finn’s was almost the opposite of her quiet home. His cousins were there, along with his aunt. And they were chatting the entire time, joking at the kid’s table until she finally had to laugh along with them. His grandma was there and she looked happy to meet her; Finn had nothing but good things to say about her.

She wore her new dress, the one that showed a little more cleavage than usual.

Finn couldn’t keep his eyes off of her, even as he was teasing his cousins.

It made her feel gorgeous.

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They’d finished their homework and talked for a couple of hours before Finn asked to kiss her. It was finally December and Kylo would be home in a couple of weeks. His letters were getting more serious, telling her how much he wanted to be home. There were overly aggressive people there that were always competing with him. He liked pushing himself but it made him work on his ability to be both a leader and a team member. He was learning to listen more and deal with all types of personalities. He really was going to come home different but maybe in a better way than she had expected.

And since Thanksgiving, since meeting more of Finn’s family and talking more to his mom, he was back to listening to her again. Maybe Hux had talked to him behind her back. Maybe Leia had phoned his mom and he got a talking to. Or maybe he had realized it himself. She really hoped it was the last one.

Han knocked lightly on her closed door. They weren’t doing anything except talking but it was a good excuse to have the door open.

“Kids? Mrs Hux needs me to look at her furnace next door. I’ll be back in a few minutes.” He looked mainly at her, but did level a look on Finn. “Everything good in here?”

“We’re great, Mr Solo,” Finn answered. “Do you need my help?”

Han seemed to be thinking about it. “I can handle a furnace.”

He left the door open a little and Rey let herself relax a little, even though Finn looked confused about what Han meant. “Why’s he been so grumpy lately?”

She didn’t really know. It might be the cold. It might be the snow. Or it might be something that Kylo had said. “It’s just the winter, I think.”

Kylo was so close to being done. When he came home for Christmas, he’d be returning to his last month of training. And then it would be real. There would still be uncertainties, but he’d have completed another set of trials and would probably be really pleased with himself. He would finally be able to figure out where she would be going to when she went to visit him.

“Yeah, it’s been really crappy,” Finn said. He shifted to put his head on her pillows. “Hey, come here.”

She smiled lightly, resting her head on his chest. As his arm came around her she leaned up to kiss him. It really was getting easier, she thought. She liked him more now, she was sure. He’d listen more; being in his arms felt lighter.

“Yes, I want the same,” Finn said. He glanced over, licking his lips as he gazed at her.

How should she move her hand? What should she do? Glancing up, she asked him with her eyes to show her what he wanted her to do. His hand joined hers again and he instantly shut his eyes as he guided her to feel his erection, hidden by denim. She was turning him on. She just had to touch him and he looked so lost in the light strokes.

“Do you want…the same?” He glanced over, licking his lips as he gazed at her.

Yes. Her body screamed for something like that. Seeing the look his face made her shiver with
excitement. He rolled over onto his side and she pulled her hand away, settling it on his hip.

“Just don’t…just not below my underwear.” She shut her eyes, hoping to turn her anxiety into excitement as Finn’s hand travelled up her leg and under her skirt. Shuddering instantly when his hand found her moist underwear, she bit her lip. He could feel how aroused she was.

But when he started to massage her, his fingers almost dipped beneath the fabric and she pulled away.

“That’s…that’s…” she shook her head. She wasn’t sure why she was shaking. She could touch herself. She was okay with being turned on. But it still didn’t feel right.

“Okay, okay.” It sounded like he huffed when he withdrew his hand. He sat up and she could hear him snort in annoyance. *Don’t do this to me now, Finn.* “It’s fine. It’s okay. I’m just…we talk about this all of the time and sometimes it seems like you actually like me and then you tell me to stop. We should be able to touch each other. I’m…I’m sorry for being frustrated but I jerk off all of the time when I leave here and it’s…I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

He was just being honest, she told herself. They had to be honest with one another if they were going to have a good relationship. They had to talk about these things, like Kylo and Poe used to do.

“I know you want more, Finn. And I like how it feels but…it’s hard for me to lose control,” she finally admitted, dropping her head. It was really at the heart of the problem. The hours spent talking with Ransolm and Ahsoka or Leia and Paige, it all started to make sense. She did trust Finn but she was more worried about the power she had over herself. “You can break up with me if you want.”

She wasn’t going to make him happy if she wasn’t ready. The weight on her chest forced tears to her eyes. Bringing her knees up under her chin, she settled her head into her arms. It shouldn’t hurt that much: not to be able to give her body what it wanted because her brain was in the way.

“Rey, I don’t want to break up. And I think I get it. After what happened to you, it’s not your fault.” His arm slowly came around her. “I’m sorry again. But if I’m…if I act weird tomorrow, it’s because I’m a little frustrated. The guys all talk about fingering girls and I thought it would feel nice for you. But we can…it’s fine.”

It clearly wasn’t fine, she wanted to snap. She wanted him to stop touching her. She just wanted to be alone or, better yet, be with Kylo. She was so tired of him being in Virginia. She was so tired of going to school and worrying whenever Finn talked to another girl or was laughing too hard with his friends. If she didn’t have her support system, she would be on the edge of falling into a black hole of shame.

“Hey, I still like you. And I don’t want to break up,” he whispered, still holding her. “I’m going to call my mom to pick me up. You look like you want to be alone.”

“Yes,” she answered flatly. “I’ll text you when I’m feeling better.”

She heard him get off her bed and then the door shut behind him. Picking up a pillow, she screamed into it.

Maybe she should push herself. It wasn’t going to get better if she just didn’t get over it.
She’d heard footsteps upstairs and finally left the washroom to sprint upstairs. Dad must be home. She could get him to take Finn home and then she could shower and find herself again. Dad would understand. Dad would let her cry. Mom would also let her cry as well but she was worried that she would disappoint her. They were so right; she should have waited. They talked about this all of the time and she had let them down.

Scrambling up the stairs, she wanted another reason for her heart to be beating too quickly. She wasn’t a fragile, fluttering bird. She’d said stop and no and everything else that she was supposed to but it hadn’t been loud enough; her voice had been too quiet, not loud enough when she needed it to be. But she’d still let it go too far. Dad would understand; dad would protect her and make it all go away. Kylo wasn’t there and Kylo could never know.

Finally in the kitchen, her stomach tightened.

Another person sat at the table, scrolling through his phone and drinking coffee in a paper mug. The cup was all she could focus on because she wasn’t sure he was really there.

“Kylo?”

He’d already been looking at her when she’d come up the stairs. His eyes had gotten sharper over the years, but they were still awash with concern when he noticed how she was panting. His shoulders tensed and he set his cup down.

“I thought that you weren’t coming until tonight.” She wanted to cry when she saw him. He was there. He was really there. He wasn’t supposed to be there until that night. Her lip quivered and she pulled down her tank top, straightening it again.

He stood, watching as she fixed her shirt. “I got an earlier flight. Sorry I didn’t call ahead. It all happened really fast and…”

Her lip shook again as his eyes followed her movements. It was like he had come home for her, because he knew that this would happen. Tears started blur her vision and she was in his arms and safe again before she could really think.

“What happened?” he whispered into her hair. “I thought that you weren’t here.”

“Please take Finn home.” She pushed back, wiping at her eyes to keep from crying. She pressed her fingers harder to delay the moistness. “Please take him home and tell him that I never want to see him again.”

Pulling back to his full height, the look from Kylo made her almost regret her words. Almost.

“What happened.”

Shaking her head, Rey pulled away. “Please, Kylo.”

He swallowed and nodded, letting her run upstairs. She thought about going into her room, but went into his instead.

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Kylo had to draw on every lesson from therapy, training, and life to not fall into dark, damaging thoughts. He had to remember every kind word that had ever been said to him. He had to draw on every measure of control that had been pounded into him over the last five months.

He had to do all of those things to keep himself from breaking down the door and strangling a fifteen year old.

It hurt even more that it was in the same room as his first time. It had been a soft, sweet but also awkward afternoon that he cherished deeply. They had been young and stupid but he had been able to take his time and felt ready, safe, and loved. Rey was not feeling that way right then and he could latch onto the pure wrongness of the situation. He hadn’t deserved someone so caring and devoted. If Poe were there, he’d be even angrier, he imagined, latching on to a bright spot in the darkness; he was searching for calmness and found it by thinking about him. There would be two of them, splitting the duties of talking to both of the teenagers. Whenever he was lonely, he wondered how he’d look today. But now he’d almost been gone for as long as they’d been together. He needed to be steady to give Rey the space and time that she needed to tell him exactly what happened. His emotions couldn’t be hell bent on destruction at that point.

Taking a deep breath, he knocked on the familiar basement door.

“Rey?” Finn answered the door, shirtless, and it made Kylo’s eyes get wide. “Oh, it’s you. Where’s Rey?”

“Get dressed.” Kylo’s voice shifted and he felt anger flare again in how the boy tilted his head at him, questioning what he’d just said. “I’m taking you home.”

“What? Why? Come on, where’s Rey? She just said that she needed to go to the washroom.” He wasn’t backing down and it pushed on the dam that was holding back Kylo’s irritation. He had tried hard to like Finn and not hinder Rey in following her heart but maybe he should have been more controlling. Finn narrowed his eyes at him. “And why are you even here? I thought you were at school or whatever.”

He wouldn’t hit him. He wouldn’t shove him. Instead he stepped forward, filling his space. He stared at him, trying to break him with just his eyes and presence. At first, Finn met the look with intense resentment; he wasn’t going to back down easily. Kylo clenched his fists and exhaled, stepping closer. The room was silent and he swore he could hear the boy’s pulse start to race. His breathing was level but the teenager’s seemed to be shaky.

He was afraid of him. He should be.

Finally, Finn flinched, swallowing and nodding, grabbing his shirt to quickly pull it on. His hands weren’t steady but he was faking being tougher than he was. He played team sports. He was just like the boys on the team that had teased and bullied him, taking his things and breaking into his room on road trips; he was also like the other macho morons at the academy, thinking they were better than him because they’d been police officers beforehand. If he were sixteen again, Finn would be leaving that room with a broken nose and a black eye. Instead, he was almost twenty-six and would have to use words to get him out of his house.

He was speaking to Kylo but he didn’t hear it. His eyes were sweeping the room, letting himself be centered by the space. *Ky, you’ve got this. Be there for her. Forget me for a bit, okay?*

“Get upstairs, now.” He wanted to grab the boy by the arm and haul him upstairs and throw him
into the snow. There were so many ways he could hurt him and he couldn’t do any of them.

“Can I at least say goodbye to her?” Finn stomped out of the room and up the stairs. Kylo was a breath behind him and he jerked a step away when they reached the entrance. “Come on, man, you’re being really unfair. She’s fine. I didn’t do anything that she didn’t want. Just because you can’t get a date doesn’t mean you should be cockblocking me like this.”

He really couldn’t stop his hands from moving when he grabbed Finn and shoved him hard against the wall, rattling the pictures. “Don’t ever talk about Rey like that again.”

Bent over the shorter boy, Kylo held him in place for a moment then let him go. Finn didn’t have a smart reply to that and quickly put on his boots and jacket.

Kylo kept his distance as they left the house, the snow crunching beneath their feet. By the time he had Finn in his car, he could finally speak again. He locked the door and turned his head instead of starting the engine. Quietly, he was thankful that Han had already taken his car out of the garage but it was freezing inside. He was waiting for Finn to talk, but at least he had words forming in the back of his head now. Whether or not they made sense would be all about control. Snapping before hadn’t been professional. He had to handle himself better.

“What are you jealous or something? She’s my girlfriend and…” Finn trailed off quickly, looking back at the house and crossing his arms, rubbing them as steam snaked around his face.

“Your girlfriend and…your girlfriend and?” Kylo repeated the words, his glare deepening. He’d forgotten his jacket in his haste to get him out of their home. “Finish your sentence.”

Finn snapped his dark eyes back to his. “What are you her dad or something now? So I almost went too far and she said to stop. So I stopped.”

There it was. He bit back his wrath and clenched his teeth. “She looked upset. Explain that to me.”

He rolled his eyes. He was cocky and didn’t respect him. He feared him and that was almost enough. He didn’t respect Rey either if he was talking like this; what was he telling her that didn’t match what he was saying then? “It wasn’t really sex. She wanted to try some stuff and I though that she liked it until she didn’t. It’s like it always is with her. I still stopped.”

Glaring in silence, Kylo waited for him to say more. But Finn just shifted anxiously in his seat, not cracking. He couldn’t waste more time away from Rey to break him. This was enough.

“Then I’ll find out the truth from Rey.” He started the car.

The rest of the drive was silent, other than the shifting of Finn in his seat. Kylo just let his questions bleed away, knowing that he’d get the answers from Rey. And if he had to, he’d know exactly where to find Finn if he had to do something about it.

He didn’t bother to turn the heat on even though he was freezing.

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Back at the house, he checked her room first and then felt relief wash over him after the initial fear of her not being there. She was safe with him. He was only supposed to be staying the week for
Christmas, but managed to get an earlier flight. A storm was about to blow in and they bumped him. If he had known that she was home, he wouldn’t have been dawdling in the kitchen, dreaming about how they’d spend the time as a family and he’d finally be able to unwind from the academy. Spend time with Rey and his parents. See Benji again.

George had wanted him to go home earlier, finding the flight for him. And again, he was in his debt.

The images and emotions that had run through his head on the drive back were pushing him into tortuous gloom and he had to fight against it for her.

“Rey?” He opened the door and she sat up, her eyes red and swollen. The pain went deeper, he knew, but he couldn’t let her see his fear. “Can you tell me what happened? I’m here for you now. You’re safe and…”

Trailing off, he left his words to nothingness. He moved as lightly as he could, sitting on the bed and trying not to disturb her. He sat on the edge, worried to touch her.

She reached for his hand and he could finally lean towards her, taking her into his arms.

“It was my fault,” she whispered and he bit his lip until he almost tasted blood. “I thought I was ready and said we could try, maybe oral sex. And then when we…when he started I wanted it to stop. It stopped feeling good and I froze. I told him to stop and he wouldn’t. Maybe he didn’t hear me but I was crying and he didn’t stop. I finally had to push him away. But he still touched me and I hated it. I thought I was ready but it just made me feel sick and…”

She gasped, her words fading into tears as she buried her head against his chest. His arms tightened. He had to put himself in her place, how she had felt rather than what he had experienced when he was younger. This was about her pain, not his. He was going to erase it; he had to.

“Are you mad?” she mumbled, looking up at him. “That I didn’t tell you that all of this was going on?”

He looked into her eyes and couldn’t find a thing there that would make him angry. “I knew that you had a boyfriend. You said that you were happy. And he was your friend and that you could trust him. What happened this afternoon?”

Rey just put her head down in his lap, letting him stroke her hair. “We knew that mom and dad wouldn’t be home until later, to pick you up. So we came here and I just wanted to hang out. Things were getting too…close. I tried to talk to him about it, like you said and…”

Another sob broke her and he kept touching her, rubbing the back of her neck and her back until she found herself again.

“He was going to break up with me if I didn’t let him try more things. Maybe I should have just broken up with him. It would feel right some times, but then other times it felt…wrong. I thought I was ready because I knew you’d be home tonight. I’d be able to talk to you about it, if it hurt or if it was wrong and I…” she shook her head but then her voice firmed. “He had his hands under my shirt and undid my bra and I knew that I wanted it to stop. But I couldn’t say anything. My mouth just didn’t work. I hate myself for not saying something. I was just gasping and lying there. And he kept kissing me and didn’t ask if I was all right and I…he put his hands down my pants. He started…I couldn’t breathe.

“It felt exactly like it did when we were there, like when Snoke bit me. Finn took off my leggings
and he…he didn’t see that I was crying when he licked me, it was so dark. He put his mouth…I can’t believe he did that and that girls at school think that this feels good. He was just jabbing at me and I broke. All I saw was Snoke. All I felt were hands inside of me. Then I…he started to take off his pants and I finally shoved him away and said it was enough. He looked…he didn’t look surprised or anything. I just had to get out of there so I hid in the bathroom. I wasn’t strong enough until then. I let it happen, Kylo. I’m so stupid.” Her voice fell again, still lost in her reaction to something that could and should have been innocent and freeing. But instead she was rocked back into the past.

He saved his reaction for his free hand, driving his short nails into his palm. “I need to talk to him. You trusted him and…”

“No, Kylo.” She sat up, shaking her head. “I can do it. I just need to breathe and not feel so disgusting. My body isn’t mine anymore. It just brought everything back. It wasn’t like kissing him, that was nice and he was kind, but this was…” She shuddered and he exhaled.

“I’ve been there,” he whispered. “I’m sorry it was different for me.”

“You shouldn’t be sorry. It’s not your fault.” She turned in his lap, to run her hand down his leg. The silence stretched on and he tried to let go of his anger and sorrow in an exhale but it still crept up his spine. “You were right. I should have waited longer. I wasn’t ready to have a boyfriend. But why…” She paused and frowned, deeply, hatefully. “Why has it always been about you? Why have I always been worried about how you are doing, who you are dating, where you are and how you’re feeling? You just keep leaving me behind, telling me one thing and then doing another. Why are you still my world when I’m not yours?”

“You’re still my world even if I don’t always show it.” He swallowed the harsh words and could only drop his head. “I never meant for you to feel that way, or leave you behind. I’ve…I’m selfish. I’ve been cruel to everyone, especially you. And that’s not your fault. I taught you how to be this way so I…” Shutting his eyes, he fought against a wave of pain in order to force himself to keep talking. “I know who I am and what I’ve done. You shouldn’t have had to suffer so much because of me. I am the reason he brought you into that house. I am the reason that he killed your parents. And I’ve been every problem that you’ve ever had since then. The times when you were away from me…everyone was right. You could never be free to be yourself as long as I kept drifting in and out of your life.”

The pause that stretched between them extended backwards and forwards in time, making him see who they were and who they would be in one blink of his eyes. He’d tainted the past but could help the future. If she wanted him to. If she didn’t, he’d fall back into himself and be done with the frustrations that life had given him. He couldn’t let George down and give up; disappearing to Virginia and out of her life was what would have to do. The only constant in his life had been her and all he’d done was use it up with greedy, self-interested hands.

Still, she started speaking.

“I…I’ve always known that. But I never blamed you for what Snoke did to all of us. You tried to protect us, take care of us. He did those things to you too. Your goals and dreams always included me but I started to feel so much of the background. I took on your pain still, like I did when we were there. I don’t know how to stop doing that.” She shook her head and shifted in his lap. “But now that I’m hurting, now that I feel so stupid and worthless and…everything, please help me now. Please take my pain away. Take it away like you used to do.”

“Shh.” He lifted her up, made her meet his eyes. “Tell me how to do it right, Rey. Don’t let me treat you that way, the wrong way ever again. I’m sorry. I’m sorry that this happened to you.”
He just wanted to keep apologizing and she silenced him with a tearful look. “I just want to be clean, Kylo. I thought I’d forgotten how disgusting it made me feel, having someone else touch me. It was exciting before but just now, it felt wrong. Why won’t it go away? My entire body just itches. I can’t stop feeling it over and over again. I don’t hate him. I hate myself. Mom always said to stay stop. And I waited too long.”

Kylo wanted to take away her thoughts, kill her pain, just as she had confessed to him. His absent cruelty had shaped her and he couldn’t take it back, but the way forward had to be more balanced. Letting go of the past was hard but they had to do it together.

There was really only one way.

Brushing her hair behind her ear, he tenderly picked her up, cradling her in his arms. Rey was so light and small, still able to fit perfectly against his chest. Clinging to him, the tenseness in her body remained. She was in pink leggings and a tank top, soft and innocent hiding the hurt inside. She rested her head against his chest, like she had when she was a child. But she wasn’t anymore. She was a young woman, suffering because of broken trust and old wounds being uncovered. He’d been there; he’d felt this. Just because the outcome was different didn’t make the steps feel any less distinct.

He couldn’t speak.

He was rescuing her again, taking her down the hall.

He gently set her down on the washroom counter, trying to get her to look anything but miserable. She shouldn’t be. None of this was her fault.

He let his hand trail off her knee as he moved to turn on the shower.

After hugging her again, he quietly turned to go, but she wouldn’t let him.

The hand on his arm was demanding so much with its touch.

“Please, Kylo,” she whispered, urgently gripping to him like she had when she was small, begging him not to go downstairs with Snoke and never return. “Stay with me.”

He saw himself there again, silently telling her goodbye. He saw the way her eyes seemed to know how it would end if he did what he was told. It was either her or him and he chose himself for her. But then, the love he’d felt for those four years made him change his plans and he fought for both of them.

From there, it had meant moving forward. It was just a shame that he kept resetting their progress far too often.

Exhaling, he didn’t react. He could only hold her hand, to try to understand her thoughts and feelings. Not just try. He had to do it. Whatever she asked him, he’d have to find a way to do it for her. But he couldn’t say anything just then. These had to be her words, her choices.

She dropped her head and a tear slipped down her cheek. He wished he could read her thoughts but had a good idea about what was rolling through her head. He’d felt the same. He’d lived through this. And the lessons that he learnt were far kinder. Someone had held his hand as he’d cried over the same feelings of warring against past violations and bodily urges.

“Kylo, what if no one can ever touch me? I thought I liked him and now I don’t know. My mind is getting messed up again and I can’t breathe. Why isn’t my body mine anymore?” She looked long
at his hand and then met his eyes.

“It’s still yours, Rey. It will always be yours,” he whispered, hugging her lightly. She felt limp in his arms, whimpering against him. “I felt the same. I pushed myself too fast and sex was the most frightening thing in the world. But I trusted the person I was with. He taught me how good it could feel. I learnt how to trust myself. The choices I made after...you know how I feel about my mistakes. They’re part of the reasons why I have to be alone right now, but I have learnt from them. The lessons hurt but don’t let them take all of the good out of your life. You’re safe. You’re with me. It will take time...but it will get better.”

Her chin fell and she stared off into nothing.

When she looked up again, Kylo felt his heart break fully.

“Please show me that I’ll feel safe one day when I love someone too.”

This wasn’t his place. She was stronger than this and shouldn’t be turning to him in this desperate place of pain and encroached innocence. But someone had once guided him through this too. He needed Rey to know that she was greater than all of this.

His own thoughts had to be pushed aside. He always felt too much and thought too deeply about sex and what it meant until it became a constant interference. He’d been allowed to grow and work through so much but it was all still there under the surface, rising up in moments of ignorant bodily urges. Being intimate and vulnerable with someone had transformed over time. Learning how to trust his mind over his body was still a process that he would master completely one day. And he could show her how.

Still, he stepped back and undid his shirt, desperately trying to keep his fingers from shaking as he twisted the buttons. “I’ll have my eyes closed the entire time.”

She just nodded.

The last thing he saw was her reaching to pull off her tank top.

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Kylo’s eyes slid shut as Rey shifted off of the counter. Her body still had the lingering feeling of unwanted touches peppered across it; inside, she could still feel the hints of fingers trying to give her pleasure but failing. They echoed the churned up emotions from over a decade ago but they wouldn’t go way. They had come warring back. All of that therapy, all of that talk, had it all been undone? Her body felt broken and she knew she shouldn’t let those feelings rule her but she couldn’t organize her thoughts. The boxes wouldn’t stay in place and kept spilling on the floor. She could hear the shower running and wanted to focus on that. Water meant being clean. It would all be washed away.

Kylo had bathed her as a child. But now it was all different. He didn’t know this body, the new one that had grown since childhood. It was a body that she didn’t even know herself right then and she wanted to feel at home again. Part of her was four years old, being molested and tortured; the other part was a confused teenager. The foreign discomfort settled heavily around her; she wanted to shed her skin and be herself again.
She moved around him, brushing her hand against his chest in the closed space. She tossed her tank top on the floor and undid her bra. It was only hanging by one hook after she had hurried to put it on in the washroom. She let it fall to the floor, then let her panties and pants join them. She wanted to burn them when this was over but would probably reconsider it. She liked that outfit.

Silently, she reached for Kylo’s hands. He shrugged out of his shirt and pants, but kept his undershirt and boxers. She wanted to ask why, but let it be his choice. He was her protector still. He was there to help her. She’d all but given up her feelings for Kylo as he kept drifting through his romantic relationships and mistakes in love. But if he could truly give her balance, be her strength through this, he would show something different inside of him to her.

She just wanted those firm hands to take away the hurt.

Under the running water, she exhaled. Naked and free, it was like nothing had happened. It wasn’t as frightening anymore.

But when she shut her eyes, the sensations crashed against her again and she whimpered. When she turned, Kylo was standing behind her. His eyes were still closed, but he was shifting his weight. The water slowly soaked his dark clothing, clinging to his skin.

“Tell me,” he said. She could hear him fighting to keep his voice level. “Tell me what to do to make you feel like yourself again.”

She grabbed her washcloth and put it in his hand. Since Kylo had been gone again, there were only three washcloths in their shower. Hers was a light yellow. Mom and dad had dark blue. Kylo’s used to be red. She missed seeing it everyday.

Shaking her head, she turned. She’d rather have a bath. A bath would feel so much better. Baths helped when she couldn’t think. To be surrounded by warmth would take away the itch, right? Switching the taps, she plopped in the plug and heard Kylo sigh before sitting down as the water started to fill the tub.

“Come here.”

She rested on his chest, letting the water start to flood in around them. The shower curtain was still there and he grunted before pushing it over the edge of the tub.

The water kept thudding into the basin and she closed her eyes and rolled onto her back. Kylo’s hands felt frozen until she reached for them, settling herself against him.

“Here,” she said, guiding his hands to her breasts. “He kissed me here. Make it go away.”

Slowly, he started gentle circles against her skin. His hands were always kind even though he didn’t think that way. She sighed as he kissed her cheek, the cloth slowly taking away the hurt that she’d felt earlier, replacing it with gentle touches.

She’d never ask anyone else on the planet to do this for her.

It was only for Kylo.

“Your body is perfect,” he said, only touching and not looking.

“I still think sometimes that I’m too fat.” She wanted to turn in his arms and kiss him, to make it grow deeper until the world exploded, but instead she sat up and turned off the faucet. Mom would
be mad if they flooded the bathroom.

“You’re not. And even if you were, it doesn’t matter.” Kylo gently hugged her again, but avoided her breasts. “He should have listened to you when you said stop.”

Sighing, Rey put her head down against Kylo’s chest again. They hardly fit in the tub. Whatever he was eating there was going to the right places. He was broad and flat, an expanse that she still couldn’t believe belonged to him. He was still the tall and skinny boy who ran out of a torture chamber in California. His scars were from someone else, not himself.

It was warm in the tub but she still felt scared. Maybe Kylo wouldn’t feel her tears as she started to cry.

“Shh, Rey. You’re safe. You’re with me.” His voice was low and she reached for his hands again.

“Here,” she said, guiding him again towards her stomach. “He kissed me here.”

The cloth scrubbed away the increasingly distant memory. Finn only did what he thought that she wanted. Kylo’s hands dipped under the water, cleansing her. He was so careful. He wanted to take care of her. That’s all that he’d tried for the last fifteen years: her love, her protector. If she hadn’t been so focused on taking away his pain, she’d have been able to handle this. But he was here now. If she could crawl into his body and live there, she would.

She heard him suck in a breath as she guided his hands lower. She wanted to be embarrassed; did she have too much hair? Would he care about that? No, he wouldn’t.

The cloth gently took away the clumsy touches from before and she shuddered, goose bumps spreading across her skin. Kylo was there. She could forget about the thrusting digits from before.

“It’s all fine, Rey. Angel, I’m here.”

And he was.

That’s all that mattered in the moment. Shifting in his arms, his hands moved to hold her. She could deal with the rest later. She was clean now. She was warm and safe.

He was there.

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He was cramped and uncomfortable on so many levels that he had to measure his breathing to keep from screaming.

Rey was finally asleep. He could feel the difference in her heartbeat.

He could finally move out of the cooling water.

Shifting so he was sitting up, he tried not to wake her but it was impossible. He whispered to her that it was okay, that she could go back to sleep soon. He finally had to open his eyes to get her out of the bathtub without dropping her. But he wouldn’t ruin her trust by looking at her.

And like he had when she took baths when she was four, he wrapped a thick, fluffy towel around
her shoulders as she swayed, pink and wrinkled and half-asleep.

But she wasn’t that child anymore. He’d felt the softness of her breasts, the tautness of her stomach, and the warmth between her legs. He forced the memories away instantly, hiding them beyond a mental wall; it wasn’t for him to dwell on at that moment.

Carrying her to his room, he gently put her down. The bed would be soaked if he didn’t change but she seemed to fall asleep instantly again. He only lurked for a moment, pulling the quilt on top of her until she sighed and rolled over to snuggle against where he should be.

He managed to grab new underclothes before he fled. When he closed the washroom door, he silently screamed to himself. The temptation to bite his arm rose. The urge to cut himself, to feel the pain he had tried to take away from her, rolled with it. None of those things were a solution, though.

He could drive to that boy’s house. He should do it. If he hadn’t sat through so many months of training about control, measured procedures, and assessing situations, he would have done it.

Instead he just hung up his drenched clothes and dried himself off looking long and hard at his hands.

It had all passed in a haze. He had put himself outside of his body and took care of her like he used to do.

Someone had hurt her again and he hadn’t been there to stop it.

He changed and headed downstairs for his phone and forgotten, cold coffee. The bitter taste stained his lips.

He needed more help. And it was getting so much easier to ask for it.

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“Rey?”

Mom was there, stroking her hair. She was still wrapped in the warmth of the blanket on Kylo’s bed. How did she get there? It felt like a distant nightmare, mixed in with the lightness of a dream.

“Hi,” Rey said, sitting up. Someone had dressed her. It must have been Kylo. Her stomach hurt thinking about how she would apologize to him for all of this. But she had a feeling that she wouldn’t have to. “Have you…”

“We talked to Ben.” Mom moved so she could be in her arms. She didn’t have underwear on: just pyjamas. But at the same time she understood Kylo’s situation. She’d thrown so much at him that afternoon. He must be hurting so much. Pushing the thought away, she shook her head. It was his duty to hurt for her, like she always burnt for him. “How are you feeling? Sweetheart, we trusted him too. And you told him no. We’re going to make sure this ends up right, Rey. Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m…better.” She surprised herself by meaning what she said. “Kylo gave me a bath.”
“He said he did.” Mom was running her hands through her drying hair. “Did that feel okay?”

She nodded. “I’d like to sleep a little more.”

“We’ll talk about it later then. Do you want me to stay?”

“Yes.”

Cuddled up in Leia’s arms, Rey let herself drift back to sleep. She hoped she would wake up as a different person. It was impossible, but she could still hope.

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Han pulled the sheets off of the bed and swore again. “Thank fucking Christ you were home.”

It was all they could do to take the pain away for Rey. Change the bed, put things back how they should be.

Swallowing, Kylo pulled off another pillowcase. “I wanted it to be a surprise. I got an earlier flight.”

“The universe works in fucked up ways.” Han started grumbling, gathering up the sheets before throwing them on the floor again. He sat heavily on the bed and snorted. “That little shit had dinner with us last night. He knows that you’re getting a gun soon, right? If he doesn’t, you should make sure he knows.”

Sitting beside his father on the bare mattress, he folded his arms. “I will.”

Rubbing his face, Han sighed again. “He should have listened to her. I get that he’s a horny teenage boy. I was one once. Hell, we had you two sneaking off all of the time. But fuck, that boy needs to understand that she’s special.”

His cheeks burnt and the guilt returned from after the wedding. “She needs to talk to him. I don’t want to push her. I need to leave before New Year’s…it’s like I’m abandoning her again. I’m…I could quit. I could quit it all and just be here for her.”

“Don’t think like that. We can handle it. Leia will take her when she’s ready. If that boy doesn’t fear you or me, he will fear your mother.” Shaking his head, Han finally stood. “Are you good at making the bed?”

“We can do it together.” He reached for the new sheets and they silently remade the bed, erasing what had happened so Rey wouldn’t have to look at it.

It was still quiet upstairs. They sat in the living room and Han poured them each a whiskey. It was a smoky burn and he sighed at the feeling. The cat was upstairs, curling up next to Rey, giving her his small kisses.

“Son, I know we’ve talked about this before but,” Han said then paused to swallow half of his glass, “for you, how hard was it? Really?”

He knew that the question was coming. His father was searching for a point of reference, trying to find the horizon to guide the ship. These were words and thoughts that he kept for his journal but
they needed to be out now, more than they had ever been before. “When we were keeping it a secret, when I didn’t understand what was really going on, I just wanted to feel normal. I couldn’t…I had a hard time masturbating. But with him, I could be…I didn’t hate my body’s reactions after a while. It still took so many years to have sex without panicking. But I stopped feeling ashamed and broken after a while. Once I found myself in the right person, I could breathe and feel good on most days. And then he died. And I fell into a different world with new reasons to hate myself.

“I’ve had…I can’t call them relationships, but I’ve had two flings. I hate that word but that’s what they were. You know about Liza. I used her and she used me. I liked the physical side, but ended up hating myself because it was like I was betraying him and Rey. It wasn’t healthy. Then, this year, I ended up sleeping with George’s son. It was…it really broke my heart. I felt something that he didn’t. We’re almost friends now so we’ve worked it out, but it was still just me thinking with my dick in the beginning. But I think because of all of this, I can help Rey. Some good should come out of me not coping with trauma until it was too late.” He finally stopped talking and dared to look at his father.

Han finished his drink and moved to get the bottle. He refilled both of their glasses and sat down again. “You’re allowed to keep things private, Ben, but we hope that you aren’t feeling like you have to hide things from us. Rey’s been really open with us about this. We thought that we found another good kid in Finn. He’s known since she was four. We thought that giving her space would…I don’t know. Let her grow and learn about herself like you did. We fucked up too.”

His head snapped up when he heard a door open upstairs. Leia’s hair was down when she joined them in the living room, reaching for Han’s glass. “She needs to eat and I can’t for the life of me think of what to make for her. I want to go to that boy’s house and throttle him.”

Smirking, Kylo tried to latch onto any emotion but grief. “Dad already said I should remind him that in a few weeks, I’ll have a gun.”

“Don’t remind me.” Leia raised her eyebrows and he could tell that she wanted to smile. “Ben, you did a very good job taking care of her. Thank you so much. I’m sorry that we weren’t here.”

He shook his head. “It’s fine, mom. Really.”

Pursing her lips, Leia met his eyes. “So what’s harder? This or the FBI?”

His father snorted a laugh and he finally smiled. “I’d rather run an obstacle course in a snowstorm with a hundred-pound weight on my back. I would if it would take this away from her.”

They solemnly stared off into nothing before deciding that they should make pancakes. If it made it feel like tomorrow for Rey, it’s what they should do.

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If it hadn’t been Benji’s first Christmas, and Kylo hadn’t been there, she would have spent that entire week in bed. The pain had faded but mom wouldn’t let her say that it was an overreaction. She had been clear to Finn what she wanted and what she could handle. She could take back whether or not she wanted to go further.

Going down on her was the last thing she wanted, she realized too late. But she had been too afraid
to touch him, to put her hand down his pants. And she really didn’t want to think about having him inside of her so soon. She wished she knew what he had been thinking but didn’t want to find out right away.

She ignored his texts the entire time. She wouldn’t pick up the phone.

She heard him come by on Christmas Eve, wondering why the plans had changed, and she heard Kylo and Han speaking to him before she put on her headphones to ignore them.

But she couldn’t let him ruin her Christmas with Benji.

She was so happy to hold him when the family arrived an hour later.

Holding and cuddling him, helping him open presents, all of it felt so normal.

And when she printed out the pictures later, she would remember how content she had felt in those moments, rather than the odd heaviness that still resided in the back of her mind.

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Kylo left. He didn’t want to; he said he would stay if she wanted him to.

But Rey couldn’t do that to him. This was something that she had to handle on her own.

Mom was waiting in the car as she and Finn walked around the park. He’d met her there, wearing a heavy look of bewilderment. The snow sparkled in the late afternoon sun but it didn’t look as magical as it used to. It hurt to look at him but she made herself. He still looked like him. He still talked like he should, like things were normal: awkwardly charming, intensely focused on what he was talking about. But she couldn’t get him out of her head. She felt Snoke’s hands on her when she thought about that moment in the basement.

“I think…I think it went too fast,” she said, interrupting him. “I wasn’t ready for that, Finn.”

“But I thought…” Finn looked confused, his face falling. “You said it was okay and then I stopped when you told me. Did I hurt you, Rey? I really didn’t mean to. Is this why you’ve been avoiding me? I still haven’t given you your Christmas gift.”

She bit her lip and nodded. “I really wasn’t ready Finn.”

He licked his lips and then dropped his head. “Oh God. I hurt you. Rey, I…I hurt you.”

Her hand was almost up in an instant as tears formed in his eyes, but she stopped herself. “I don’t think I can date you anymore. I still…I want to be your friend again one day but right now, I need to think about myself for a while.”

“Rey, I’m so sorry.” He wiped at his nose, looking at her with pain on his face. “I thought that you were ready, that I could help you figure it out. I don’t like that you think about that monster all of the time. You shouldn’t have to. I still like you.”

Shaking her head, she had to look away again. “I felt ready at first and then….then I couldn’t move. I said stop but maybe you didn’t hear me.”
His head dropped to stare at his boots. “Maybe I was bad at listening.”

“I’m sorry, Finn,” she found her voice. “Maybe…save the present and I’ll save the one that I bought you? We can…when we’re friends again, we can give them to each other.”

He was quiet for a moment, kicking at the snow. “How can you be kind to me right now? I’m a…”

“No, you’re not,” she cut him off, not wanting to hear that word. “But next time you like someone, maybe…maybe listen better.”

Forgiving him was going to take a long time, and even though she’d had nightmares and it hurt to look in the mirror, she couldn’t let him walk away feeling so terrible. He deserved his guilt, he deserved his shame but he shouldn’t hate himself. She wasn’t sure where the thought came from but it was still there.

Driving home with Leia, she took a long breath.

“I’m proud of you, sweetheart,” she said. “It will get better.”

Watching the houses get familiar, as they got closer to their neighbourhood, she nodded. “I know it will.”

She didn’t fully believe it at that moment, but soon it would be true enough soon. It was a new year, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: References to past rape and self-harm, along with references to masturbation, PTSD and dubious consent between two teenagers. This is a dark fic at the end of the day.

You don't have to hate me for writing this. I already hate myself.

The next chapter is a time jump. I could have split this into two but whatever, here are 15k words of the most uncomfortable thing you might ever read because I cringed to myself the entire time. Someone take these characters away from me, I'm not playing nice anymore.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

Rey deals with Kylo's new partner, his friend in Virginia, and then faces him getting injured at work before she graduates high school.

Read chapter notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Until she saw Kylo again, it was like everyone’s lives kept going and she was frozen. It had been so long since she felt that way that it made getting through January a harsh lesson that she could still fall back into habits that weren’t healthy. They weren’t bad; they just stood in the way of healing.

She didn’t want to eat. Even her favourite foods made her stomach hurt. Every breath she took felt like betrayal; her body was hungry but she couldn’t feed it.

She missed the first week of school. She wanted to quit dance. Everything needed to stop for a while.

Rose and Kaydel still brought her homework. They’d sit and drink tea in her room and she’d stare at her wall, trying to remember the reasons why each picture was important again. It was Rose who helped her put the pictures of Finn away. Inside, she wanted to throw them away. But she missed him at times; the way he would look at her or how he would hold her hand when he thought that she was afraid. But at the same time, those thoughts brought back the past and its hissing, evil mouth. Kaydel thought she should toss them too; how could he not understand what was going on in her head? Her friends were protective. They were who she needed. It hurt when she wanted to push them away.

She had a long conversation with Ransolm on the phone. Could she come back to Michigan just to finish the school year? She had another long talk with Han and Leia: could she finish high school in Virginia? That’s where Kylo would end up. She knew it.

It made her angry not to hear solid answers from both sides. She could do so much good back in Michigan. Everyone there understood what it was like to feel like getting better wouldn’t move forward fast enough. Ransolm reminded her that she was strong enough to help others there in her town, to find herself in the centre of talk with others at her school who might not have someone to talk to. It hurt that he was right.

And Han and Leia said that they’d talk to Kylo. He’d all but promised her that she could live with him; this time he meant it too. But that would mean registering in a new state, making new friends, and going to a new school. Well, maybe she wanted to be a nobody for once. Maybe she wanted to go to a school that wasn’t run by his best friend.
It was only when she was looking after Benji that made her think about what leaving would mean. He’d only be able to know Kylo through her for a while. And what if whoever broke into the house came back? What if he was looking to take a baby away from his parents again?

And Kylo was texting more than he had before. It was always late and night, but the messages held the sweet kindness that he had shown her that day. He never wanted her to feel that way ever and would do anything to keep it from happening again. Just being able to talk to him again in some form gave her some strength. It had to be enough for now.

So she went to school. She went to dance practice. She watched Benji while Paige took a nap on weekends. The snow was still falling. Finn would always awkwardly look at her in the halls until Rose took her hand to guide her away, keeping the tears from coming. Everyone knew that they were broken up. Some of the nastier rumours were hard to deal with. But the nightmares were always about Snoke; the ache in her stomach came from that. Finn’s terrible decision—a really fucking stupid mistake, Han had said—had made it hard to sleep at night and even harder to walk around school and not feel like the world was always going to fall down around her.

It was probably the longest January in existence.

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She answered the backdoor to George’s house with Benji in her arms. “Hello?”

It was the same tawny-haired, bearded man that she’d been introduced to earlier that day at the ceremony. There had already been too many names that day; his was lost in the flood of agent this and special agent that, men who made her feel small and alien. Still, this man grinned at her and her confusion. “Hello there. Sorry I’m late. Someone stuck me with a lot of paperwork so he could be a good host.”

She smirked, still blocking the doorway. The way he smiled made her want to break some of her earlier awkwardness into smaller pieces. She didn’t say anything but there was an eventual glint in the man’s green-blue eyes. “Are you going to ask to see my badge?”

She grinned. “He likes looking at shiny things.”

The man, Agent Kenobi, took out his badge. Benji instantly grabbed for it, just like all of the badges he’d seen that day. “Sorry it’s not as shiny as Kylo’s. Hello again, Benji. He was really quiet at the ceremony. You’re a great babysitter.”

Nodding, Rey finally let him into the back entrance. She could hear the voices from inside the house again once the chill was shut out. “He was still tired from the flight yesterday. He cried the entire time.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Kenobi slipped off his coat and boots. He was fixing his suit coat when she heard footsteps approach them, ones that always made her heart beat quicker. “Hello, Kylo. Are you drunk yet?”

Kylo had a flash of embarrassment cross his face before he leaned against the corner to the kitchen. He sipped at his drink, giving her a small smile before looking back to Kenobi. “I think it was a direct order from our unit chief.”
Their greeting was a quick embrace and she caught the look of contentment on Kylo’s face for a moment. Following them inside to the others, Rey grinned at Benji again. His eyes were always locked on Kylo whenever he came into the room. Hers were as well.

She was able to breathe for the first time in over a month when she saw him yesterday at the hotel. She had hoped that they would be able to stay at George’s but Leia and Han didn’t want to impose on someone who had always been overly generous to them. They didn’t even ask. It bothered Rey at first until she saw how he acted at the ceremony. He was still warm but there was a straightness to his shoulders when he handed Kylo his badge and welcomed him to the Bureau. Hux leaned over to whisper to her that he really was still scary. It sent her back to another ceremony and another person who was always uncomfortable around the tall man.

But this was Kylo’s world now and she wanted to dive into it. It was hard to accept that she would have to wade in slowly.

She took her seat next to Kylo and he reached over to have his godson in his arms again. She slid closer and he met her eyes again. It was hard to feel sad when he was so happy in that moment. She didn’t understand exactly what all of the speeches were about that day. There were only so many stern men in dark suits that she could listen to in an afternoon. And Kylo seemed to like that tension. He was finished. Ten years ago, when he dove into this idea to distract himself from not feeling understood in the world, she’d been too little to comprehend what it would all mean.

Now it meant being a part of something greater. It reminded her again of what Ransolm had said; she could find her own path to helping people in her own way. Maybe she should talk to Hux about starting a group or something. She was always in the councillor’s office so she might as well have a better reason to be there.

Looking at Kylo again, she sighed. He was balancing Benji on his knee, taking a drink and talking to Kenobi across the table all at the same time. It really wasn’t a big group and it made her feel safer that it was just her family, Hux and Paige, and the two agents. There would be no surprises.

If she could figure her own life out, it would mean everything would settle into place like it should.

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She escaped to the porch after Hux and Paige left. Benji had fallen asleep long ago and Hux was drunker than she’d ever seen him. He was talking more with his hands, swinging them wildly as he explained something he was clearly wrong about. Kylo had a grin on his face the entire time and seemed to refill Hux’s glass as soon as it was empty. Until Paige finally made him leave, Hux seemed to think that a high school principal could keep pace with two FBI agents.

Wait, three.

Pulling her coat around her, she sighed, dropping her face into her scarf. It really wasn’t that cold but the night air made her seek the comfort of the fabric; it used to be Kylo’s and he’d left it behind. She’d started wearing his old t-shirts, digging through the remnants of the clothes in his closet. She’d be back to wearing dresses when the weather was warmer but the snow and cold gave her an excuse to wear his large hoodies to class. No one said anything about her suddenly showing up in a large, black sweater, but Hux had stopped to look at her across the hall one day before nodding and then moving on.
Now he was heading back to the hotel, probably already passed out.

Han and Leia would like to leave soon too. She’d have to go with them. But she’d get to see Kylo the next day and more of her questions would be answered. Where was he going to live? What would his office look like? When was he going to have time off? Could she visit him on spring break?

“Ah, there you are.” Agent Kenobi opened the patio door, stepping out into the cold. “Need some time to yourself?”

She shrugged. “I don’t like seeing them all drinking.”

Leia had quietly moved Han’s glass several times as the evening was winding down. She winced, thinking about Paige taking care of a sleeping baby and a drunk husband. She should have left with them, but that would have meant less time with Kylo. They’d sat on the couch together and his arm was around her most of the time until he needed to explain something or bait his friend into drinking more than he should, his arm motions getting more exaggerated with every glass.

“It is really strange that we celebrate something by doing our best to forget it.” He stood next to her, looking at the snowy trees of George’s backyard. “I remember standing here, what, more than ten years ago and thinking the same thing.”

She nodded. At least Kylo hadn’t started smoking again. “Agent Kenobi, is Kylo really going to be your partner?”

It had come up over the course of the night. And it made her wonder about who this new person was and if she could trust him or not. “You can call me Owen, Rey. And yes. He’s fresh out of the academy. He needs to be with someone with seniority who isn’t George. He’s already pulled so many strings to get him into our unit that he’s running out of goodwill.”

Owen. Okay, she could try that. “I think he’s doing it to protect him.”

He chuckled lightly but nodded. “Of course that’s what he’s doing. He did the same thing for me. I came into all of this impatient and stubborn, needing to follow every rule and not being afraid to tell someone when he wasn’t following procedure. We argued several times in the beginning about what he was doing when he tried to bend the rules. Anyone else would have put me on permanent desk duty. But he sees potential and won’t quit until we reach it.”

The more she learned about George, the more real he became. Still, she bit her lip. “Will you help protect Kylo for me too?”

Slowly, the agent tilted his head and put his hand on her shoulder. “I promise I will do that, Rey. It really isn’t like it is on television, but I will do my best to keep him safe. Even if it is from himself.”

Glancing up, Rey frowned. “How much do you know about him? About us?”

Owen had an honest face. When he wasn’t hiding behind a firm look, she saw someone who could understand her without judgment. Or at least she hoped she did. “I never worked on your case, if that’s what you’re asking. I was new, sure, but I only reviewed the files with George occasionally over the years, mostly to see what we might have missed. And when we had to investigate his background, it was very unavoidable. We aren’t doing this for publicity. He’s someone who proved himself on his own merit.”

She nodded, feeling tiny hope in her chest that she would be able to escape her past too.
“Why don’t you tell me how you see him?” he asked. “Tell me what I should know about my partner.”

Meeting his eyes, she thought about the question. “He doesn’t like people calling him Ben but he can do it if he has too. Han and Leia only call him Kylo when they want him to listen. And when Hux gets mad he does the same thing with Ben.”

Owen nodded. “I noticed that at the academy. He spent the first month without telling anyone how he really liked to be addressed. Everyone thought he was antisocial and wouldn’t make it through the training. When he finally told his instructors, he was much more relaxed. We can’t really get around the problem when we’re out in the world, dealing with the public or with other law enforcement, but it’s the name he’s had for almost twenty years. If that’s who he feels he is, then he should use it. It’s also easier for me because my middle name is Ben. What about your name?”

“My name?”

He quirked his head, waiting for her to think again. It was a genuine look.

She somehow got her thoughts together. “I know it’s not one I got from him. Or, maybe that’s what he told my parents to name me. There’s no one really left for me to ask. I was just Rey when we were there. Now I’ve been Rey Solo for so long that I never really think about my real last name. Unless I’m sad.”

“From what I know, there’s a lot to be sad about.”

They stood in silence until his hand warmed her lower back. It was a slow touch and he appeared to move slowly with purpose, to give her time to move away if she wanted. Or maybe his hand was just cold.

“Come inside. There’s something I’d like to show you.”

They hung up their coats after stomping off the bit of snow that clung to the bottom of their shoes. It wasn’t exactly quiet in the house; there were distant voices but it wasn’t as loud as before.

Glancing around the living room as she followed Owen, she spotted George showing Han and Leia something on his wall. He had so many pieces of art and she wondered if he’d really visited all of those places. Maybe when Kylo was able to take vacations, they could go somewhere else in the world. She had really never left the country; the drive through Canada really didn’t count.

But Kylo was on his phone and she stopped on the stairs to lock eyes with him.

*Making sure Paige got back okay.*

*Okay.*

She turned away to hear him ask to say goodnight to Benji again and she started to lose some of her earlier sadness.

Owen led her down the hall to George’s office. He flicked on the lights and moved to sit behind the desk. His glass was sitting there and it made Rey frown.

“Oh, I was hiding up here until I came to find you.” He smirked. “We all have reasons to want to be alone.”

Nodding, Rey looked at the books that lined the walls. Many of them looked thick and heavy, like
the ones that Kylo had brought home from college but worse. A grey filing cabinet had pictures on
top of it and she picked one up, to have a better look at George’s family: the art downstairs was
personality, his office was personal. A dark-haired, frowning teenager sat on a concrete barrier
with two blond toddlers at his side; the flourish of trees behind them and how they were dressed
told her that it was a family trip somewhere warm. And the teenager really didn’t want to be there.

“That’s another thing to know about him,” she said, putting the picture back. “He likes to be alone
when he needs to think, but sometimes he likes to be alone with someone else there. Does that
make sense?”

Owen sipped at his glass but still shook his head in agreement. “It does. I already get the feeling
that he needs people but doesn’t really like needing them. Do you feel the same way?”

She hadn’t really thought about that before Finn’s mistake. “I’ve always needed him but I’ve
always had friends and Han and Leia too. I used to have Leia’s parents but they passed away. I
really miss grandma and going to her house. She really loved me. I’m still mad at Leia’s brother
but it’s getting better. I used…I used to have a boyfriend but we broke up. I sometimes have
problems asking for help but I’m really not like Kylo. I can talk about my problems most of the
time.”

Sitting down in the armchair in the corner, she let her head drop for a second before looking back
at him.

“I don’t want him to move away again.” She paused to purse her lips. “The last time was okay in
the beginning but then I got so angry and upset that he was only doing it to hurt me. It took me a
while to understand that he wasn’t doing it to push me away. If he had just stayed at home, alone,
then he wouldn’t have been able to have a life. It would have been like we’d always be stuck at that
house with him.”

“I understand,” Owen said, tilting his head. “What do you want to do with your life?”

She smirked. “I haven’t figured it out yet. When Kylo was my age, he knew what he wanted to do.
And he probably would have given up if George didn’t help him. And if he didn’t have me and
Poe. He waited an extra year to go to college so he could spend more time with us. He was bored
and hated it but I’m glad he did.”

Scratching lightly at his beard, Owen shifted in the chair. “It’s always hard to move away. I hardly
see my brother and his family. It’s mostly at Christmas.”

“Are you married?”

He shook his head. “We’re engaged but we’ve been that way for five years. I think she might give
up at some point.”

“Kylo was engaged once.”

“I know. Is it something he talks about?”

“Sometimes. He thinks about him more than he talks about him. Han and Leia miss him too. I hear
them talking.”

Owen finished his drink. “What about your boyfriend?”

She stuck her hands under her thighs and shrugged. He was still a stranger. He couldn’t know that
much about her at this point. She’d have to say what she had been practicing. “We broke up.
Things were going too fast. And we broke up. It will be easier to move here anyway now that we’re broken up.”

“So you want to move here?”

Rey could only shake her head. “I’m still thinking about it. He’ll need someone to take care of him.”

“I’m going to take care of him, Rey,” Owen said. “The times I was in the classroom or on a course with him…we already work well together. I promise to keep him safe for you.”

He stood and she followed him, wanting to start moving and get out of that room. She glanced at George’s desk, at the picture that Owen had been looking at. Seeing the picture of her and Kylo, taken nearly twelve years ago on one of the first days that they were home, she had to keep her tears away. It was a happy day. It was a great day. Owen’s hand rested on her shoulder and she nodded. “Thank you for talking to me, Rey. I’ll see you downstairs.”

She was only alone for a few minutes before she heard Kylo in the doorway. He had stumbled lightly on the stairs. Folding her arms, she sighed.

“Han and Leia are going,” he said. “You can stay here if you want. I want you to.”

“I can?” She was lifted at the words. “Is it okay with George?”

“It was his idea.” He tilted his head and sighed. “I’m so happy that you’re here. It was hard to be here, to do this, while you were at home hurting.”

She hugged him and shook her head. “I got through it. It still isn’t perfect, but I have other friends to talk to.”

“We’ll be able to talk more now that I’ll have a normal workday. I missed you so much. It’s been…it’s been hard to get through all of this without you.” He held her tightly, almost lifting her off of her feet. He had been quietly stressed the entire day, despite the small smiles. Even that night she would see him pause for a half-second, trying to figure out his reactions. It would all be different next week.

“I’ll show you the room.”

After Kylo led her to the guest room, and told her she could borrow one of his t-shirts to sleep in, they went downstairs to say goodnight. She offered George to help clean up but he shook his head; they could do it in the morning. They said goodnight and goodbye and she could finally be alone with Kylo. He was drunk; his face was flushed but he was relaxed too. He kept smiling to himself and then saying something that she couldn’t really make out as they brushed their teeth. Using his toothbrush felt weird but she did what she had to.

He was there.

He started talking about some random part of a course and it wasn’t really making sense. Changing in front of her, he kept mentioning names of people she’d probably never meet. But he seemed to like them. He had made friends. It was weird to think of Kylo having friends that weren’t just Hux and Paige.

He finally stopped to frown as he looked at the bed. Fixing his pyjamas, he sighed. “I can take the room across the hall.”
The t-shirt barely covered her panties. It was long but she still knew how bare she was.

Did he think about what it was like to hold her? Did he remember how her body felt? Was he embarrassed over what happened? Slowly meeting his eyes, she shook her head. “No, I want you to hold me.”

She didn’t want to feel the tension between them. Being naked and in his arms still hadn’t faded from her mind. The way his hands could be kind in the way she needed at that hateful moment of feeling so unclean, of having so much shame course through her veins. All of the healing had seemed to vanish when she was sobbing to herself in the washroom in the basement; he had helped her to surface, to have a chance to get back to herself. It wasn’t his fault that he had to leave and everything was happening so slowly for her.

In bed together, in the dark of George’s house, she sighed against his chest. Soon, he’d have to be a new person, someone with a great deal of responsibility and under a lot of pressure. Having a teenage girl in his bed would be so inappropriate.

Still, that night, she slept better than she had in months. His arms loosened when he fell asleep, but they were still there.

Despite the comfort, she woke up too early and sleep refused to find her again. The sun was up and she was thirsty. When she shifted to get up, Kylo rolled over and mumbled something: something about feeding the cat and getting back to bed.

Shaking her head, she yawned and wandered downstairs. She knew where she was when she woke up, but it did take her a few moments to find her head. George’s house felt more like a home upstairs than it did downstairs.

She had to pull at the edge of the t-shirt when she saw him in the kitchen, loading glasses into the dishwasher. “Good morning.”

“Hi.”

It was strange to see him in something that wasn’t a suit. George owned jeans. He wore green polo shirts.

“We still have juice in the fridge and I’m making coffee.” He looked a little tired but gave her a firm smile anyway. “I have syrup and pancake mix from the last time my children were here. I’d be happy to make you pancakes, Rey.”

Sitting at the table to hide her legs, Rey nodded. “I love pancakes.” She didn’t remember why she liked pancakes so much, but she didn’t want to think that much about it. “How often do you see your kids?”

George started moving around the kitchen, suddenly clean after last night. He stopped to meet her eyes to answer. “I see my oldest son quite often now. We’ve had our problems but he’s here quite a bit and not just to do his laundry. My two youngest, I don’t see them as often as I wished I could. They live in North Carolina. We speak all of the time but I really only see them at Christmas and for two weeks in the summer. It’s…hard to have a family and have this job.”

She swallowed. “Kylo knows that. But I don’t think he wants one. He misses being with someone. But when I move here, he’ll have me.”

Nodding, George turned away. “I’m sure he will need you very much.”
By the time Kylo came downstairs, apologizing for being late even though no one had told them they were awake, breakfast was ready.

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“This is the house.”

She frowned at Kylo, squeezing his hand. They were stopped outside a large, two-story home with a tree in the front yard. The ‘For Sale’ sign had stood out even on the walk over. “It’s really big.”

He shrugged. “I wanted a big house.”

Han and Leia had come by earlier so she could shower and change. Now, they were wandering around the area, hearing what Kylo’s plans for the future. The future was already there but it would soon be real. The house was down the street from George’s. She could almost see his car in the driveway in the distance. She rolled her eyes at him when he caught her looking and he smirked. Of course that’s why he wanted that house.

Beside them, Leia was writing down the number on the sign. “Well, Agent Solo, do you want me to do it? We’ll need to figure out everything with the bank, but we should try to get a viewing before we leave. Who knows what will need to be renovated. Everyone always changes the kitchen. And God, Ben you don’t need that square footage.”

Kylo just shook his head. “I want this house. There’s nothing else in this neighbourhood. I’ve looked.”

Even though Leia was shaking her head, Rey could already picture herself living in the off-white house down the street from Agent Jinn.

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“Was it weird?” Rose asked, handing her another dish to dry.

Rey shook her head, wiping the plate before putting it in the cupboard. “I guess, kind of? I got to hold his gun.”

Kaydel instantly had her eyebrows up. “Which gun?”

“Kay,” Rose warned, setting down the dish she was washing heavily in the sink. “Don’t joke about that.”

Even though she appreciated it, Rey still dropped her head. She didn’t want to tell Kaydel more about how she felt about Kylo; she was still working on it herself. Rose got most of that talk. She was waiting to tell Paige, but hoped she would understand. She’d been around Kylo the longest. She remembered when Paige really was Kylo’s only real friend until Poe showed up.

Kaydel scrunched her eyes shut. “I’m sorry, Rey. It was…I just…I think about him all of the time. Now that I won’t get to see him all of the time…I’ll find a new crush.”
Crush. Kaydel had a crush on him. And Rey was slowly accepting what she’d known for so long. She had a real crush on him. It wasn’t just him taking care of her or saving her. It wasn’t just taking her places and listening to her talk. He was real and alive and she couldn’t close her eyes without thinking about him.

She still needed a way to get through school and talk with Finn. It hurt to think about him but was it really worth throwing out so many years of friendship? She couldn’t talk to him and was afraid that if the gap kept growing, she’d never get it back.

But Kylo told her to let it be. Han and Leia said the same.

It was still her life. She could decide who she should or shouldn’t forgive.

Han and Leia were next door, but it still felt like they were alone for the night.

“We should plan your birthday party,” Kaydel changed the subject, quick to try to get out of something she’d done wrong. She was getting more serious at times by stopping talking to be quiet for a while. Rey just wished she could really tell her how she felt about Kylo. It would make things less weird. “We can make dinner here and do whatever we want.”

Rey nodded. “It’s…that’s what I was thinking, Kay.”

Another birthday without Kylo.

But time moving forward meant that she’d get to see him again when summer came.

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*I’m sorry we broke up.*

Sighing, she stared at her phone. It was late and she’d had a bad day. She hadn’t wanted to finish her homework and even though Han and Leia were looking at her with kind eyes, she knew that they wanted her to try more. Her birthday was next week and she was only now slightly worried that they wouldn’t let her have friends over.

She’d try harder next week. It was all about moving forward and not getting stuck. Kylo always felt stuck in his thoughts and she couldn’t let herself get that way.

*I’m sorry too.*

*I really didn’t think about it, Rey. I shouldn’t have touched you like that.*

*It really hurt me. And I’m having a hard time right now.*

*We don’t have to be friends again if you don’t want.*

Dropping her head, Rey put her phone down. If she hadn’t started dating him, they would still be friends right now. It was a heavy layer of regret that would take time to work through.

*I need to take time. I’m sorry.*

*It’s okay. Goodnight.*
She had hated her body’s reactions since that night. She’d start thinking about Kylo and knew that her body was getting warm, wanting to have his hands on her again but in a different way. She wanted him to know her body. But there were so many things in the way.

Looking up at the ceiling, she blinked back tears.

Summer was too far away.

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The first time she saw the inside of Kylo’s house in person, it felt surreal. It was a bright June day and he really lived there. It wasn’t an apartment he rented with someone else, but something that he owned. He hadn’t really filled it with pieces of himself yet; he was waiting for them to bring it as summer was about to set in. He’d bought it, not caring that he would probably get a new assignment in a year. George was his boss. Owen was his partner. He had a badge and a safe for his gun in the bedroom.

Her grades were better than she’d expected. If she didn’t have her friends, she’d never have gotten through it all. She’d wander through the mall with Ahsoka, talking like they used to do. What are other people thinking and what do we know about them? She was starting to sound more like Kylo. Whenever they spoke, he tried to find a way to explain what he was doing, while also focusing on her life. It still felt like something she’d never understand when he talked like an agent; but when he talked like himself, she knew that he was really just doing the same thing as Ahsoka. Why do people act one way and then do something that doesn’t make sense?

He sounded happy. He texted her so often when he was on his first assignment in Massachusetts. She had a new number for him now: he had two phones.

The worst times were when Han and Leia were still trying to convince her that she couldn’t move to Virginia directly. That’s what she thought would happen. In the fall, she could just move there. She’d already told Kaydel and Rose that she was doing it. She already talked to Paige; even though she wanted to keep babysitting and helping, she wanted to go. She’d scream and them and slam her door like Kylo used to do. She just wanted to be there. That had been in April. By May, she started to understand more. Kylo really was gone all of the time. He’d talk to her on the computer and his house was empty, his voice echoing on bare walls. He had a few things but hadn’t had time to finish what he had planned. The only furniture he had was a new bed. Work would get in the way whenever he tried to do more.

But then they were there. The long drive could have taken just a day but since she didn’t have her license yet, they took a break in New Jersey. The things they had packed, the list that he sent of things he wanted, made her and Leia laugh at first and then the headache of how to pack it all began. And there were some times that the list made her hurt. He was taking pieces of so many people who were gone.

But none of that seemed to matter now.

She put up glow-in-the-dark stars in her room, balancing on the stepladder as he watched with his hands bracing the legs.

She was sixteen now. And she wanted to look at those stars when she was there and went to sleep
in a familiar bed.

Turning to him, she smiled as she fixed the last star in place, her arms starting to ache. “I tried to make the constellations I remember. But it was harder than I thought it would be.”

He shrugged as he reached up for her. Gazing down at him, she wanted to stand there for longer, only taking him in. Still, his hands gripped her hips and he lifted her to the ground. Her feet touched the floor and he fixed her sweater. “I think it will be fine. I missed the stars too. I’m going to go help Han finish the bookshelves. I don’t hear him swearing anymore so he’s probably given up.”

There was still so much left to do and move. And he had to work on Monday while they finished it all. And then mom and dad would leave and she’d be able to stay for a month. She had argued hard to stay until September, but finally gave up and agreed to one month. Han had never yelled at her but she felt like he was getting close to breaking with how she was acting. It wasn’t fair to them that she felt like snapping all of the time.

She had to help more now to make up for how she’d acted.

The bookshelves were finished and she enjoyed seeing the look of almost surprise on Kylo’s face. He sent her to the kitchen, telling her to organize things how he wanted rather than how Leia thought they would be. They left for the garage, unloading more of the boxes and things. She never realized how much stuff Kylo actually had but then remembered most of it was what Leia decided he needed.

But his house was almost a home now. And she could help it feel really like somewhere that they both belonged.

“He really should have renovated the kitchen.” Leia had complained about that the most. It was a nice and open kitchen, bright and modern. The appliances were mostly new and there was plenty of cupboard space. Rey didn’t really understand why Leia wanted it different.

“Why?” she asked, opening a random box to start unpacking it. It was a mixture of cutlery and dishtowels. Okay, she knew where these should go.

“He’ll have a hard time selling it in a few years and making a profit. If he’d just put in a small investment, he’d be happier in the end.” She was putting dishes into the cupboard. “But I really hope that he can stay here for several years.”

She didn’t want to think about Kylo having to move again but if it happened, she’d have to deal with it.

There was a knock at the back door and Leia left her to greet whoever had come by. She heard her speak to someone, a man, warmly before bringing him inside.

Glancing up from looking through the kitchen box, she watched who the voice belonged to.

The young, dark-haired man put a box of books on the table. Leia was already starting to dig through them. “He doesn’t need these.”

He shrugged, almost looking annoyed. The look made her narrow her eyes and lose focus. “Dad wanted me to drop them off. They’re just sitting in the basement.”

“And now they’re just going to be sitting in another basement.” Sighing, Leia started ordering the books into various piles. “Which ones are even important? This one is older than I am.”
Lifting his shoulders again, the man left her to the books and went to the fridge. He grabbed some juice and then went instantly to where the glasses were; at least now there were more than four glasses and two plates. But he’d been there before, even when Kylo had mostly been living with nothing but basic things. Finally, her curiosity made her leave her project from the other side of the kitchen.

Leia was complaining about the books again when she came closer. “Rey, where did he say he wanted these?”

She had locked eyes with the stranger for a moment before turning back to Leia. Kylo had said that George was giving him some things. But she thought that he would be bringing them over. “The guides are for the office. Everything else goes in the living room.”

Looking up from the table, Leia noticed how Rey was eying the other occupant in the brightly lit kitchen. They’d have to put up curtains at some point. “Didn’t George teach you any manners, Gregor?”

He snorted but still extended his hand. “Hey. How’s it going?”

“You’re George’s son?” She didn’t want to be rude but she was so confused, even as she accepted the firm handshake and stepped away.

He lifted his shoulders. “Yeah. I guess I still am. Where’s Ky?”

The front door opened and shut and she glanced over her shoulder. Kylo brought in another box and caught the new presence from across the house. “Did you bring them?”

He was in the kitchen in only a few long strides. Gregor finished his juice and gestured at the box. “Let dad know if you want any of his other old shit.” He smirked at him. “He’s got loads of it.”

Kylo almost nudged Leia out of the way to start looking through the books before he blinked and glanced from her to Gregor. “Rey, this is Gregor. He’s George’s son.”

“Yeah, she knows. Hey, I left my sunglasses here last time. Do you have them?”

Kylo nodded. “By the front door.”

Rey couldn’t help but stare at the strange man the rest of the time he was there.

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“Who is he?”

Kylo took another towel from her hand, placing it in the linen closet before he seemed to stop to think about what she had asked. She had waited until long after the awkward lunch with the stranger to finally ask the question. He was gone but she couldn’t get her mind off of how he spoke with Kylo and her parents. What had she missed?

Kylo had heard her tone and met her eyes. “He’s George’s son and my friend. I’ve told you about him. I only have one real friend here so that’s who I’m talking about.”
“Yeah, you have but I thought it was just…Owen or something when you were talking about hanging out.” She handed him the final towel and folded her arms. Maybe she hadn’t wanted to know more about his friend when he’d talked about him.

He sucked in a breath and closed the closet. “Rey, to be fair to me, when we’ve talked these last few months, I have been more focused on making sure that you were okay, to help you understand what I’m working with. Han and Leia know that you want to move here. I know about the arguments and how mad you’ve been so I couldn’t really talk about my life here. I want you to be here but you couldn’t really until now because I didn’t have time to set anything up. That’s my fault, I know. My plans rarely work like I hope they will. And I’m sorry if it seems like I was trying to hide something with Grey, but I’m not.”

There was a long pause and she gradually remembered when she’d heard that name before. She narrowed her eyes at him and he shook his head. It couldn’t be the same person.

“Yes. Yes it’s him. I slept with him a year ago. I tried to hate him but now he’s just a really good friend to me. Owen is also my friend but I can’t spend every minute of my day thinking about work. And we usually end up talking about work when we’re together.” He reached to touch her shoulder. “I wasn’t keeping this from you.”

Her mouth fell open and heat came to her face. That was him? And Kylo was still spending time with him? “You’re…just friends with him?”

“Rey. Yes.” His face firmed as he looked at her. Don’t let this ruin our summer together. Please. I won’t, she blinked back instantly. I just need to think about it.

Good.

It took her until the end of their time together to really understand how he was thinking. He would come home from work, looking stressed and tired but would always brighten up when he saw that she was there, making dinner or finishing emptying another box.

She tried not to focus solely on the strange, handsome man who knew Kylo’s house, who’d been to Kylo’s house before she had the chance. It was the same stab of jealously and envy from ten years ago. And with all of her worries in the spring, she really hadn’t needed to know this. When they talked more about it, when she was done being annoyed with how secretive he seemed, he told her that she had been hard to talk to but he didn’t want her to think poorly about herself. She needed time to work through her thoughts and he didn’t want to give her more worries.

When they shared his bed on the final night, he asked if it was okay. He didn’t want her to go home and think that he was with his friend. It was different now. He didn’t want to be with anyone. He was only going to get hurt again.

So, Kylo had a friend.

And she would have to live with it.

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“I want to quit dance and join the track team.”
It had been a bad, bad week. Kylo had been out of the country, and couldn’t say where. His texts were short but he was still listening when he could.

And then someone on the dance team, a girl who had moved to town last fall and instantly had more friends than her, started a rumour that Finn had gotten her pregnant and that’s why they broke up because he wouldn’t pay for the abortion. It had made her scream so hard at the girl that she never wanted to go back there. Instead of going home, she had went to Rose’s and cried all night, not telling Han and Leia where she was.

Now, it was Friday. And all of it made her unable to think about anything else other than getting away.

She had been pouting all night, she knew it. And Han had finally asked what was wrong.

He licked his lips and nodded. “Well, sweetheart, if that’s what you want, you can do that. You’ve worked hard at dance and we know that you love it, but you can try something else.”

She rolled her eyes. “So I can do whatever I want except move to Virginia?”

From the other side of the table, Leia sighed. “We’ve talked about this, Rey. You’ve told us what your therapists have said. It’s more stable for you here. Ben works a lot and also needs time to sort his life out.”

“So he’s settling in again?”

“Rey.” Han’s voice held a strong dose of warning. “This is different from before.”

Snorting, she folded her arms. “Kylo has always got whatever he wanted.”

“No, he hasn’t. Rey, if you want to quit the team because of what that girl said, then we agree that some other sport is what you should do. But I want you to think about what you’re saying. Ben has worked hard to get this far but we’ve been there the entire time, trying to keep him steady. We’re supporting and loving you the same way. And we don’t compare the two of you so we’d appreciate it if you didn’t think that way either.” Leia’s voice was level and calm but she caught a hint of anger there. This was how most of their arguments started. They refused to yell at her; their words would just make her think and sometimes she didn’t want that.

“We’re here for you, sweetie. But we have to talk about these things.” Han put his elbows on the table before reaching out for her hand.

She wrapped her arms tighter around her chest. “I don’t understand why I have to stay here. I hate it here.”

Leia slowly closed her eyes. “Rey, go to your room. Think about how you’re talking to us right now.”


Stomping up to her room, she slammed the door.

Only to open it a few minutes later to let the cat in.

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Kylo helped her set up an easel on her side of the home office. He liked to watch her paint while he worked at home in the evenings, mornings, or on weekends. They could still be in the same room even though his head was most often elsewhere.

He’d been there for over a year now. After another year, the chances of being transferred would drop significantly, or at least that’s what he told her.

Rey had looked forward to her three weeks at his house the entire spring. It would get her further away from the awkwardness with Finn, Han, and Leia.

What she’d miss was driving with Han. She could have taken her driver’s exam before she left but wanted the excuse to practice a bit more with Kylo. Han didn’t mind that she wanted to wait; she was seventeen and could take her time. Now that she wasn’t slamming so many doors, it was easier to talk with him again. He really didn’t have to tell her what to do but it was time that they would spend together. She was good at driving but still worried she’d fail the test. She’d waited an extra year just to feel comfortable and she had promised to take the test before school started again.

It would be easier to do things for Paige and Hux if she could drive.

Benji was also getting bigger and quicker, going from walking to running before anyone could really think about it. She took him to the swimming pool before she left for Virginia. It had been a beautiful day, spent splashing and laughing, until some lady gave her a dirty look and started whispering about her to someone else, another mother on the kids’ side of the pool. It made her want to cover up her bikini even though she’d left the dressing room feeling thin, strong, and beautiful. Now she wasn’t sure what the lady was talking about. But she leaned over again when Benji hugged her, glaring at her from across the pool area, to continue whispering about her.

When she talked about it with Paige after, Paige gave her a sympathetic look. She must have thought it was her baby. It made Rey rage who people judged others without knowing anything about them. She was going to wait to talk to Kylo about that; he was already protective of anything that involved his godson.

So she painted on a Saturday afternoon as he frowned at his computer at the end of her first week there.

But it was like she had always lived there.

“You can talk about the case, you know?” She glanced over to catch his eyes, seeing his shoulders drop at the word. He’d been quiet most of the morning, staring off more often than usual. “Whatever you can talk about.”

He nodded. “I know. But it’s still hard. Owen and I will probably have to go to the scene and I can’t get out of it. There are too many people to question and the local cops are in over their heads.”

“What are you going to do there?”

Sitting back, he folded his hands behind his head. The buttons on his shirt strained slightly at the movement and she bit her lip. She really had missed being close to him since Christmas. “The regional office is working on the arrest warrant. If it comes in, we would need to go there to question him more, try to get him to break.”

Turning back to her landscape, she dabbed more green onto the canvas. “What did he do?”
“There’s evidence that he took his children across state lines and killed them, but there are other things in his background that make him interesting. But it became federal with the kidnapping. The warrant is really waiting on the blood evidence. And they’re using the local lab so it’s frustrating to have to wait. We’re quicker and better,” he answered her question and turned back to typing. Finally, he sighed and pushed away from the desk. “This is just a waiting game and I hate it.”

They hadn’t made plans for her weeks there other than spending time together. And she had already accepted that he might have to go away. It would mean time to herself and sometimes she needed that more than him. It was a rare feeling at times but being able to curl up on his bed and read a book or watch a movie or just think about her life was appealing. It wasn’t the same as having him beside her, but she didn’t mind taking time to herself.

The spring had really worn her out. This was taking a break from real life.

“I’m going to make lunch.” He moved behind her, looking at what she was working on. “I really like that.”

Glancing over her shoulder, she smiled. “It’s not a real place but I feel like I’ve been there.”

He held her eyes for a moment before nodding and leaving the office. Her art teacher said that her shading was really improving. Kylo had writing and maybe she had painting. Drawing still felt easier and she felt like she was better at it but she wanted to try to develop some of her skills that summer. It was on her goal’s list. That and getting better at track to compete at some of the meets next spring.

They ate on the patio, the sun warming them both. Kylo had replaced the furniture from the last time she had been there. It was still strange that his life, the private side, still kept moving forward even when she wasn’t there. She liked the new chairs; they were easier to sit on when she was wearing shorts. Inside, she hoped that he picked them out with that in mind.

His phones were always nearby. It wasn’t a surprise when one buzzed in the middle of lunch.

“Hey. It’s fine, we’re just eating. Okay. Can you bring it over? Come around back, we’ll be there. Yes, bye.”

He set the phone down and she poked at her food. “Should I get another plate?”

He thought for a moment and then nodded. “Grey is bringing over one of George’s old files from a similar case. I wanted to take a look at it.”

She had hoped it would just be George or Owen but used getting another dish as an excuse to escape inside. She still didn’t understand Kylo’s friendship with Gregor after how hard the start of their relationship had been. She trusted Kylo when he said that they were just friends. When she had been there when she was sixteen, she guessed that they were still working on it and almost had it figured out. She saw that it was just a friendship but there were still too many things that bothered her. There were no drawn-out touches or real looks, but there were hugs; they had worked through the mutual feelings and could just be like that. But it still made her nervous to be around them. Kylo knew it and they’d talked about it. He really was the only person around Kylo who wasn’t somehow connected to the FBI, law enforcement, or the government. The next-door neighbour was in the CIA. The neighbour on the other side worked for the military. It was a safe neighbourhood of very stressed out people and he needed someone who understood the other side too.

Kylo had grandma’s old plates. It made her forget her flash of anxiety just holding one again. He had her quilt on his bed and another one on the back of the couch.
He was away from the table, talking on his phone at the edge of the patio when she came back. He spoke differently when he was working. His shoulders were straighter and his eyes were always narrowed. She liked it better when he looked at her.

The footsteps up the back-deck stairs made her pick up her fork again, continuing to eat the pasta salad.

“Hey,” Gregor said, before glancing at Kylo. “Who’s he on the phone with?”

If she had to guess, she’d say Owen. She liked him better than Grey and hoped that it was him. “Probably his partner. They might have to go out of town.”

Gregor sat down and filled his plate, like he felt like he belonged there. He dropped a folder beside him and pulled his chair closer. “Yeah, dad said that they might. He knows that you’re here and doesn’t really want to but they’ve been working on this for a while or something. They were down there last month and need to wrap it up or keep it going or whatever.”

They both went quiet and Rey poked at her plate.

What did they even have to talk about that wasn’t Kylo?

“How’s work?” she finally asked.

He snorted after he finished chewing. His dark hair was longer since the last time she saw him. His t-shirt had some band on it that she’d never heard of. He was also wearing shorts. It made Kylo’s slacks and button-up shirt look so much more adult. Grey was sitting there like anyone else. “I still like it and I haven’t been fired so I must be doing something right. The kids make it fun. I think that they appreciate that I’m just like them. Most of them know they’re going to move around in the future and really have a hard time making friends. I know the feeling and can tell them stuff.”

“Really?” She knew that he worked at the local library. She didn’t know what he did there but had imagined him sorting books and being bored, probably wandering around wearing headphones and ignoring his boss. Swallowing a guilty feeling, she met his blue eyes. “How much did you move as a kid?”

She finally had a moment to really study him. He had George’s strong features but set in a different face. He wasn’t as tall as Kylo or George but still stood out. His smile was broad and easy to like. When he had his mouth shut, he was actually nice to look at.

But how he looked, someone attractive who was settling into his life, still made her worry about his relationship with Kylo.

He was making a choice to be alone.

“Oh, a lot before my parents divorced.” He smiled at her, despite the content of their conversation. “When dad got placed at headquarters and we thought ‘finally, finally, it’s going to stop.’ But it turns out being in one place just showed my parents that they hated one another. Then I was back and forth between mom and dad and now…now I guess I’ve picked my side. My mom can eat shit.”

There were always sides in families. She saw that with Hux and Paige: where they were going to spend the holidays, how often they were going to go out of town and see relatives. Her family had been hers for the last thirteen years but she knew she had another side still out there somewhere. The ache from being turned away had numbed over the years but when she was having a down day or dropping back into past hurts, it was hard not to touch on that bud of sadness.
Kylo ended his call and was rolling his eyes when he sat down. He fingered the folder and nodded his thanks to Grey before looking at her. He ran his hands through his hair and looked more annoyed. “We have to go tomorrow. I’m really sorry, Rey. But we can probably wrap it up quickly.”

“It’s fine. I sort of counted on it. It’s your job.” She hoped that she could ease the pained look on his face. And it seemed to work. “We’ll have time when you get back.”

“You can come by the library.” Gregor’s offer made them both turn to him. “One of our summer students quit and we could use the help. My boss told me to find someone.”

“So, it would be like a job?” Rey knew that most of her friends had summer jobs. Rose was working at a camp for most of the summer. Kaydel hated her job at the grocery store but wanted a car. For her, the chance to spend time with children made it hard not to get excited.

“It won’t pay anything, but yeah. I’ll talk to them today if you want to do it.” He smirked at her and then turned to Kylo. “Ky, pass the water.”

Kylo handed him the carafe before he turned to her. “I’d feel better if you had something to do other than just sit here. I don’t want you to be worrying about me. If you want to do it, I think you’d be great at it.”

When did he get so nice? Rey asked, letting her true thoughts come out in blinking.

He got a job. He’s working on being more mature. He can still be an annoying moron, but he’s almost an adult now. Kylo answered, eating to disguise their conversation.

By the time Gregor left, Rey decided that she would be fine spending time with him. Or would have to learn how to be.

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Kylo had to leave at 4 a.m. She had trouble falling asleep so she had a headache as she sat at the breakfast table, watching him write out emergency numbers. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust her to remember them, but he was too cautious when it came to her being alone.

George’s home, office, and cellphone numbers. Gregor’s cellphone number. The numbers to the neighbours. The code to the security system was there but hidden in a made-up number to someone who didn’t exist anymore. She should have told him that she already had Gregor’s number since two summers ago.

Then he kissed her forehead and left for the waiting car. He had stopped reluctantly by the door, giving her one last look that told her how torn he was.

It would be better when she lived there all of the time.

He was gone and she could sleep in his bed. It was still warm from his body, helping her rest without dreams or nightmares.
“Gregor?”

“Yeah?” He was driving her to the library. He’d been there at 8 a.m. but they hadn’t left until almost 9 a.m. It had been too early but he brought breakfast and Rey had been hungry. The breakfast sandwich was perfect but he had put too much sugar in her coffee. It was really gross and she left the take-away mug on the table when they departed.

“Why are you and Kylo still friends after what happened?” She wanted to hear it from him. It would ease the tightness in her stomach that came every time she looked at him. He was good-looking and charming when he wanted to be. Kylo had been attracted to him and she understood why. But how could they spend time together without remembering the past?

“Checking that our stories match?” he teased and then grinned. “It’s fine. I mean, I was a moron when he, you know, wanted more. I missed the boat and really kicked myself for a while. Like, when I was texting you two years ago, I was a fucking mess. It hit me out of the blue. Like, fuck, I love this guy. I love him and he won’t talk to me. It drove me nuts and I fell apart for a while. But after I talked to him, I sort of got it. You can’t unring a bell but friends, friends are okay. So I dropped out of my stupid degree and took the librarian program at the community college. When I moved back here when I was done, and he was here…we needed each other. But, you know, just not with the fucking part.”

She sucked in a breath at the word and he caught the sound and winced, shrugging an apology.

“But you still…you still think about having sex with him?” Rey really hoped he didn’t talk that way around the kids.

He parked the car outside of the library and met her eyes. “I’m not going to lie to you because that’s stupid. I want you to trust me like he does. I’m still attracted to him and wouldn’t turn him down if he wanted to get something serious going again, but he doesn’t. He’s flipped that switch in his head and I’m in the friends’ column. And it fucking sucked in the beginning but now, shit, maybe I have grown up a little. I still tease him when we go to boring Bureau barbecues, but that’s more about him not always understanding how other people see us. Or maybe he does it to mess with them and to not get hit on by wine moms. I don’t mind doing those things for him because he’s my friend and I get a kick out of protecting him from sexually frustrated, middle-aged women. I still get the good sides of him and have someone to drink with who listens to my stupid ideas and who goes for runs with me even when I don’t want to get out of bed.”

She quietly looked down at her hands, nodding.

“Look, Rey, he told me a little about what happened between you and your boyfriend. It's been a while but having to see him everyday must suck. Kylo came back and I didn’t expect him to call me but he did and he was so messed up about it. And then he had to go right back to fucking Quantico. I don’t know how you really feel but I know what Ky told me. He pushed you hard and made you feel so…shitty. Ky was really upset about it and still is. He’s really proud of you and how you handled it. And he’s still guilty about having to leave for fascist camp. And I’m not saying that you should or shouldn’t be friends with him ever again but people sometimes do stupid things. I still can’t believe that he forgave me but that doesn’t mean you have to be the same as him.” He sounded like he understood, even though she knew Kylo hadn’t told him everything about what had happened between her and Finn and how Kylo had taken care of her.
She wouldn’t have made it through the rest of that school year if he hadn’t been there at that moment; she wouldn’t have been able to make it through the next year either as she tried to figure out whether she wanted to be friends with Finn. She had thought long and hard about dropping out or finishing school at Ransolm’s. The arguments with Han and Leia had felt endless. But that would have just been running from a problem. Now, having had enough time to breathe, she was glad that she hadn’t left. She had Kaydel and Rose. She had Benji.

Finn caught her by her locker on the last day of school. They had talked before but she knew why he was there. She’d seen him with a girl a year below them. She saw how he could drape his arm around her without her pulling away. They really had come together at the wrong time. And maybe if she hadn’t grown up like she had, they’d still be together.

“He’s apologized too. And we can talk but I…I don’t like being alone with him. I know he has another girlfriend and she looks happy with him but sometimes…sometimes he looks at me like he’s still sad about what happened. I know it wasn’t my fault but I don’t like making other people hurt.” She looked up from her hands and last, catching the gentleness in his eyes. “I feel like I’m the only person in my class who isn’t dating someone.”

He winced then sighed. “Yeah, that fucking sucks. I was seventeen when I came out to my parents and they did not want me dating. ‘Grey, we love you as you are, but you need to think responsibly.’ Great, thanks dad. Give me that advice and then introduce me to yet another prospective step-mom. And just having to sit there and watch everyone else making out or going out…that sucked so hard. I still found plenty of ways to fuck around but not being able to be totally open made me so mad. No wonder dad liked Kylo more. But you’ll get through it. High school really isn’t forever.”

Even though she only had one year left, it felt that way.

She held the thought as Grey showed her around the library, introducing her as the new summer student to some of the others there and showing her to the office in the back. He gave her a t-shirt and smirked when she frowned at the orange shade. He didn’t pick the colour, he said even as he took off his own shirt to pull on a similar one to hers.

Grey was toned with a firm chest and stomach. He wasn’t bulky like Kylo, but he was more tanned. And when he turned his head a certain way, he looked just like George.

He took her to the reading room, a collection of low stools and beanbags in a circle amidst the children’s book section. He showed her the books that they were going to read at the kid’s circle that day and the list of activities for them. There was a neat little schedule that he’d put together. She met some of the other summer students and felt herself getting increasingly excited about the new challenge. The first thing he got her to do was print off work sheets, checking in with her after a few minutes before disappearing and leaving her to figure out what to do next.

It was easier than she thought. Everything was labelled. She just had to follow the list.

And when the day ended, she had almost forgotten that she was going home to an empty house.

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Knocking on the door, rapping at it as fast as she could, Rey tried to get her breathing under control. After the sound outside kept getting louder, when she knew that someone was trying to get
into the house, she just ran.

Finally, the porch light of George’s house came on and the door opened.

Gregor stood there, squinting at her. “Why are you here?”

She pushed inside and slammed the door, sliding down to collapse on the floor. He stepped back, watching her desperate movements with his hands loose at his sides.

“I think someone was in Kylo’s house,” she forced out. “I didn’t know where else to go.”

Kneeling down, Gregor gripped her shoulder. “Hey, it’s okay. Dad isn’t here but it’s okay.”

Throwing herself forward, she hugged him down. “I just ran here. I didn’t mean to get so scared.”

“Rey,” he whispered into her hair, his arms coming around her. “It’s okay. I’ve got you.”

She almost sobbed but shook it off, letting out a dull whine instead. “I want to call him but he’d just be worried.”

He sat back, shaking his head. “Yeah, he’d freak out. Come on, it’s 3 a.m. I’ll call the cops and we’ll see what they say.”

Without thinking, she took his hand and he helped her up. She didn’t let go as he made the phone call, not looking panicked or annoyed. He made them tea and they waited for an hour before someone finally knocked on the door. They went with the officers to Kylo’s house, looking around and finding nothing missing. There were no signs of a break in. The alarm hadn’t been set off. Kylo would have called if he’d gotten the alert.

There was nothing there.

She’d imagined it.

She still grabbed her phone and purse, locking the door and setting the alarm. She went back to George’s house with Gregor. The officers took them there and she could see them trying to figure out their relationship. She wanted to tell them that he wasn’t her boyfriend but let them have their assumptions.

The officers took her worries as real but didn’t go far enough; it was a good neighbourhood but there were always prowlers and people looking for a thrill. They looked around and didn’t see anything strange. It might have been a dog or a cat or some wild animal.

Grey held her hand the entire time, looking annoyed that the officers weren’t taking her fear seriously. She didn’t want to tell them that Kylo had a stalker before, one that had killed someone they both loved. She thought again about the letter and why nothing more had happened since then. Maybe Gregor was thinking about it too. Before the cops left, he gave them George’s business card and told them that if they actually did their jobs, he was the man to call.

“I’m sorry,” she said when they finally left. The sun was starting to come up. But at least it was Saturday. She didn’t have to work but didn’t know if he had to or not.

“It’s okay, Rey.” He closed and locked the door. “I have the morning off so I was planning on sleeping in and then playing video games. You can stay here until you feel okay.”

She nodded, still rubbing the fabric of her pyjamas. She followed him upstairs and looked at the
guest room before turning hopeful eyes to him.

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

His room was messy but it was mostly books and clothes. There were many guides on teaching children how to read, how to deal with bullying, and other topics piled on his desk. Yawning he dropped onto his bed and lifted the covers for her.

Curling up next to him, she sighed when his arms came around her. “Why did you do this for me?”

He kissed her forehead. “Because you’re cool. And Ky would have killed me if I didn’t.”

She sat back and managed to give him a small smile in the growing morning light. And she didn’t know what was wrong with her but she leaned in and kissed him, meeting his dry lips in one swift moment.

Grey didn’t move. He didn’t respond. When she pulled away, blushing, he quirked a grin at her.

“That was nice. But you should save it for someone who can appreciate it.”

She wanted to be embarrassed. She wanted to apologize. But he didn’t look like he wanted to hear it. He pulled her closer and she sighed against his chest. “But what if he wants someone more like you more than someone like me?”

He rubbed her arm as he shook his head. “He wants you, Rey. He just hasn’t admitted it to himself yet. And from my experience with him, let him take his time or it will end up with everybody hurting.”

Closing her eyes, she nodded to herself and hoped that he was right. “Are you sure?”

“Oh yeah, I’m sure.”

Rey couldn’t help but frown. “But he still likes guys.”

Grey tipped her chin up, making her open her eyes again. “He likes certain people. He’s not bi, but finds attraction more through what he sees inside. Poe, Liza, me, you…he gets drawn in by how he sees us. I mean, he tries to find these good things that he can trust. He’s not, I mean…” he paused, to grit his teeth. “Don’t tell him I told you this. Don’t you dare. But I haven’t fucked him. I don’t think Poe did either. He likes being in control and he fucked us. I went down on him and I think if we had gotten a thing going, if I hadn’t fucked everything up, he would have worked his way up to doing me the favour but he’s probably straighter than everyone thinks he is.”

Rey’s face burnt at the image. “What’s it like?”

“What? Blowing a guy or blowing him?”

“I don’t…” she shook her head. “I don’t know. What if I’m not good at it?”

“He won’t care. He’ll be more worried that he’s hurting you until he figures it out and then he’ll be too turned on to think about it.” Grey sighed again. “And since he knows how to do it, you can probably ask him for tips.”

There was no way she would ask Kylo that. The image of him with anyone else still made her shudder. “I don’t think I like knowing that.”

It seemed to click in Gregor’s head that she was uncomfortable because his arms tightened around
her. “Listen, I’m sorry for telling you all this. I know you guys…the shit you went through doesn’t go away without hard work. He’s still got thoughts in his head that he doesn’t share with anyone but you. And one big one that he hasn’t realized or told you about yet. You’ll both be ready when it happens.”

Something distant that Kylo had told her rattled in her head and she found herself agreeing with Grey.

It would be fine to wait a little while longer.

The rest of her time there was spent looking at Kylo and wondering if Grey really knew what he was talking about.

There were small touches and lingering looks. He liked smiling at her, asking her how work was going. She really didn’t want to leave him or the kids, but the image of the future for her there would make the fall so much easier to get through.

She’d see him again at Christmas.

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Hux knocked on the door of the classroom. Rey had been busy daydreaming over nothing when she felt his eyes on her.

“I need to speak to Rey please.” There was a clear panic in his voice. No one else heard it but she did.

She looked at Rose and snapped her mouth shut. Something had happened. Something bad.

She left the room and Hux’s hand instantly gripped her shoulder. “He’s been injured, but he’s okay.”

Rey went through a world of emotions before she found her voice. She was almost eighteen. He was almost twenty-eight. This shouldn’t be happening so soon. Where were all of the promises? Had they meant so little? She bit down her anger and focused on how he must have been feeling instead. “Was he shot?”

He shook his head, guiding her to his office. “No. It was a knife. I’m sorry you can’t have your phone on in the classroom, Rey. But George called me after talking to your parents. He’s really okay.”

She still couldn’t stop thinking the worst as she slumped down on the comfortable couch that Hux had put in his office in the last year. Paige had picked it out. Benji should be climbing on it. Instead, she was sitting there and trying not to cry. She really didn’t want to because the tears were turning into something more out of anger than fear. And she hated it. She didn’t need to think about his suffering and tie it together with rage.

“Can you tell me what happened?” She wanted to call George but if Kylo was in the hospital, and if it was a case, then George had other things to deal with. Maybe she should call Owen. He’d make it make sense. “What did George say?”
Hux settled behind his desk. He offered her some water and she shook her head, just wanting to get it over with.

“There was some raid on some suspect. They were trying to arrest him or something. Kylo doesn’t tell me about every case but I this is the Missouri one. How long has he been there? A month?” Hux was trying to distract her or keep her grounded. She couldn’t decide which option was worse.

“Almost two months since Christmas.” She shook her head. “He hates that field office. They have bad coffee. But what happened? Hux, please.”

Sighing, Armitage raked his hair back and his face faltered for a moment. He loved Kylo too. He hated the idea that his friend had been hurt. “His face got slashed. They…George said that they could save his eye but there will be a scar if he doesn’t listen. I haven’t spoken to him yet. He was in surgery when he called. He wanted you to know. Han and Leia…they want to know if you want to go with them.”

She licked her lips. She was behind on her homework. Her grades weren’t the best. She was seventeen and should be thinking about graduation, not Kylo across the country and in a strange hospital bed. “I think…I think if he’s okay, I can handle being on my own. I’ll get to see him when he’s home. He’ll get time off, right?”

Hux shrugged, his eyes drifting to the wedding photo on his desk. “George said that he would. I still feel like I’m a teenager when I talk to him. He’s…he petrifies me.”

She smirked, snorting a little. “Just hug him the next time you see him. You won’t be so afraid.”

“Are you?”

“What?” Rey looked up, narrowing her eyes.

Hux sighed. “How are you not always afraid for him?”

She was. Deep down, she couldn’t hate what Kylo wanted to do. They’d been through so much so she could still understand why he wanted to do it. But it still made her constantly worry.

It was fine when he was just doing paperwork or waiting for lab results. It was fine when he was bored and writing up profiles and doing analysis. But when he was in the field, it was like she couldn’t sleep because he couldn’t. He’d text her in the middle of the night, worried about something that only made sense to him. She’d still calm him down by complaining about her day. By the time three or four in the morning came about, they were talking about nothing in short messages and both of them felt better.

And then Kylo went to work. And she went to school.

Why couldn’t she just be there now?

“I’m…he’s…” she shook her head and looked out the window. “This is what he wanted. Right?”

Hux exhaled. “Yes. Yes it is.”

She looked at her hands and then found herself smirking. Hux would get it. “He’s going to be so mad that someone wrecked his face.”

Hux had been busy looking sad and angry. He snapped his head to her and let the words sink in. He finally smiled and then chuckled lowly. “He complained that he was ugly before. He’s going to
really hate this.”

“I won’t get mad if you go to a bar or whatever with him when he’s here or drink in the living room. I can take care of Benji.” She tried to grin but it faltered and she shuddered down a sob. “I just want him to come home.”

Finally, Hux stood and moved to sit next to her on the couch. “Do you ever wonder how is this our lives? There are so many people in this town that don’t…that haven’t been through all of this. I’m…I’m not speaking as your principal now, Rey. I’m talking as your friend. And this is so fucked up.”

Leaning against him, like she had so many years ago, Rey sighed. “Can I stay at your house tonight?”

“Of course, Rey. Benji will love it.” He looked relieved by how she acted and it made it easy to lift her chin when he let her go. She had wanted to hug him, or be hugged, but it was simpler to walk out and deal with her worry at her own pace.

She left Hux to call mom and dad in the hallway. Dad was driving to the airport and wanted to make sure that she was okay. Kylo wasn’t seriously hurt. But they hadn’t spoken to him yet. So they didn’t exactly know what was going on.

She told them to make sure that he called her when he woke up.

And then she went back to class, trying to keep the late February day going.

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She saved her tears for the night before Kylo was supposed to come home. George and Owen weren’t letting him go back to Virginia for the three mandatory weeks he’d have to take off. Owen had called and sounded guilty, admitting instantly that he hadn’t kept his promise. She wanted to be mad but needed to make sure he didn’t blame himself. One week in the hospital and three weeks at home were going to make him very frustrated but she also knew he’d calm down after a few days and settle into recovering.

She just wanted to see how bad it really was. Han said it didn’t look that bad. Leia had only sighed when Rey asked.

Now, she was watching Benji while Paige and Hux went to the airport to pick up her family.

“Play game?” Benji asked. His Ls were still Ws and it always made her smile. Hearing him say Kylo made her melt every time. It was his fifth word. For a while, she and Paige had a bet that it would be his second or third word. Thankfully, mom, dad, milk, and hi came first.

“Okay.” She nodded. They’d been playing with blocks before but she had watched him grow bored with stacking and knocking over the colourful pieces. Covering her eyes, while still watching him at the same time through her fingers. “Go! Run and hide!”

Benji hobbled to his feet and shuffled around the living room. He couldn’t go upstairs or downstairs, but there were still plenty of safe hiding spots in that room and the kitchen. Bee liked hopping over the baby gates too so it wasn’t all bad to put them up. She was also watching him the
entire time and could stop him if he got distracted and found something more interesting than
playing the game.

She watched him crawl under Han’s chair, curling up and covering his mouth to keep from
giggling. Find a spot and be silent. That was the game. It was Kylo’s game. He’d video call and
she would play the game for him.

“Okay! I’m coming! I hope you found a good spot!” she called, standing from the floor to start
‘looking’ for the boy.

She knew why Kylo was teaching him the game. He’d taught her the same thing when she was that
age. There were too few places to hide for her, but for him, there were many places. She knew
exactly where to go with Benji if anything seemed off in the house: the hidden cupboard in the
back of the pantry. She could conceal herself there with him until someone could come and protect
them. They’d practiced a few times so he could learn not to cry.

Hux didn’t like any of those things, worried that his son was going to grow up an anxious mess.
But he also saw the danger and let Kylo have his way this far. He wouldn’t be scared if it was
something fun, Kylo said.

She stepped around the living room, humming to herself. She checked behind the couch and
sighed, loudly. She wandered into the kitchen, checking under the table and under the chairs.
Again, another sigh. Returning to the living room, she tapped her foot, scanning the room. Finally,
she heard a small giggle and dropped beside the chair.

“Found you!”

Benji exploded with laughter and wormed his way out of hiding to hug her. Playing with him at
least took her mind off of Kylo’s arrival.

They were finishing a snack when the back door finally unlocked and opened. Voices peaked her
panic for a moment and she shook off the look, hoping that Benji hadn’t seen it. He was trying to
understand that Kylo had been hurt and was coming home but not for a holiday. He’d just seen him
at Christmas; with the snow still outside, he thought it was Christmas again. He clumsily asked if
kissing would make him better. Of course it would, she said, but only on the inside. The outside
would have to get better over time. That part made him the most confused.

Taking Benji by the hand she helped him to the doorway. “Kylo?”

“He’s coming, sweetheart,” Leia said before turning to Rey after taking off her jacket. She sighed
and then fixed her hair. “Take him to the living room. He’s not in a good mood and needs a few
more minutes.”

She looked at Han, who nodded. He knocked the snow off of his boots and sighed. It must have
been really bad. The other voices came from the porch. Kylo’s was low and Hux’s was careful. She
still guided the boy to the couch, helping him to sit beside her.

“Okay, let’s get ready.” She forced her voice to be positive. “Remember that Kylo loves us.”

Finally, she heard them come in the house and held Benji’s hand, waiting.

Half of his face was covered in gauze and tape. The other eye, the one that locked on her instantly,
was red with thick bags underneath. He still managed a tight smile. “Hi.”

Benji looked at her and then looked at him. “It hurts?”
He wasn’t steady on his feet but only Rey seemed to notice it. He’d just flown for several hours after leaving the hospital. He wasn’t going to be close to normal for days. But he was there now and she could take care of him. They all could.

“Yeah, buddy, it hurts. But we got the bad guy.” Kylo put his arm around him, brushing her shoulder in the process. She slid closer, shaking her head at him. He pursed his lips, looking like whatever he’d been arguing with outside remained. “He didn’t hit my eye. That’s the main thing. George and Owen are overreacting.”

“No, they’re not, Ben,” Han said, coming in from the kitchen. “You have thirty-nine stitches in your face. He got you good.”

“It’s actually thirty-seven…”

Han sighed. “Go upstairs and rest. I can hear that you have a headache.”

Glaring out of one eye, Kylo stood. He reached down and Benji climbed into his arms. After glancing at Han, Rey followed, watching every cautious step that he took up the stairs. She really couldn’t catch him in any way but could keep him from falling if she pushed hard enough.

“It’s not that bad,” he said to them both, settling onto the bed. He ran his hand through Benji’s hair, focusing on him. “Do you want to see it?”

“Kylo, no.” Rey sat on the other side of the bed, shaking her head. “Only the doctor should take off those bandages.”

But Benji was nodding, putting a wary hand on his godfather’s face. “It hurts?”

“Just a little.” He smirked and glanced up at her. “I looked at it at the airport when they finally left me alone. I haven’t had a conscious moment alone for a week.”

She frowned at him. Of course he wouldn’t be able to leave it be. “Hux just said you were cut. He didn’t say how bad. And Han and Leia haven’t said much. Why couldn’t you tell me the truth?”

He sat up, working at the tape. Hissing, he peeled off the outer later so they could get a glimpse of the mess of red and black underneath the gauze. His skin looked tight, pulled into the sutures and leaving it looking sickly. His eye was taped shut and the line of stitches crossed up his cheek and then up his eyebrow to his forehead. They’d shaved off half of his eyebrow; the other side just sat there alone, closer to his nose. Of course he wanted to look at it. Benji’s mouth was open and reached out his small hand. Kylo nodded and he leaned down, letting him brush his cheek.

“Hurts,” the small boy said, feeling the threads before pulling away.

“Yeah, buddy, it hurts. But it will get better if I’m careful. It’s like when you get hurt. It feels better if you don’t scratch at it, even if it itches.” Kylo leaned back, securing the tape and hiding the wound from them again. He still smiled at Benji, running his hand through his dark hair. “Want to take a nap with me?”

Benji nodded and Kylo stretched out, letting him climb onto his chest. He started sucking his thumb, instantly lulled by the warm body on the bed. Kylo closed his eye and let his head fall back.

“Rey, can you stay with us?” The voice was suddenly exhausted and pained, touching on his true fear in the moment.

She was still sitting on the edge of the bed. She wanted to be angrier with him but she couldn’t. He
looked so tired. It had been so long since she’d seen him like that. And back then, there had also been too many stitches.

Nodding, she slid over on the bed, resting her head down to stare at the side of his face, now hidden from her again. She covered his hand with hers and dropped her voice. “What happened?”

He licked his chapped lips. “We had him cuffed, but he was resisting. I had him down on the ground and another officer asked me a question. I only had to lose focus for a second and he turned and…got me. There had been a knife in his back pocket and he got a hand loose and…and then I was down. I didn’t do the pat down but I should have double-checked. I thought I would lose my eye; I thought he hit my eye. There was so much blood. I’ve never heard George yell that much before.”

She wanted to ask if they had shot the guy after but was worried about Benji hearing. She hoped that whoever had done that to him was dead. Shifting closer, she closed her eyes. “Han and Leia wanted me to come but I couldn’t. I’m sorry.”

She slowly realized that he couldn’t really turn his head to look at her. He wasn’t avoiding her; this was one of the consequences of an error that he would always have to live with. “I was out of it or angry most of the time. The stitches have to come out soon and then we’ll see how it really is. Even with plastic surgery, there’s going to be another scar.”

The thought had hit her earlier. He already didn’t like how he looked. He couldn’t see himself through her eyes. Even with the scar, he’d still be him.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s my fault. Don’t be sorry.” He groaned lightly and moved his arm, hugging Benji closer. “I need to try to sleep before my headache gets any worse. Please stay with me.”

She wasn’t going anywhere.

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By the end of the three weeks, the only two people who could calm him down were her and Benji. He’d be patient to a point with everyone else but would look strained whenever Han made him stop working on his laptop or to get off his phone. The strain he put on his one eye at first made them all worry; the ring under his right eye got deeper and the purple tones on his skin made her ache. Now, with both eyes, he still needed to listen to the doctor. And even though she could help him with some things, there were only so many things that she could do. She told him that she wouldn’t read his case files to him or check his emails. He’d looked angry for a moment and then accepted it by leaving the room.

He was looking at old pictures more. And even though she didn’t want to feel it, a sour sensation settled in her chest every time he talked to Grey. A different ache rocked her when he talked to himself, saying that he was sorry to no one that he’d ruined the last part of him that was unscarred.

He had a different tone when he talked to George or Owen. He was mostly asking about cases and updating them that his vision was fine and he could come back early if they needed him.

He slept a lot. Probably because he was bored. She’d come home from school and he’d still be in
pyjamas. He wasn’t really shaving. He’d scratch at his cheeks, reading his email until someone would make him close his laptop. Then he’d flop down and curl up, just like he used to do.

But when it was just the three of them, playing or reading or listening to music, he was just him again. The red slash down his face was healing every day and even though it hurt to look at, it was just another part of him to accept and add to his story. Benji had kissed it better so many times that she thought it would actually work.

She wanted to go back to Virginia with him, but school stood in the way. He’d listened to her complaints about not being allowed to go with him. He looked at her with sympathy. They were really in the same situation, both having to listen or risk more damage in the future. She’d be able to spend time with him in the summer. He’d have time off in August if nothing happened. Even if something did change their plans, she wanted to be at his house for a few weeks. She wasn’t going to college but she was still deciding if Han and Leia would let her move there permanently. Maybe if she stopped asking, they’d agree to it.

There were times that she caught him looking at her from the corner of her eyes when he thought she wouldn’t notice.

Could she tell him how she really felt?

She really only realized it waking up from the nap on that first day he had been back.

She’d woken up first, needing to make sure that they both were still there.

She way he slept, still holding on to his godson, made it hard to control her heart.

The love she had for him wasn’t the same anymore.

He’d stretched her childhood devotion to him almost to a breaking point. She almost understood why now. He was growing up, but still struggled with so much hurt that he didn’t want her to always be weighed down by it. He was being selfish by pushing her away but in that time, she was able to grow up too. Kylo had no reference for how she felt between being seven and fourteen. Those were his lost years but for her, they were the ages that she figured out who she really was. Sometimes she could be angry or sad, but she also had more chances to be happy and feel loved. He’d felt alone and was always afraid for himself and for her, when she came into his life. She’d found friends and mentors, travelled and found subjects in school that weren’t too frustrating. Those years were about healing for both of them, finding out what love meant in an imbalance.

When he almost kissed her, those distant years ago, she got a glimpse of so many of his thoughts and struggles. Being attracted to him had been hard to fight. Her body was so much like his, from how he described he. She wanted to be touched, to be held and cherished, but there was always a small voice that screamed that it was wrong. The voice in his head had been ten times as loud; he had to do so much more to tune it out. His broken heart and mistakes that followed made it hard for him to expect any kindness in the future. He didn’t think that he deserved it.

Over two years ago, he showed her how to heal her vulnerability. How trust was meant to be. Finn wasn’t a mistake to her anymore. It taught her more about herself and who Kylo was to her than any conversation could have. Forgiving her friend had taken so much work that she still thought she hadn’t fully let it go yet. She still didn’t like being alone with him; she could see it in his eyes that he regretted letting his need destroy what they had. Kylo knew that feeling too well and had pushed through so many ruined things. None of them were perfect.

Staying with him in Virginia, watching how his face would change when he was working, helped
her understand why Kylo had softened so much around her. His days at work were spent being very focused, concentrating on so many people and puzzle pieces, that his emotions were pushed down to the bottom. He could only let them out when he felt safe. She gave him that. At his house, at home, wherever they were, she was still what kept him from losing the other part of himself. He had other friends; he had his boss and his partner and spoke with them about many other things. But with her, he could have quiet in his mind. Sitting on his couch, feeling him stroke her hair as he read something that wasn’t work, meant that they both had no worries in that moment.

Watching him sleep in their home now, knowing that he wanted her there, made her shake her head.

She loved him. She loved him like she wanted to be loved. He had made another stupid decision and put himself in danger, but when he shook off his initial self-pity, he’d get through it. He could do it on his own, but knew better now to ask for help.

She had fallen in love with him. Whatever scar that was left, she still wanted to look at his face and feed off the warmth that his eyes could give her. The small touches and gentle hugs were the hints at how he missed physical relationships. He still desired intimacy even though he’d sworn it off. But it had left a hole in him. She hoped that it wouldn’t be there forever.

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One of the only good things about him being home was that they could celebrate their birthdays together for the first time in too long. He didn’t want to do anything but she had friends over. He’d be leaving soon, but having her heart consumed by him had meant she had neglected time with other people she loved.

He had fallen asleep on the couch after dinner, Benji resting peacefully on his chest. Hux had been by earlier and they had sat and talked for a while. Then he left his son so he could have a date night with his wife. She hadn’t missed the brief flash of sadness from Kylo before he turned back to his godson and lost the look. Her friends hadn’t seen it, but it hurt more now.

And they were being teenage girls, watching them from the upstairs landing.

“I really thought the cut would be worse,” Kaydel said, glancing over at her. “It’s like, it could get better? Once it stops being so red and gross.”

She had stared at his face during the entire meal. He pretended not to notice, but still blinked bitter, sarcastic remarks to her that made it hard not to giggle. He mostly helped Benji eat, talking with him more than them. He still saw everything, though. At the same time, he’d had a headache all day. He was trying to work but no one would let him.

He really couldn’t take a break unless they were alone.

“He might be able to get it fixed.” Rose looked at her with raised eyebrows. “Right?”

It made Rey shake her head. “They think, I mean, George thinks that it might be…useful. He can go undercover or something. He doesn’t want to work in narcotics but…he speaks Spanish. Sometimes he dreams in it.”

“He tells you his dreams?” Kaydel sat back, fixing her tank top. “Do you guys still dream about…
what happened?”

Still watching Kylo, Rey bit her lip. “It’s…it’s weird. Sometimes I don’t even think about it. Like, so many other things have happened since then. I don’t want to forget the other kids but I feel better when I don’t think about them so much. It’s not fair that I got to grow up but I can’t be mad at myself forever.”

“We like you better when you’re not mad, Rey, but it’s okay to be mad sometimes.” Rose squeezed her hand. Rose had always listened when she was angry about not being able to live with Kylo. But now that school was almost over, now that the rest of their lives could finally begin, she could finally make the decision on her own.

They left their hiding spot and went back to her room. Everyone else in class was already talking about college. Rey hadn’t applied to anything. She wanted more time to think about it, she said. There was no pressure on her, not from Han and Leia. She’d talked briefly with Kylo before but he was also sure that she had to follow her own path. She’d find what she wanted to do. For now, she could spend time with her friends and help take care of Benji.

Then the conversation turned to prom and she bit her lip, pulling a pillow onto her lap. She didn’t want to go with anyone.

“We could all go together,” Kaydel said suddenly. “All three of us. No stupid boys. Just us.”

Meeting Rose’s eyes, she saw her smile. “It would be so much easier. Like, we could all wear the same dress but in different colours.”

In her mind, when Rey thought about prom, she had some fantasy about Kylo suddenly showing up to take her. To be able to spend the entire night just looking at him as they danced. And Finn could glare and still be jealous, even though he would be with his girlfriend.

“It’s…it’s something I’d like to do.” Rey finally lifted her head to smile.

Things could change in the in between, but it lifted her heart and would give her something else to think about that wasn’t Kylo. She had her school work, her art, and her friends. She had babysitting and helping mom and dad around the house.

Kylo wasn’t that far away.

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Kylo and George came to her graduation.

So did Ransolm. She hadn’t seen him in years and was overjoyed to spend some time with him.

Maybe he would understand why she didn’t want to go to college and instead move to Virginia to take care of Kylo.

He was too serious when she wasn’t there. She’d talk with Grey or Owen, or even George when she’d call just to talk. Kylo was taking on too much, still recovering from his injury. He’d finally been let off desk duty and, from a distance, the scar wasn’t that bad. It was only up close that it reminded her of the dangers he would have to face too often.
Prom had been the three girls, laughing and not caring about everyone whispering about them. All the stupid girls in their class couldn’t get to them. She’d chosen a light-blue dress that was tight at the waist, but flowed down into a sea of glitter and satin. Rose had pink and Kaydel had purple. They got their hair done together and had taken so many pictures that every second had been immortalized. Leia had been so happy to take pictures of them. Inside, she knew that mom hadn’t like the boys skipping their proms to do nothing but hang out. Kylo had said that prom was ‘fucking stupid’ and Poe had only agreed to make him happy. But those were two still fewer pictures of them for the memories of how they were.

He’d been gone for so long that it felt like another lifetime ago.

She thought about him when Finn cautiously asked her to dance. Rose looked at her with pain in her eyes, worrying that she was uncomfortable. It would be fine. It had to be fine. He was going to school in California. He’d be leaving before the end of summer. She still didn’t know what she was going to do. She told him that. Looking at her with sad eyes, he told her again that he was sorry. He’d said that hundreds of times as they treaded carefully into being friends. In the end, she hoped that he wouldn’t fully drift out of her life, but was okay letting him go if she needed to. He wasn’t there that night and she’d only left Rose and Kaydel for a few minutes to speak with Ransolm alone.

But now school was done. Her real friends would stay in touch with her no matter where she was.

“They really don’t care that they stand out,” Ransolm said, leaning against the railing in the June air. George and Kylo were looking at the garden, sipping at glasses of alcohol and smiling more when they thought they were alone. Leia had put in some new flowers and they appeared to be talking about the red blooms, but they were probably talking about a case. “I was right when I said he found his calling.”

Smiling, Rey leaned against him again. Kylo and George were moving as one without thinking at times. She’d seen it a few times with Owen but Kylo really did have his mind on being more like George since the injury.

“He’s trying to be more important than he is,” she said and then sighed. “I missed you so much.”

His hand slowly found her back, rubbing it lightly. “I missed you too, Rey.”

Everything had kept driving her forward. For a moment, it felt good for it all to stop. “Han and Leia don’t want me to move to Virginia. They aren’t telling me what to do but I know that they don’t want me to.”

“Well,” Ransolm started and then sighed, “well, what are they saying?”

She pouted a little and then shrugged. “That I need to be here to take care of Benji. He just turned three and likes spending the night here.”

He nodded. “I saw. He’s a wonderful little boy.”

“He asked me if Kylo lives with Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny.” She smiled at the memory. Kylo had really only been able to come home on holidays and it was what Benji associated him with. “I don’t know what to do.”

Since the accident, Kylo had been more careful to tell her everything that he could. He was cleared for duty faster than she expected, but he missed it too much. The closer he got to thirty, the more frustrated he got about his career and his life. He’d talk to her about it, and then turn to Han and
Leia and outline the best of his ideas. There was a house for sale on his street. They could move there and they could all be closer together.

But Han and Leia liked going for coffee with their friends. Their dinner parties were quieter now but they had their life there. If they were moving anywhere, it would be to Hawaii. Kylo had just rolled his eyes at Han’s joke.

Still, Han would grumble more going up and down the stairs. Leia didn’t just use glasses for reading. Rey noticed that the pill shelf in the kitchen now had more of their medication than hers and Kylo’s. She really only took vitamins and a light anti-depressant, along with her birth control. Kylo’s painkillers were still there. Mom still filled the prescription in case he needed it when he came home.

He didn’t really live there anymore but the pieces of him remained.

But she was tired of just having bits and memories; she wanted to be with him.

“And I’m sure that you told him that they’re not real?” Ransolm grinned at her.

She blushed. “I never should have told you that.”

“I didn’t mean to embarrass you. It’s a cute story.” He looked over to Kylo and George again. Kylo was smiling, almost laughing, at something George was saying. “I think you should follow your heart, Rey. You’re an adult now, but that doesn’t mean you can’t ask for help still.”

“I know,” she said. “It feels…it’s always so weird to do things that Kylo has already done. I went to his school, my locker was almost where his was…is this really my life? I think about that sometimes. Leia and Han wanted me without knowing me but they could have let me go anywhere. Some other family could have adopted me and Kylo…I probably would have never seen him again. I think sometimes that maybe I only remember everything so well because he was always here, reminding me.”

He tilted his head, sighing at her. “You’ve worked so hard for everything, Rey. Your life is really your own and remembering, even when it hurts, can teach us a lot. You will just keep growing and learning and that will show who you really are. You mean a lot to me. Thank you for inviting me tonight.”

Going back into the house, she let her mind trace back all of the important people who’ve come in and out of her life. Like the children from before, they were never really gone as long as she remembered them.

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Everyone, aside from George, had gone home or to a hotel. She had hugged Ransolm one last time, breathing him in and remembering how deep that crush had hit her.

Now, she was finally alone with Kylo in their pyjamas.

Lying on his bed, it felt like it had been fourteen years ago. Looking around, everything was different and new, but still held the echoes of how it used to be. He’d left many of his childhood things there, but most of his books and pictures were gone. Leia still wouldn’t turn it into a guest
room but it would slowly become that.

He ran his hand through her hair, tucking it behind her ear. “I’m so proud of you.”

She had to smile, dropping her eyes for a second. The way he was looking at her made it hard not to move closer, to grip his hip. “I remember saying that to you when you graduated. And then you went and graduated from three more things. High school must look easy after all of that.”

He snorted, but still shook his head. “It’s something you accomplished. You should be proud of yourself.”

She wanted to be. She wanted to believe what he was saying. He was resting against the pillow, the scar mostly hidden. His eyes were tired, but not from more than a long day. He’d be leaving early the next day; there was always more work to do.

Reaching out, she brushed his cheek. “I love you.”

Deep brown eyes met hers. “I love you too. I’m sorry I have to leave again but we’ll be together again soon.”

Together like this or together like she wanted? “Kylo, can I ask you something?”

He was relaxed. He was happy. He was proud of her and looking at her mouth. “Always.”

It was quiet in the house, all of the voices from earlier gone. The lamplight was low, shining from the side of the bed like always. She wasn’t a child and didn’t need it anymore, but it was comforting to have it there. It always meant that she was safe.

And Kylo had spoken to her so gently the entire night. The times that they were alone together, finishing the dishes, he’d been watching how she moved.

He brushed her cheek again, waiting for the question.

But she didn’t have anything to ask.

She leaned forward and kissed him, meeting his mouth and his surprise in one motion. He was still but didn’t pull away. Her body went numb, being so close to his warmth. His lips were softer than she ever imagined.

But he didn’t kiss her back.

The hand on her shoulder tightened as she leaned back. “Kylo?”

His eyes were closed and he was taking deep breaths. She waited, hoping that her heart wasn’t about to break before he finally looked at her again. “You want me?”

It was the pained, sorrowful question that she’d never thought she’d hear from him like this. His eyes were shining and she felt his hands pulling her closer. They gripped her hips. And she wasn’t afraid.

His hand brushed her side, gliding up her body to her face. The way he touched her, the way he was holding her now, turned the past into dust. She was in that moment. When she was out of it she would deal with the fear and sadness and the mourning, but she wanted to lose herself in what she hoped would turn into a deeper kiss, one from him in return.

Slowly, he leaned over. His lips met hers and her body shuddered, a wealth of warmth blossoming
in her chest. He was so soft; the tenderness of his mouth wasn’t asking for more but he still wanted to share this with her.

His hands, his body, everything about him. It was like no one had ever hurt her; it was like he had never hurt her. But he pulled away when she put her hands around his neck, trying to deepen the kiss into something more.

“Rey, we…” he choked out, blinking and then shaking his head. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No, Kylo, I wanted you to.” He was still moving out of her arms, pushing away until he sat up. Even with shorter hair, he still ran his hand through it. When he stopped to dig his nails into it, she didn’t know what to say to get it to stop. “Kylo, please look at me.”

He rubbed his face and then sat back, dropping his hand to scratch at his wrist. “I’m not the right person for you.”

Narrowing her eyes she reached for him but it only made him stand from the bed to look down at her. “Can you just listen to me?” She firmed her face after she spoke, willing him to sit down.

He watched his throat bob as he swallowed. “How can you want me to touch you? After everything, Rey, am I really what you want?”

“I want…” her firm response faltered in her throat. There was a wash of memories when he stepped back, knocking into his television stand. This was where he watched movies or played games, or read until he was too angry and upset to respond. This was where the bedsprings used to squeak for another person whose face was still on the wall. “I want you to love me.”

He stood up straighter. His lip quivered before he looked down. When he met her eyes again, she let herself go numb. For one of the few times that she could remember, his face was unreadable. There were no hints.

He really could hide everything from her if he wanted.

After an aching moment, the look softened. And he was back again. His head fell for a moment before he met her eyes. “I already love you. I just don’t know…I don’t know if I’m the right person who you need to love you.”

How could he say that? He was her heart. Through all of the hurt, through everything, the way forward was with him. He was still the person who she saved all of those years ago. And if she could save them both now, again, she wanted to do it. The springs, the summers and the falls. The Christmases that never lasted long enough. Finding new favourite things. The good things always had to outweigh the bad. She may have felt alone at times without him but she was never truly alone.

He opened his mouth and it quivered for a moment, just the slightest shake of his lip. He shook his head and then looked at her again. “Rey?”

She brushed the wetness from her nose. “Can I decide that? Not you?”

He still stood there, motionless. “Yes.”

Sucking down a breath she found the words that she hoped would be right. “When I close my eyes, I don’t see you like I used to. I don’t know when that changed but I’m…I’m not a baby anymore. I can decide who I want to love. And if I didn’t love you, I don’t know who else I’d love.”
His hands twitched, but she still saw tears in his eyes. “I’ve always come back for you.”

Rey sat up straighter. “Kylo…”

“No, I…” he shook his head and there was the flash of Agent Solo before he came back to himself. “This is…we need to talk about this tomorrow. I have…I have so many feelings for you that this is…hard for me. But I believe you. I don’t know why you love me but I don’t want to ruin it and hurt you.” He wiped at his eyes and exhaled, looking lost for a moment before meeting her eyes. “Please love me enough to let me figure this out.”

She had to nod.

He looked like he wanted to say something else. He took a step forward but stopped himself. He clenched his fists and then shook his head. *I need to be alone.*

Leaving him, she looked at him from the doorway and saw that he was wiping at his eyes. Closing the door behind her, she shuddered away the thoughts.

She finally fell asleep around 3 a.m. But she refused to let herself cry.

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A warm hand stroked her hair, making her stir awake. The sun was hardly up but Kylo was already showered and dressed.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” she answered.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded.

He sighed. “We have to leave earlier than we planned. It’s not what we wanted, but we have to.”

Biting her lip, she nodded. “I get it.”

“Rey.” He tipped her head up, his hand lightly gripping her chin. “Did you mean what you said last night?”

“Everything,” she answered. “Kylo…”

“Shh…” he said.

And he leaned down and his lips met hers. Her eyes fluttered shut, the world slowing down around them. This was the star. This was the spark. The old bubble that they had used to float away in contracted around them, holding them in that moment. Would it have felt the same if he’d kissed her like this four years ago? Maybe her heart hadn’t been ready then, but it was sure now.

Pulling back, he held her eyes for a long and silent moment. “I need…we need to figure this out. When I get back, we’ll talk. I have a hard time knowing my heart sometimes, Rey. I don’t want to leave here without telling you how I feel but it’s all so…I don’t want to say the wrong thing. But
please believe me that I love you. Please let me figure out what that means.”

A tear escaped her eye and he brushed it away, tilting his head. “I believe you.”

Licking his lips, he placed a kiss on her forehead. The warmth of his hands made the hairs on her arms stand up.

They said goodbye downstairs and he left with George.

She was already counting the hours until he’d be able to call her again.

Standing on the porch, she looked around the morning light and swore that the air smelt better.

Chapter End Notes

    Standard warnings in the tags, except for Kylo surviving some edged weapons.

    And it took 46 fucking chapters but here you all go.
Chapter 47

Chapter Summary

Kylo tries to manage a case while also dealing with the past.

See tags for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There wasn’t much Kylo could do but touch his mouth and stare out the window of the taxi in the dull morning light. It was too early. It was earlier than he wanted or needed to leave. Work couldn’t leave him in his thoughts, to let him figure out how he loved her. He’d kissed her; he’d promised her that he loved her, but still lacked the words to tell her everything that she meant to him. He always had a hard time finding those words in the sea of feelings and years that they had shared. Eighteen years—eighteen years and fourteen of them in the world.

And how many of those years had been easy?

Shaking his head, Kylo shut his eyes as his house faded in the distance. “I’m leaving again.”

Beside him, George cleared his throat. “You can’t keep going back to that guilt. We’ve talked about this. You’re not leaving. They are just staying in one place that you can always return to.”

Still blinking away the early morning, Kylo nodded. Movement on the case meant changing his focus but he couldn’t pull his mind from that house just yet. How could she feel that way for him? All he’d done for so long was run from her, push her away, and then trying to rebuild it all. He really didn’t deserve her love. But somehow, he had it. “I know. But it’s…it’s different now.”

He couldn’t look at the other man, keeping his eyes firmly focused on the passing scenery. “There is nothing you can’t tell me, Kylo. And I will need you focused when we land; there is a case we need to review and work to the best of abilities. So tell me now before it gets in the way of doing our jobs.”

His head was still filled with the touch of her lips when he forced himself to sit up straighter. The last half-year had already been difficult. He didn’t need any further questions about his performance. He had stubbornly pushed himself to get back on duty before anyone thought he really should. Getting back to doing something was really the only solution to the feelings in his head and heart. They were getting mixed up again; he had to stop them.

“Rey kissed me,” he said, grazing the window with his knuckle. “And I kissed her back.”

A slight sigh. “And what are you planning to do about this?”

“I don’t know.” He met his eyes and didn’t see disapproval or shock. It was the same gentle patience that he rarely saw from George at the office, but quite often when they spoke off duty. He still had his kindness. How could he have both him and Rey still believe in him in some way?
“She’s about to start a new chapter of her life. She’s come a very long way after being through a great deal of more than growing pains. The world is really open to her in a different way than it was for you. You can’t overthink how she’s feeling right now. Or how you’re feeling right now.” George clasped his knee, squeezing it lightly as he sighed. “But if you need to figure it out, I think you should do it by talking with her when we have some down time this evening, or tomorrow. I’m afraid that you can’t really dwell on this right now. We have three dead families to deal with.”

That had been the call that morning. A third house had been hit in Florida. They’d already been looking at the two previous dead families and the plan was to head down after a proper goodbye, not a rushed one by the front door. They’d been months apart. Now, this one, had only happened after a two-week gap. Now, with fifteen dead bodies, they really needed to be there and be professional.

He’d started down this road so he wouldn’t feel so lost in the world anymore. He’d had a goal when everything had been at its worst. It had been a selfish reason until he realized at the bottom of it was desire to help people.

Now, he really only wanted to help one.

“I’ll be ready. I don’t want anyone to doubt me,” Compartmentalizing: again, like always, it would have to be what he had to lean on. He’d have seven years of harsh practice, learning how to hide how he was really thinking. At the end of the day, he’d be able to talk to her.

Winding through the airport, clearing security and having his gun back at his side, he balled his feelings for Rey up inside of him. They had to be hidden in a corner where none of the darkness he was about to see could reach them. His feelings for her could be tucked in the same spot, ready to be examined when he could put them in the right order.

The person she deserved to love, the one to hold her and show her that life could feel safe and warm, had to say the right things. He couldn’t ruin something like this again through misunderstandings and unsaid thoughts. He also couldn’t lose something like this again.

Blinking at the thought, he sighed to himself. He wasn’t listening to George. He couldn’t make long-term plans without talking to her first.

They had to wait to board. Not that long, just a half an hour, but it was enough time to try to reorient his thoughts by looking through the information that they had again.

He managed to text Rey that he already missed her. Her response in return warmed his heart, but also helped him focus: *I miss you but I’m okay.*

He wouldn’t be able to have his head together if he had been left to drift. They had to identify the connections, possible motives, and the potential suspect.

The next time his phone buzzed, he hoped that it was her again. Instead it was just Grey, saying that he was cutting the grass that day and he owed him. He could have asked anyone else to take care of it while he was away, but it was easiest to lean on his friend.

God, did he owe him so much.

“Ready to go?” George nudged him and he tucked his phone away, finally ready to board.

“Absolutely. I have some things I think we can discuss on the plane.” It wasn’t a lie. There was something about the most recent scene that had instantly made his mind start to turn, accepting that there was another duty for him at that moment.
Grey just had to step into the room and he grabbed him, forcing a kiss on his mouth. Surprise knocked him back for a second before his arms came around his neck, allowing himself to be dragged towards the bed. It was the same hungry mouth that he had a hard time letting go of. The other man was stunned for a second and then returned the kiss with instant passion and want. It had been too long. And he really needed this now. And maybe he missed him too.

He had Gregor down in the bed, kissing up his neck, as he let his mind go white. It was like with Rey in the bathtub. He wanted to be there but also fighting against it at the same time.

How could he leave her? How could Finn have done that to her? His mind was still racing as he lunged against the strong body beneath him, wanting more instantly.

“So we’re this sort of friends again?” Grey looked up at him and grinned, even as Kylo settled on top of him. For a moment there was a flash in his eyes and he ran his hand along his cheek, making Kylo lean into it. The familiar, gentle hand kept his blood going. He was getting hard already. He had been thinking about this the second he had sat down on the plane, wanting to focus on anything but how he’d left Rey. The moment he had texted him, telling him where to be, he knew what he thought that he needed. But Grey was still talking, stroking his face. He was already annoying him more than he needed. Just get naked. Just let this happen. Stop delaying it. “What happened? You look freaked out. Is this the academy or something else?”

“Something else. Something bad, but I don’t want to talk about it right now.” He studied the other man’s mouth and the curve of his nose. This was how it would have to be. “I...I need this right now. Can you...can we live in the moment and deal with the rest later?”

Gregor’s dark lashes fluttered and he nodded, the flirtation from the past summer rushing back in a breath. He had him there. He could tell him what to do. He just had to hear that he wanted to be with him again. He’d bought condoms for the first time in years and wanted to use them.

Grey pulled him down and kissed his cheek; the sensation lingered like his voice. “You told me to meet you at a hotel. It’s all about the moment.”

Seductive. There was seduction in those words.

He surged up and Kylo had a warm and familiar mouth to dive into. He ground their hips together and grunted as lust took hold. He couldn’t start thinking again. He wanted this, they both did. He had knowing hands reaching under his shirt, pulling it free from his trousers. Fingers were brushing his stomach, up to his chest.

He’d have to be back at Quantico in the morning. But he could have tonight.

“I want you to fuck me.” The words came out firmer and more certain than he thought they would.

Still, Grey snorted and shook his head. He brushed some of his hair aside, eyeing him. “Kylo, come on.”

“Please.” He couldn’t help but feel Rey’s vulnerable body against him, asking him to touch her, as his voice dropped to pleading. It was all he had allowed himself to think about on the plane back, how much pain she had been in and how he had needed to leave her again. His head was cyclical.
He was too lost to break it. He couldn’t go back to Quantico in this state. Everything about his body and mind felt wrong at that point. She’d been so hurt and he’d been forced to leave again. Holding her body, feeling the gentle curves and the smoothness of her skin...how could he leave her like that?

Shutting his eyes, Grey groaned. “You fucker. You can’t ask me something like that and expect me not to ask questions. Get off of me.”

“Don’t you want me?” He still held him down on the bed, needing to hear the truth.

Their eyes locked and he instantly wanted to pull away.

“Look, these last few months have been weird for me. Getting to be your friend has taken some getting used to so you can’t just change your mind because something fucked up has happened. Get off of me unless you want me to punch you in the face.” The glare he gave him told Kylo that he was serious.

He slowly rolled off of him to stare at the ceiling, his legs hanging over the edge of the bed. He could feel every groove of the tile beneath him. It was what he’d been doing while he waited for Gregor to get to the hotel at the airport; he’d just been studying the shapes and colours of the room that wasn’t in the barracks and wasn’t the safety of home. This was anonymous. He really only had tonight. He’d have to be back early the next morning and didn’t have time for talking. His need for physical release was pressing too hard.

“Tell me what happened. I won’t fuck you if you don’t tell me what’s bothering you so much.” Grey sat up, looking down at him. “Do you want to get together again? Is that it? You have to tell me what is going on right now, Kylo. Because I can’t make a move without knowing it.”

“How...how do I do this?” He met his eyes, holding them as he searched for both why he thought this would fix things along with how to tell him what happened.

“What? Go back to the no-fun police? Be away from her?” And then Gregor’s eyes fell. “Or be with me?”

Sucking in a breath, Kylo felt guilt surge through him from both sides. “Something happened when I was home that I don’t know how to deal with.”

He didn’t know what he wanted. Since letting Grey slowly into his life, mostly through texts at night after he’d texted Rey or Hux, he had seen the gradual changes he was trying to make. He was taking a practical diploma now, not a degree that he procrastinated on too much by partying. He lived with George. He was trying hard, but still stumbling into figuring out what he wanted. It would be so easy to try to be with him, to know that he’d have someone.

But at the same time, Rey was in a world of hurt and betrayal. Her wounds were too fresh to scratch off the first signs of healing. He’d taught her how to be this way. He’d been too focused on killing the aches of the past within his body through a physical relationship. The parts she had seen when she was a child had only been the good sides. And even if he’d told her more, it didn’t erase those moments. But now he was stuck there, being drawn into doing it again. No. This had to stop. No, he had to think about her. Being fifteen and thinking that no one would ever want her was something he shared so deeply with her. When she was ready to talk again, he’d focus on that. And that taking time would probably not be harmful; she would probably end up in fewer hotel rooms with former flings.

“Rey’s boyfriend assaulted her,” he numbly spoke, not wanting to let the words really get out.
“What? Like raped? Holy shit.” Grey had to say the word. He just had to say it. But he still gaped at him with concern.

“Not like…it was rape but only digital penetration. He thought…he had some bright idea to go down on her and put his fucking fingers inside of her. He put his mouth on her like he used to do, tasting her and molesting her against her will. She cried. But she couldn’t scream. She froze. She said no. She felt trapped. He brought it all back for her. I think he wanted to have…intercourse with her. But she found the strength to push him away. If she hadn’t, either my parents or I would have killed him. Or at least made sure he went to jail.” Exhaling, he shut his eyes. “But I was there…we could work on getting through it.”

“Right at Christmas too. That kid won’t know what hit him when you’re in your g-man suit with a gun the next time you’re in town. But that’s so shitty, Ky. Did you talk her through it? All that ‘it’s not your fault, no means no’ shit?” Grey seemed genuinely concerned, despite what he was saying, when he looked at him again. Kylo couldn’t hold back the flash of annoyance. Grey caught it and reached out, touching his shoulder. He squeezed it for a moment before sitting back, swallowing how he had just sounded. “She must have been really messed up. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s…I wanted her to have space and find someone she cared about,” he mumbled. “It was so hard. Reliving everything was hard. But what if this is what I taught her? What if she only wanted a boyfriend because I had one at her age? I didn’t want to admit it, but this is my fault. She saw us together so many times. She heard us. She’s been asking about sex since she was...since we taught her the right words to understand her abuse, to try to help her think about sex in a positive and healthy way. She’s asked me to be her boyfriend so many times and when she was small it was...it was like all of my other fantasies. I used to not really live in reality before he died. Most days, I still don’t. I go back to thinking I’m dead and it’s just a spiral.”

Sighing, the other man nodded. “Yeah, I get that. I still don’t live in reality. I wouldn’t be here if I did. But this isn’t your fault. You had so much going on and you found someone who loved you even if you...even if you made things complicated and hard. You deserved to try to have a healthy relationship with sex, just like she does. You don’t get raped as a kid and not have issues. You’ve both got them. And you can help her through it.”

Kylo raised an eyebrow at him, waiting for another snide remark. He got a shove in return. “Come on, Kylo. My second step-mom was a rape councillor. You don’t hear her crying alone at night and not ask what’s going on. I thought it was just because dad ditched me with her and two toddlers to hang out with you.” He looked away for a moment and dropped his eyes. “I got all of that talk and still thought the fucking world should revolve around me. So, yeah, I think I get what you’re saying.”

The months of figuring out if he could trust him were finally firmed. He wanted to sit up and hug him but stayed in place, not trusting himself to move. “She lashed out at me and I deserved it. Her entire life has always been me messing up and her having to live with it. I…she wanted to be clean. She wanted to take a bath and asked me to wash her.”

Grey sucked in a long breath. “How could you…I can’t…how?”

His parents had asked the same question when they realized he hadn’t just sat beside the bathtub but had held her in the water. It was after that, only shortly before he needed to leave, that they really understood how difficult the entire ordeal had been for them. To anyone on the outside, it would have been embarrassing. But he’d done what she asked and it had been utterly painful to hear her soft whimpers as he learnt her body: firm and toned with expanses of hidden softness. Caressing her breasts—even if it was in the action of cleansing—had made him react. Forcing his
body not to embrace that physical need had been so exhausting and weighed heavily on his brain. Like before, like when he’d almost kissed her, he was just as rotten as Snoke had been. He was turned on when he shouldn’t be. When he finally forced the feeling away, focusing solely on the context of the situation and how much she was hurting, he was able to escape it. But it didn’t mean he had forgotten it.

That’s why he reached out to Grey. That’s why he wanted someone to punish him.

“I had my underwear on. She was so fragile and wanted to forget the hands. I touched her everywhere. I feel…I did it to help her so I shouldn’t feel guilty about it but I still do.” He was speaking outside of his body, watching them talk instead of really being there. “I told her I could quit the academy and stay but she wouldn’t let me.”

“Yeah, you’ve done all this work. Don’t throw it away.” Grey rubbed a slow circle on his shoulder, reminding him that he was really there. “So it brought back a lot of stuff for you and your solution was to ask me to fuck you? That’s pretty fucked up and unfair to me, you know that?”

He winced. “I know. I’ve worked so hard not to do these things but I couldn’t go back to Quantico without being able to focus. So I was selfish. Again.”

Grey nudged him up and he hugged him, arms warm and inviting again despite his tone. “I don’t forgive you and I’m pretty pissed off right now but we need to…talk. And I fucking hate that we’re both suffering here. I still don’t know why you do the things that you do and it’s another reason why I want to be around you. But it fucking sucks that you had to leave her for the world’s worst summer camp.”

He had to tell him. It couldn’t go unsaid any longer.

“I reacted when she was against me. My body didn’t know the difference, whether or not she was in pain. I had to do it for her; it was all she wanted. But my fucking body wanted more. And if I hadn’t pictured autopsy photos, death, and sadness, she would have felt it. I can’t trust my body and it makes me…nervous. Unsteady. Unfocused.” He sighed into the embrace, needing the warmth. “I’m sorry for dragging you here because of…”

“Hey, shut up.” Sitting back, Gregor shook his head. “You’re a little messed in the head right now and even though I really want to, I can’t. I spent the entire fall turning my life upside down and trying to figure out how to be your friend without thinking about sleeping with you all of the time. And if we did have sex tonight, I’d be totally fucked up. You’d be totally fucked up. You know how much I like you. But I really don’t want to leave here thinking that there’s still a chance for something more.”

In only less than a half a year, they’d switched places. And if he gave in, he knew that he wouldn’t be able to let him go either. There were annoying parts to him, but knowing that he was working towards a future made it so tempting to imagine a life together. It would be a safe one, one that he could shape. It was easy sexual chemistry, one that had burnt hot in the moment that nuclear weekend. There were only known dangers. He wasn’t small and helpless; if he lost control, Grey could overpower him.

“Grey…”

“No, Kylo. I’m…look, you’ve never gone from having tons of random, casual sex to trying to figure your shit out before. Dad fucking knows why I take long showers.” Gritting his teeth, Gregor flopped back on the bed. “So yeah, I fucking want you. And I can’t have you. So whatever you wanted to get out of this has backfired on you. We are friends. We are just friends.”
Rubbing his eyes, he finally nodded. “But can you stay the night anyway? I have to be at Quantico before 8 a.m. So it won’t be late.”

“Yeah, sure. I mean we can talk.” Gregor paused to exhale loudly. “And it will be fucking boring but what’s the point of being an adult if you’re not fucking miserable. But those pricks at the academy will see through you if you show up and are moping around. So we’ll talk. Fucking best night of my life. But we’re leaving this room as just friends. I’m hungry. Order us something. I need to use the washroom.”

He left and Kylo finally had to force himself to breathe and move.

They ate room service and Kylo was reminded how he hadn’t really seen him since August. It had been training every step of the way since then. There had been challenging courses and learning how to work with new people, who were equally as focused as he was. There was always a new challenge or problem to solve. He was closest to Jannah of all his classmates; her laser focus on getting into anti-terrorism mirrored his own desires towards stopping serial killers or murderers in general. She’d lost her father in a bombing when he had been overseas at work. She had also been a small child who’d had her world turned upside down. The bits of his life that he’d revealed to her made it easy to share mutual pains.

And then there was texting Gregor or Rey. Or getting updates about Benji from Hux and Paige. The short hours that he was allowed to use his phone were never enough to get him out of feeling so isolated and pressured.

Still, every update from Rey had told him that she was happy with her boyfriend. How she wanted him to trust him, to like him. How he couldn’t intimidate him when he was there on Christmas. And that boy had ruined it all.

She had her friends. She had his parents, the endlessly patient and kind people who watched them constantly come together only to fall apart again.

Grey really had to leave that room as a friend that night. Taking a long look at him, he quietly began to unravel whatever attraction that was left for him. He’d hurt him that night and was asking a lot of him to keep something like this private. He could never betray him again.

Leaning back, setting his back against the bed, he sighed. “Thank you for not letting me make another mistake, Grey. Are you…are you okay?”

They were sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed, far enough apart purposely. The empty dishes from room service had been shoved aside.

“It’s okay. I mean, I’m…I’m sorry that I said I didn’t want to deal with your sort of complicated. Because now I really want to. But friends is good.” He turned and smiled at him. “And when you’re done with this shit and working with dad, we can both bitch about him. So, there’s that.”

Sighing, Kylo reached out to brush an eyelash off of his cheek. “Why is your nickname Grey and not Greg?”

He snorted a laugh. “You’re just asking me that now? Fuck. Okay, I went swimming when I was four or five and my mom, who is also in the running for being the world’s worst parent, let me be out there for so long and didn’t realize how cold the water was. I came home and my skin was just…grey. Dad freaked out and wrapped me in blankets, hugging me like he’d never done before. ‘You’re just so grey.’ I was sick for two weeks and it fucking sucked. But the name stuck. And anyone named Greg is an asshole so I guess it wasn’t that bad.”
“And you got to miss school.”

“Yeah, there was that.” He eyed him, then sighed again. “Dad’s had grey hair since he was thirty. So my time is coming soon.”

“You’ll look fine. It will be distinguished.”

“You’re a prick.”

Kylo smiled, then felt his face falter. “He was the first one to call me Ky. It took me…a while to hear others call me that and not think about him and how much it hurt.”

“That shit is always going to hurt,” Grey said, meeting his eyes for a long, drawn-out moment before getting up and picking their plates up off the floor.

He was still going over his old thoughts as they got ready for bed. He called Rey, hearing lingering weakness in her voice, but also a distant determination that he hoped would only get stronger. She couldn’t let this break her.

And if his friend hadn’t stopped him, he would have probably made a mistake that he could have never taken back.

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“He got in the same way as he did at the last two sites. It’s through the oldest daughter’s window.”

He stared at the picture of the window as Owen spoke, quirking his head, before looking down at the image of the bed. Everything had been measured and photographed, but evidence was still being gathered. They couldn’t walk through the scene until it had all been collected. Step by step, inch by inch, they were going through the family’s lives and how it led to their deaths.

The blonde girl was facing down, but there was a wealth of blood spilling out from beneath her throat. He’d obviously caught her, forced her down onto her knees, and slit her throat before throwing her down onto the mattress before moving on.

But there was one spot of blood that bothered him. He tapped at it and slid the picture across the table. “What do you think this is?”

Owen looked at the image and then pulled it up on the laptop, casting the image onto the larger display with one click. Now, they could all see the dead girl in a room that had used to be hers but now belonged to no one. “It could just be blood splatter, maybe from the knife.”

Kylo shook his head, standing from his chair. The room was sticky hot and he hated where they were working. The cops there had really given them the worst conference room possible, probably purposely. “But we already know he’s left handed. He slit her throat and all of the castoff is on the other wall. This one spot, the one that’s alone, where did this one come from? Is it…could it be from him?”

Nodding, George looked to one of the officers. “Have we typed the spot yet? It does stand out.”

The man licked his lips, glanced at him, then nodded. “I’ll go see what results we have. DNA
won’t be back, but if it’s his, that would be…”

George waved him off before shifting to study the image further. “I don’t think it’s from him. But what’s it from…”

“We need to look at it directly.” Kylo snorted, slightly. “But there is something here. If we can get the forensics to tell us the direction of the splatter…”

Owen folded his arms, looking from the screen back to him. “Tell us what you’re thinking so we can either rule it out or embrace it. Because I have no idea why you don’t think this is him accidentally cutting himself. It’s clearly a big knife.”

He wanted to be at the scene too. They all did. But this would have to do for now. Kylo had to put his frustration into words.

“But he’s getting more comfortable with what he’s doing. This is…” he stopped and scratched at his wrist, frowning at the rising red bump. He focused on his arm for a moment and frowned. “How many mosquito bites have you gotten the last few days?”

Owen laughed. “It’s over 90 degrees every day and it’s impossible for anyone other than you to wear long-sleeve shirts. So when night comes, they are out there and find a way in.”

He pulled his sleeve down again, ignoring the comment. “What happened the last time you swatted one?”

Shrugging, Owen narrowed his eyes but started to look at the picture with gradual acceptance. “I burst it. I was half asleep with the window open. It was fat and the blood just…burst.”

There. There they had it.

“But the blood rolled down your arm. It happened to me a few summers ago. If you have a broken screen or leave the door open, then they get in and bite you if you’re not listening. And since I have troubles sleeping most of the time I will hear them. It’s only when I’m exhausted or listening to music that I don’t hear them.” He slowly pointed at the small red patch on the girl’s body. “The screen must have been cut before. She opened the window because it’s hot and they didn’t have AC. He had been planning this one too. This wasn’t more rushed. We need to see that autopsy report to make sure.”

Owen was always more enthusiastic than George and it made Kylo smirk to see him grin. “She didn’t hear him! Her phone is right there. The headphones were still in her ears.”

George looked up from taking notes and Owen winced before sitting down and shrugging. The local cops shouldn’t see them getting excited about breaking down a scene.

Kylo breathed in and schooled his face. “He’s only been stalking the daughters. But after he kills them…”

“He doesn’t want the families to miss them.” George turned and nodded to Owen. “Or he’s jealous that they got to have her for so long. It’s entirely sexual.”

Still staring at the dead girl, Kylo shook his head. “But how did he pick them?”

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He hung the painting that Rey had finished while he was gone on the wall of the office. He turned to make sure that it was sitting right and she nodded.

“It’s straight. It’s right.” She still tilted her head and bit her lip. “I don’t think it’s perfect yet. I should have worked on it more. I could have made it better.”

Shaking his head, he stepped back to stand beside her. He really had looked down on her his entire life. But she was almost tall enough now that he wasn’t always looking at the top of her head. It was always different when they were talking on his bed before she said goodnight and went to her room.

“It’s something you’ve done. That makes it perfect,” he said, resisting the urge to put his arm around her. The outcome of the case had been more positive than negative but it still wasn’t resolved. He was allowed to go home. Owen had taken the reigns and he would finish things on this end. Just because his reports were too long didn’t meant that they were bad. It meant that Rey’s summer wouldn’t be ruined, but left him at an impasse with work. It would all be so much easier if she was there all of the time.

But he’d spoken with Han and Leia. Her outbursts would be lessened if she always had someone to talk to. Text messages aren’t enough, Ben. Making her run to the neighbours’ wasn’t enough if she was afraid, Ben.

He wasn’t good enough for her. He’d never been. He was leaving her to her own thoughts and if they were anything like his, they were dangerous enough. But Grey had been there. Grey wasn’t just a neighbour. It would be like her running to Hux if there was a problem.

Why was everyone always questioning him?

“You know I checked the cameras, right? There was just a black smudge but that looks like camera problems.” He was reminded to tell her, just by his own thoughts. He had looked at the footage at least a dozen times and even though it looked right, it still made him nervous.

She looked up and nodded. “The cops thought the same thing. And I saw you checking when you got back. I was scared but Gregor took care of me. If he hadn’t been here… I could have done it on my own. Maybe… maybe I was just hoping George would be there. But Gregor was okay.”

They’d been working together since he’d been gone. The rest of her time there, she’d spend her days at the library while he was at work. It eased his fear to know that his friend would guide her through some experience. She still needed to decide what she wanted to do with her life. And he wasn’t about to pressure her like he’d done to him. Come to school with me. I need you. I won’t make it without you. All of those pleading words. What would he be doing if he pressured her like he had done to him? It would have left them both in arguments. If her path led her back to him, then it would be right. He could only guide it as much as his common sense would allow him.

Still, having her there felt better. It would be easier if she wasn’t there alone, however.

An old ache shined through again.

Rey made tea. She had started getting interested in tea, making cups for him when he was too focused on work to realize it. They sat outside and he sighed at the state of the trees in the backyard.

“I need to get someone to look at those.” He glared at how the branches drooped. It just didn’t look
good. The neighbours would complain.

“You can’t do it yourself?” she asked, following his eyes.

He sipped at his cup, the one from grandma’s house. “It’s really too much work. You need a ladder and sheers and… I’d rather just pay someone to do it.”

“You sound like Han.” Rey was looking at her cup as she smirked. “Well, I don’t know. Someone else can fix it.”

He smiled at how she mocked his father’s voice. “I’m also a busy man.”

The smile he got from Rey made him pause and take her in. The way her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. The way her smile lit up her face and hit his soul in a new way. He wanted to reach out, to cup her face and pull her close. He could shift his chair so she could rest her head in his lap. He could run his hands through her hair and hear her sigh.

But so much stood in the way. She was a melody without a written song, one that he’d hope that they would finish one day.

The rest of her time there, they found a routine. He would get to hear about the reading circle and the children that would attend. Rey found a niche in talking to the little girls there, some with fathers in similar employment to him. The kids also thought that it was funny that her name was so similar to Grey’s. Having dinner with him now turned into him mostly sitting quietly, listening to the day the two had shared and enjoying a conversation that didn’t make his head hurt. There were no meetings about blood analysis. There was no one telling him that his reports were too long and overly detailed. There were just two friends gossiping about their coworkers.

He hoped that the next summer, the one after she graduated, would show his parents that the stability her therapists wanted could be found there.

And he didn’t feel alone either.

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Exhausted, he still took a drink with Owen. They’d gotten far today, further than he’d expected. There was a profile. There were ideas about motive. Getting the forensics back would connect it all and they could narrow down their list. But just being able to sit and think about nothing would make tomorrow so much easier.

“You’ve been really focused, Kylo. If George forgets to tell you, we are proud of you.” Owen lifted his glass and Kylo mirrored the motions. “Hopefully we’ll at least have blood typing tomorrow.”

He nodded, sipping at his glass. “I think sometimes that I hate how many things I remember. But that mosquito really annoyed me.”

He had also been bothered by the separate beds but he was slowly realizing why it had upset him so; he still had to reconcile the old parental, fraternal memories with how it was now. It was easier to admit how long he’d been attracted to her now that it was about to be something real.

Owen finished his drink and waved at the bartender for two more. Kylo was fine with his partner
making the decisions. He’d been worn down to nothing at that point and was willing to have someone else make the call for him. “We need to follow the air conditioning angle. Most people have it here. Our families don’t. That’s where we will get him, if he’s been casing the houses.”

Kylo was nodding, but also scanning the hotel bar. It was late, but there were enough people there. He didn’t like being back in Florida. He didn’t like how it was bringing out too many emotions and buried memories in him. The last time he’d been there had been over ten years ago. George and Owen knew him well at that point. That explained the compliment. They knew what he was falling into when he was away from work.

“We’ll get something from outside of the window. I just want the results quicker than we can get them. I still need to work on that part. I don’t…sometimes I want things to happen quicker than they do.” He took a sip and set down his glass. He finally shrugged out of his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. “If he’s already escalating…”

“Kylo, stop. We have tomorrow to think about this. How’s your face?” Owen sat back too. He’d already shed his jacket, revealing the short sleeves he’d worn throughout the day. “How is your head?”

He’d hidden the concussion from everyone when it had happened, when his face was destroyed. He knew the symptoms. But he also knew not to complain about them. Headaches could have come from having half of his face in sutures. But of course Owen and George knew. “I am fine. More or less. The troubles with sleeping come from the case but I’m…still learning. Adjusting. Maz and I are going to talk when we get back. I’ve been talking to her more often since the injury. I’m not…everyone thinks I’m vain and maybe I am. Is that what people think of me?”

Owen snorted. “Your mother knows you like tailored suits. You work out more than you need to. Just because you don’t look at your reflection all of the time doesn’t mean that you’re not vain. None of us like to be wrong but sometimes you have a problem with it. It took me a long time to learn that I can be wrong. Maybe you learned a good, early lesson by being injured. We all can make mistakes but there are some situations where we can’t make them.”

“How long have you been waiting to tell me that?” Kylo asked, raising his gapped eyebrow.

“Since the moment you went into surgery. That exact moment.” Owen grinned. Kylo returned it with one of his own. “You know that they knocked you out only because you wouldn’t stop moving around?”

He smirked. “I was so angry. I thought they were going to take my eye.”

“Thank God they didn’t. Silla likes your eyes. I have to hear about it all of the time. There are just some days when I think that she worries more about you than me…”

He accepted a third drink, just to hear Owen talk about Silla. She was getting tired about not being married after being engaged for so long. Like him, it was hard to plan for the future. Everything couldn’t just stop for a while; time was never still and always created new problems.

He was about to finish his drink and excuse himself to bed when his constant sweeping of the room finally paid off. The desk clerks were changing shifts. And he spotted someone that rocked him back to a distant, impulsive night that had almost ruined his life. That had doomed another life to death.

Leaving Owen without thinking, he strode towards the lobby. The dull light of the bar was suddenly washed into the fake light of dishonest ambience. In his ears, his heartbeat guided him.
He was sixteen again and stalking out of a car, looking for vengeance.

His feet stilled and he narrowed his eyes at the older man behind the counter even as he greeted him. “How can I help you?”

That face was there again. It had aged. It had gotten fatter. There was less hair. But it was him.

“Why didn’t you love your son?” The words left his mouth as his mind was turned over to his body.

There he was. Alive and working: the same man he’d assaulted when he was sixteen. None of this would have happened if it wasn’t for him.

“I’m sorry, I…” the other man tilted his head, squinting at him. Of course he looked different. He was so far removed from how he looked when he was sixteen. But he knew that his eyes were the same, the same ones that Rey loved and made Silla swoon. He watched that thought settle into realization as the man suddenly gaped at him. “It’s…what are you doing here?”

“I’m working. Answer my question.”

He winced and then tapped on the counter. “I didn’t…I had a lot of problems. I’ve been…how is he?”

Kylo stepped back, clenching his jaw. “What are you talking about?”

“Look, I’ve been out of his life for so long. I never wanted to accept the two of you together…but is he happy?” Mr Dameron’s eyes seemed to shine in the fake light.

Blinking, Kylo just shook his head. “He died seven years ago. But we got your letters and we burnt every one of them. He was happier with me than he ever was with you.”

A look of grief, a look of pure pain, washed over the other man’s face. Kylo felt a spike of sympathy but pushed it down into hate. “I didn’t…no one told me. He’s…he’s really gone?”

“Yes,” Kylo hissed. “And I’m glad you didn’t know.”

He hated himself the moment the words left his mouth but he turned before the man could see the tears that had been forming. Still, he called after him. “I never sent him anything! I never sent any letters! I only knew that he was with you!”

Rubbing at his face, Kylo stalked back to the bar. “I need one more.”

Owen had been watching the entire thing and frowned. He still ordered one last round and it vanished from Kylo’s glass as soon as it was placed down. His mouth burnt and he glared at the empty glass.

“We can talk about this tonight or tomorrow. But we are going to talk about whatever that was.” Owen emptied his own glass and settled a long glare at him. “Think about it tonight, but not tomorrow.”

When he finally was in bed, finally changed and needing to sleep, he had to stick to those words or else everything would roll backwards again. He couldn’t afford that.

How could he tell Rey about this without bringing back old hurts?
It was endlessly embarrassing to ask for help. Anytime his eye would blur or lose vision, he’d have to resist throwing whatever he was holding. Hiding the concussion was even worse; he’d thrown up almost every morning since being home and was dizzy all of the time. He hid it all underneath an agitated demeanour. He hated being home. He hated not being in his own house. The reminder of his coming birthday didn’t sit well; he was nearly thirty and was sleeping in his childhood room again. It wasn’t the same as before but the colour of the walls was still identical. He’d paint it if he had the energy but about the only thing he felt compelled to do was work, followed by being angry that he either couldn’t or wasn’t allowed to by his meddling parents.

But he didn’t hate spending time with Rey and the company of his godson. The little boy was fascinated with watching the wound heal. He also liked naps. And naps in the evenings meant that Rey would be there too. He hoped it would be a good lesson for him: falling down and getting hurt didn’t mean that it would never get better. Everyone had to learn how to hurt and heal. Trying to be a good example was never really something that he was good at but he had to try for them.

Still, he blamed the environment and the constant headaches for some of his worse days. Those were the times when he’d snap easily and without thinking. He didn’t shout at his father when he took his computer away but wanted to. He didn’t yell at his mother for putting his medication on the table next to his coffee but it was hard not to flash back to being fourteen in those moments. But now that he was almost twice that age, it was strange to wear those shoes again.

Time felt like it would lurch forward at a frustrating pace. Christmas hadn’t been that long ago. But summer felt an endless lifetime away.

But Rey would go with him on the doctor’s visits that weren’t during the school day. The optometrist warned him again of the strain he was putting on his eyes and it made her face firm; she was also on Han’s side about the computer. She still didn’t have her proper license but she drove perfectly. Maybe it was another one of those things that she didn’t want to complete because it had been so important to him.

Her fear for him was clear. She’d study the wound and frown, then turn to text her friends something. At least she had them when he was phasing in and out of existing.

But there was something else different in how she looked at him. There were the sharp looks of disappointment when he blew someone off for annoying him, but the softness in other looks always made him pause.

And then there was the way her ponytail would bounce when she laughed. Or how she’d scoop Benji up into her arms to help him reach whatever he wanted on a shelf. She had a way of talking to him that reminded him of how he had tried to be when she was small. The old songs that he would sing to her when it was safe hadn’t hurt then. He had been told how his parents hated him and didn’t want him. But he really didn’t know anything but the songs from Leia and the stories from Han.

He should be relaxed. He was loved and safe.

But he’d also put himself in danger of never seeing them again, either through death or injury. He had to be more careful in the future both for her and his career.

That balance needed to be worked on.
His guilt would only be strengthened every time he looked in the mirror. He hated those moments the most. He was used to covering up scars and hiding them from everyone, only allowing those closest to his heart to really see who he was. This one was different; this one made it painful to think about the future. Sure, it was healing neatly. Sure, they could do something to fix it. But it would always be there. It would be a constant reminder that he had faltered in a task from his superior. How many times could he really fail before it all went away?

It also hurt to think about anyone wanting to look at that face every morning from the other side of the bed. Either they’d pity him or get tired of seeing the unattractive scar on an already unappealing face. Maybe it would be easier not to fall into temptation now that no one would really want him. He still questioned why anyone could put up with him for more than five minutes with how he could act. The inside was also scarred deeply. Only a handful of people had seen something in there worth caring about.

Rey cared. Maybe that’s all that needed to matter moving forward into the unknown. Her smile, her laugh, her genuine heart. That’s all he used to need. He’d have to depend on it and plan the future around that.

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When they got the names from the air conditioning companies in the area, they were able to narrow down the list.

When they got the blood type back, they could narrow it down again.

DNA was coming. It was always coming.

But if they got a confession, it would be so much better. The DA would be happy. Everyone would be happy and he could go home.

The profile had led them to a man in his mid-forties, white, who’d just suffered a traumatic loss with a history of violence. And now, Kylo was looking at him in the interrogation room, feeling like his idiotic degrees and training were finally worth something. Jason O’Neil. A pure scumbag and narcissistic serial killer. He finally got to face someone like that. He was right there. He was someone who had planned death in advance and had come willingly to the station. The hubris made it all seem so real.

“Do we hit him with the daughter first or the others?” Owen asked, crossing his arms, eyeing the man on the other side of the glass. “Where is your mind?”

George had left them to this. And Kylo had thrived on the trust. George knew that looking at so many dead teenage girls would send his mind racing. And it had. But in a good way.

O’Neil wasn’t going to leave there without confessing. He could feel it already.

“He doesn’t like waiting, so we’ve already made him wait. He could have left, but he hasn’t. He wants to be here. He wants to tell us everything. If we go at him with the daughters, he won’t tell us what we need to know.” Kylo looked at Owen and shrugged. “At least…at least that’s how I’m thinking.”

Having to look at murdered teenage girls, their young siblings and parents, hadn’t left him with
many good words to say to Rey at night. But now that they had a suspect, now that they could solve the problem, it would all start making more sense. If they could finish this tonight, they would be able to finally talk. There was so much that he wanted to tell her but having a case meant that his mind was never only about her. How could it be? He had a Rey part of his brain and then so many other compartments.

“Then let’s hit him with what we have and see where it gets us.” Owen fixed his tie and raised his eyebrows. “Are you ready?”

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When she kissed him, he knew that it would happen. It was a delicate and fulfilling kiss. There was none of the awkwardness that had come with his other first kisses. Liza had been sloppy, to eager to get it over with. Grey had stalked him down and given him an almost instant release.

And Poe was another lifetime ago.

There was no comparing her and him. And the others didn’t matter enough. They were echoes to his shining lights.

But he couldn’t kiss her back. He hadn’t figured it out yet. He spent his days solving problems but this wasn’t like that. This was an open door, like the one he had burst down when he was fourteen and encroaching onto a new life.

That day on a dirt road had led them to this point. And he wanted to embrace his feelings but couldn’t help but worry that they would frighten her. He had raised her, he had protected her, but he had also pressed hard on her. She could always make her own decisions, have her freedom, and for some reason, in that moment, she was choosing him.

He squeezed against her slightly, trying to right himself, searching for the words that would probably never come out right. He was so bad at this.

Her voice almost shook when she pulled back, looking for an answer that he had but couldn’t put into order. “Kylo?”

He couldn’t look at her. It would all fall apart if he did. “You want me?”

This shouldn’t be about him — this was how she was feeling, why she did what she did — but at the same time he was at the core of it. When had he not been the centre of her galaxy? He was the one that kept her alive. The boy with dark hair who grew up to be a man with too many scars.

Still, he dared to touch her. To let his hand roam her body for the first time like a lover would. Everyone was the same when it came to how they liked to be caressed. He didn’t want her to feel like this was routine for him because it was far from it. The last few years of celibacy made it difficult not to feel every curve of her body. It was her. It was still that little girl, that baby, he had helped into the world. How could he stop thinking about her like that? He needed to touch her more. If she wanted it, he thought again. If she really wanted him.

He had to kiss her again. He had to hold her closer. He was about to dive into need and forget the world. But when their lips met again, he was forced to accept that things were changing. It was an evolution. It wasn’t a mutation. He had to tell himself that. He wasn’t hurting her by kissing her.
He was showing her how much she meant to him.

Finally, his hands could give another body pleasure. She looked absorbed by the simplest touch. It would be painful to call it off, or make them both realize what was happening.

“Rey, we…” at the bottom of it all, this was wrong. He had been her father figure, her brother. Kissing and caressing meant another thing, another world and life. He wanted it but he needed to hear it from her. He hadn’t even asked if he could kiss her. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No, Kylo, I wanted you to.” There was no way he wasn’t moving. Being close to her put her at risk. He could so easily stretch his hand under her shirt. He could kiss down her belly to her crotch to taste her warmth. And he would be as bad as everyone else. He would be a monster; he already looked like one. He didn’t want to think about this. But she needed him to. He was so torn. “Kylo, please look at me.”

He couldn’t. He’d confess all of the wrong things if he said anything. “I’m not the right person for you.”

He was moving before he thought, knowing that with every inch he was causing her pain. “Can you just listen to me?” She glared at him and he finally had to stop to look at her and swallow.

How could he not touch on the hurt? There was so much of it. Him in the shower, them together in the bath tub. It overlapped into infinity but even there he wasn’t pure. “How can you want me to touch you? After everything, Rey, am I really what you want?”

“I want…” her voice seemed to stop for a moment, searching to find itself as he kept backing away. This was what he needed to know. He needed to focus. “I want you to love me.”

That made the world seem to collapse around them. He was so tired of that feeling. He hated always knowing that too much was happening outside of his control. How could normal people go through their days and not care about everything? Since the moment he’d held her for the first time, he’d loved her. Now, he had to figure out how to love her in a new way and put it into words. Those were words he always had a hard time finding. Even at the bottom of his heart, he still felt like it had been stripped bare by pain and grief.

Still. How could he not be honest in that moment? His uncertainties. His indecision. She knew it. She had to. “I already love you. I just don’t know…I don’t know if I’m the right person who you need to love you.”

It was as bare as he could be. He was an awful partner. He just used people for their affection. He made them crazy and as paranoid as he was. He never wanted that for her. He didn’t want her to leave the house and worry that he was following her. He didn’t want her to go out with friends and be panicked that he would show up. There were so many things that would always haunt him and these things would be harder than the loving parts.

She still looked uncertain and he finally lifted his head. “Rey?”

“Can I decide that? Not you?” So smart. So her. What else did he expect to hear?

Frozen, what else could he say? “Yes.”

Her perfect mouth could never disappoint him. How did he deserve her? How had her earned this person’s love? He had broken her so many times and she still came back to him. “When I close my eyes, I don’t see you like I used to. I don’t know when that changed but I’m…I’m not a baby anymore. I can decide who I want to love. And if I didn’t love you, I don’t know who else I’d
love.”

The words made him look down and try to blink back tears. He was embers now. He couldn’t move without risking everything going out. And still, he would have to go on. “I’ve always come back for you.”

She licked her lips. She bit them. He wanted her in that moment and he needed to keep his distance. “Kylo…”

“No, I…” He was a professional. He shouldn’t be dealing with this like he was. He steeled his face, looking at her with blankness. He couldn’t break down in front of her again. “This is…we need to talk about this tomorrow. I have…I have so many feelings for you that this is…hard for me. But I believe you. I don’t know why you love me but I don’t want to ruin it and hurt you.” Still, despite his training, he wanted to sob. The mask was lost. “Please love me enough to let me figure this out.”

Like the gift she was, she nodded.

He wanted to confess everything, but it died on his lips. Instead, he took the coward’s way out. *I need to be alone.*

And then he was.

Even though he didn’t want to be.

-=-

“So…how did…what do you do when you interrogate someone?”

Kylo thought about the question as he rolled the remaining stress out of his shoulders. He had escaped the hotel room for the balcony when Owen started talking to Silla. He initially left so his partner could have privacy but now he was glad for his own. Still, it didn’t do much good. The second he heard her voice, he had tensed. He was still worn raw from talking a suspect into confessing. Everything made his mind race into conclusions.

It was so much safer to text. But they had cracked this. He’d done something that he had never anticipated doing. Him and Owen had really sat there and the training had paid off. His own broken brain had made it so easy to talk to the man, to empathize with a killer, who had murdered too many families to make up for his own lost one.

He was an AC man. He was middle class. The moment his family died from a fire, outside of his control, pressed on his need.

He sucked in a breath and nodded, trying to shake how he had felt in the moment for how he was now.

“We basically talk to him until he wants to talk to us. We have evidence that we can use to try to catch him in a lie. This time, Owen and I had to sit in that room for seven hours. He didn’t ask for a break, even though he was allowed to ask for one. We kept reminding him. So we couldn’t leave either. We just kept him talking until he…he realized that we had him.” He was still reliving the look on O’Neil’s face when he broke. “That’s never happened to me before. Normally, I…
normally someone else takes over but Owen and I had a good rhythm. I wasn’t even tired until I stood up and realized my legs were numb.”

“You didn’t fall, did you?” She was smiling, but still worried.

“No,” he tried to sweep away her concern with a laugh on his side. “I just put my hands on the table as the officers…put him under arrest. And then Owen laughed at me trying to shake my legs, trying to get some feeling back.”

“Well, I’m proud of you.” He could hear the smile in her voice and wanted to absorb it. It was going to hurt to take that smile away again soon, but he hoped it would only be for a brief moment. “I’m glad…I’m glad we can finally talk. This last week has been…I haven’t felt good.”

Exhaling, he bit the inside of his mouth before speaking again. He couldn’t tell her about the encounter now. He didn’t want her to think about the only other person he’d ever loved in that moment she was feeling so confused and searching for answers. “You have to remember to get out of bed, angel. I know it’s hard to do, but at least once a day. I know…I know I don’t have to tell you this but…”

He heard a long sigh. “I’ve been…trying. I can eat a little. Most of the time, I can eat more after I’ve talked to you but I know that I can fix it. I try not to just think about you, but at night it’s hard. And that makes the mornings drag on. Han and Leia want to know what’s going on and I don’t know what to tell them. I…I guess I know why you lie sometimes. I tell them I’m sad about school being over and they hug me and I feel even worse. I bike over to Paige’s and see Benji and know that I shouldn’t be that tired to spend time with him. I’ve just been worried.”

“And I made you feel that way.”

There was a long pause. “I just want to know what I mean to you. And if I can still come stay with you next month. And if I need to come home after that month.”

Three questions. Three questions that he had to answer from his heart or he’d hurt her, or lose her—or both. He gripped the railing and his phone. In the distance, he could hear the ocean. He could do this. “You’re the future for me, Rey. I know that we’re both…that we both still have problems but I know that we can solve them together. I feel…I miss you taking care of me, but I miss taking care of you more. Not like when we were kids. Not like when I was in college. But like…Rey, when you say that you want to come stay with me, does that mean in your room or in…mine?”

It was the most careful way he could phrase the question but his mind was starting to stumble. He couldn’t turn this into an interrogation of her feelings.

There was a light inhale. Shit. He’d asked the wrong thing. Biting his lip to resist attacking his bare arm, he glared into the night.

“Yours,” she answered. “But not like…not like how it used to be. I still don’t know…I still don’t know what I can do in your bed.”

The lustful thought that rocked him made him squeeze his eyes shut, trying to will it away. Giving in to licentious instinct made him no better than the man that had just been arrested. “I will never rush you, Rey. Your body deserves only kindness. And I’d like to show you that when you’re ready. So I think…I think we should talk about you only staying with me for a month. We still need to talk to Han and Leia about this. I don’t want to hide things from them but they’ve been…”

He heard Rey sniffle and panic took him in a moment. “They’ve been my parents too. Oh, we can’t
do this to them. Oh no, Kylo…”

He heard the quiver in her voice and willed himself to reach through the phone to hold her. “Rey. No. Rey, if we talk to them, if they know that this is…this is something new…they will understand. They have always known that we’ve had a special relationship. Just because it’s special in a different way doesn’t make it wrong.” He paused and heard her suck in a breath. Closing his eyes, he pictured himself with her. “In my head, I’m holding you right now. Everything has always felt better when I’m close to you.”

“It’s so easy to imagine you here,” she answered. “I think…thank you for reminding me that other people might be hurt by this.”

“Not hurt, but maybe confused.” This was what he had missed when he was sixteen. This was what had swept by him as he got carried away. Time. She needed time. Everyone around them needed it too. He couldn’t go exploding and trapping a person with him until he was taken from him into the utter harshness of the world without ever having a real month to breathe for five years. “I’ve talked to George. And Owen. And…Grey. I hope…I hope you’re not angry.”

A stern sigh. But he’d told her. That part was out of the way. “You needed to talk to your friends. I talked… I talked to mine too. Kaydel hugged me. She seemed so happy that you were dating me because that would mean you’d always be around again and she didn’t understand that it’s not… we’re not really dating. Maybe we’re just together. But Rose looked sad. She’s moving to New York for school and was hoping that I’d change my mind and come be her roommate. Like you and Hux were. And I started thinking that maybe I should, just so she wouldn’t be sad and…it just made me upset again.”

“You can ask Grey if there’s a library programme there too. Or if there’s something else you’d like to study. It’s not…it’s not that far if we’re all on the east coast.” He always had to work deeper to find the real sadness and the real problems, even within himself. “I took a year off. You can make up your mind. If we decide that living with me works, Grey says you have a job there. He likes you and is happy for us. He’s…it’s like he got it before I did.”

Rey chuckled, only shortly and lightly. “Yeah, I think he did. He’s like…when I text him, it’s like he’s really my friend too.”

“He is, Rey. Believe that.” He finally yawned and had to check his watch. “I don’t want to hang up. But I’m exhausted. I’m…I don’t hate my job but I hate it for you. Do you feel…is everything a little bit better now? I love you but I want us to learn how to be in love together. I don’t want you to feel like you have to fix me, or that I’m thinking about someone else when we’re together, but there will be…there will be so many more conversations like this if you still want to be with me. I don’t know how to apologize more for that.”

She was nodding, sitting up in her bed. He could picture her there, her hair down and her pictures lining the wall. He had given her a good home; his family had given her that too. “I want to have them. I feel…I feel better now. I know that you love me. I know that you want to try. And we’ll have next month together. And I can’t wait.”

“I can’t wait either. We’ll talk before you leave, but we’ve got to wrap up things here and then get back and it…it won’t stop for a while. But I can’t wait to come home to you again. I love you.” The hairs on his arms stood on end. Had it really been so easy, and so quickly, to say those words and mean them?

“I love you too.” He heard the smile in her voice as she spoke. It was such a reassuring sound that his troubled thoughts were almost settled. “I’ll text you. But I understand if you can’t text me
He couldn’t think of what else to say. He had a job. She knew that. He’d have to find a way to put her first. He had never been able to do that for him but Rey was different. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

He hung up the phone and dropped to his knees, noiselessly screaming into the night.

He blamed it all on the lingering weakness in his legs but knew why it happened.

Chapter End Notes

Gah Ah! I had so many directions that this chapter could have taken. If you hacked my google docs, you know what really went down. I love you all. Keep staying safe and, I guess, reading this. As usual, I don't have a beta and I hate everything I put out so...if you want to beta this let me know? lol
Chapter 48

Chapter Summary

Rey comes to Virginia as Kylo copes with both her arrival and the aftermath of a hard case, along with starting to deal with old ghosts.

Read chapter notes for warnings and more.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

George looked up from his report and raised his eyebrows. “You really did all of this in three days? We’ve talked about balancing work and taking time off, Kylo.”

Kylo kept his face blank, only looking down at his hands for a moment. He didn’t have an excuse that would work this time. However, being finished with the task two days ahead of schedule hadn’t been what he had set out to do when he was given the assignment. The ten hours of videos and the transcripts had been hard to keep out of his mind. Even with proper training, sleep kept eluding him as his mind swirled with too many ideas. “I wanted to get it done. But I think it’s thorough and…”

“Oh, I know it’s thorough. All of your work is. But when I give you a deadline, it’s not there as a challenge. It’s there so you can sleep and not come in here looking exhausted. I do see you every day, Kylo. You can’t hide from me even if you’re not trying to.” George sighed and put the thick document down on his desk. It hit with a thunk that Kylo didn’t expect. “How is the facial analysis going? Is it still only partial?”

“It was just a reflection. It looked like something but it turned out to be nothing.” He let out a sharp sigh of frustration but then turned to resolve as he inhaled. “But they’re looking at identifying similar rooms from other videos. So I will probably have more to watch once they narrow down… location, mostly based on what I’ve written about there and what they find.” He had to shake off the lost look that was about to cross his face. It had almost impossible to break up watching the videos into an orderly workday. Watching a small boy, blindfolded, being slowly undressed, then raped and tortured to death was the last thing he wanted to relive every time he closed his eyes. Still, he needed to defend himself. “I could handle this assignment, George. This was what I wanted to do. I might have gotten carried away.”

“Well, that’s clear. I’m not… I can’t punish you for doing your job and doing it well. But this will be reviewed, obviously. But as your boss, I don’t want you doing this again. And as your friend, I’m worried about how you will be affected by this…disturbing content. You know I had no choice in giving this to you. The rest of the team had their tasks and this was yours.” George briefly looked at the open door to his office, then back to him. “I want to protect you but can’t show open favouritism. This is the first time and…it is about teamwork, Kylo. This is about us both being leaders in individual ways.”

Kylo was nodding instantly. “No, I understand. And I thought I could put myself outside of my
feelings when I was working. And I know I can, still. But it got harder at night. So I kept working when I shouldn’t have.”

It was a stupid admission, but at least it was an honest one.

George could only briefly shake his head. “Think about that in the future. I don’t want to have this conversation again. And next week, I don’t want to see you here at the office. You have time off. Use it.”

Kylo understood the words and the tone and stood from the meeting, straightening his suit. There was still more to work on in the afternoon and he’d have to deal with the emotions the meeting had brought on when he got home, alone. But really, getting done with the report had made it easier to think about the next steps. There was always order there in the space of work. Despite the chaos that was at the core of the crimes that they dealt with, they had procedures. And he was sure that when he spoke to George privately, he’d get a chance to decompress more.

It was only Wednesday.

Thursday, he had a mandatory meeting with Maz. If he didn’t deal with all of this head-on, he would be useless for weeks. And he couldn’t be.

But Friday, Rey was arriving for her month with him. So if he didn’t speak clearly and thoroughly with Maz, she would catch the full brunt of the aches that had been stirred that week. He’d really only taken the time from working to text her or take her calls. Occasionally, he would reply to other things but this week had really pressed on every raw nerve in his head. But when he talked to her, it was never about the case, which was already wrong. But focusing on her had given him moments to breathe.

“How mad was he?” Owen asked when he finally made it back to his desk. The other man folded his hands behind his head and looked at him with more sympathy than he deserved.

Looking up and across the space at his partner, he shrugged. “Black shoes,” he said, looking back to click his computer to life. He swirled the cursor around and glared at it for a moment. His report stared back at him, reminding him of his mistake. “So, there’s that.”

Owen winced. It had been an observation that he had pointed out early on in Kylo’s time at Quantico that he would have probably figured out on his own. George had three pairs of shoes in his office. If a day took a certain turn, it would be the black pair. If it was a day of praise or accomplishment, then he’d wear the brown pair. They still hadn’t figured out what the tan shoes were for.

“I can’t say that I didn’t warn you. He sees you logging in at odd hours from home or from a different floor. You still follow the rules even when you’re not following the rules. You can’t make this look like you’re overly focused on this. It throws up red flags. So as we proceed, after you’re back, I’ll press harder to keep you in line.” Owen glanced over his shoulder, towards George’s office before turning to him. “It’s still a good report. Just slow down sometimes.”

Kylo could take the criticism, he had to. But he spent the rest of the day resisting the urge to scratch at his scar. It was as telling as the colour of George’s shoes.

Complete the tasks. Don’t speak shortly with colleagues or ignore the more annoying ones. Smile. Don’t touch his face. He created a mental checklist in his head to get through the rest of the day. They had updates for various things during the afternoon briefing and no one was looking at him any differently. So his way of working through the problem before he could go home and really
think about it was as effective as it could be.

He let himself drift lightly as he half-read through the update from the techs. The conversations with Rey as they neared their time together had mostly left him with pleasant thoughts and ideas. But there was always a looming dread when it came to some topics. How to talk to his parents was high on that list. He could hear how she purposely called them Han and Leia more often now. She’d sometimes slip up and it was a stab of pain each time. But he was confident that when they figured out what they were, it would make sense. Still, he was hiding another relationship. He had promised himself that he wouldn’t do that and wouldn’t force another person into nervous silence.

The second problem was Rey not wanting to plan for the future, outside of just being with him. She liked the work she did with Grey, but she needed a diploma or a degree to have an actual, paying job there. Sometimes she drifted in her interests. The drawing pads and canvases that filled her side of the office were there for her, but she didn’t like reading as much as he did. Quitting dance had made him worry. She did well at track, so that was something positive. Her grades were strong where it counted, but he still felt pangs of regret that he hadn’t been able to help her more in many of the subjects. It was hard for him not to worry about her losing herself in him. The number of people who he’d sucked in around him still left him reeling back to Luke’s old words.

Then there was another, more sensitive area of concern. He loved her, cherished her, and was attracted to her. But thinking about sleeping with her, holding her in that way, often drove his anxiety up to a point of pure panic. He would have to tell her about how he’d reacted when she was fifteen and hated himself for it. The last month had made him focus hard on work. He’d spend time with Grey, either watching movies together or playing video games. They’d go out when he could. The attraction was buried for him but he could still catch some worry in Grey’s eyes when they discussed Rey. He cared about her too. How quickly could he press this without scaring her? How slowly could he move without frustrating them both?

And still on the fringes of it all, was a face that would still turn up in his dreams.

How were they going to talk about his previous relationship? How was he going to make her feel safe and loved when the old wounds would just be ripped open again?

She was worth all of this pain but he was still worried that her image of him would be twisted when he went through how many mistakes he had made with him. He had heard the earlier nervousness in her voice, felt it in her texts; he had planted those thoughts in her head by being so upfront with how he felt about sex now. Inwardly, he wondered if she really understood how it had felt for so long when he’d have to pull away and leave his partner, someone who was always giving in bed, unsatisfied. Those had been hard nights. Those were the dark patches he wanted to eradicate. Still, the light, the good...

The bit of Poe that was left in his soul had taught him patience in that sense.

Still, talking about it would hurt.

Blinking back to what he was reading, he was jarred out of his thoughts by his phone ringing.

“This is Solo.” It was his name. He had to use it. At the office, he was Kylo. The cops and techs that knew him called him that too. But it was still strange to walk in Ben Solo’s shoes as the fraud that he was.

“Hey, Kylo. I have those results for you.”

“That took a while, Lonnie.” He turned away from Owen, dropping his voice. He shouldn’t exactly
be using Bureau resources for this, but he hoped that the lab tech would keep it quiet.

“Well, it’s not exactly a case so I had to do it in my spare time. I got three sets of prints off of the envelope. We have yours on file. And the second set matches the victim. But the third,” Kylo sat up at the words and felt his heartbeat increase. “I’m sorry but it’s just a partial. If you have something to compare it to, I might be able to give you a more or less positive, but it wouldn’t hold up in court. I ran it through our databases and it really didn’t narrow it down. That’s the best I’ve got.”

He slowly exhaled. “That’s…that’s fine. I want the envelope back. And I’ll find some way to thank you for this.”

“Yeah, it’s no problem.” Lonnie seemed to be about to say something more, about to ask what this was about again and he couldn’t let him.

“Talk to you later.” Kylo cut off the possibility and hung up the phone. He stared into space for a moment before moving on. There was always more work to do.

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“When’re you coming back?” Benji sat on her bed, kicking his legs lightly. He was ‘helping’ her pack the last of her things but that really turned into playing with her old stuffed animals and asking questions.

Rey wanted to be honest with him: there was a chance that she wouldn’t be coming back in a month. But just having the thought made her miss him already. He was three now, more than three, and had so many questions about the world and life. Most of them came out in confused mixtures of syllables when he was excited. He was slowly realizing that there was a thing called the future. It wasn’t just about waiting to get to Christmas or his next birthday. Time was there and it scared him.

She wished that she had firmer memories from when she was three. All she remembered from those times were being hurt or being safe in Kylo’s arms while others were crying. The periods when she was separated from Kylo and couldn’t understand why the other children kept disappearing flashed, making her hide a wince. She used to think that it was normal to always be terrified and that everyone always died.

Benji wouldn’t have to learn about all of those things unless she told him. When death came around them again, creeping in with its dark shadow, she hoped that she could help him understand.

“I’ll be back in a month. But maybe your parents can bring you to see Kylo too. He wants to spend time with us both when he’s not busy at work.” She tried to smile at him. He’d understand the truth eventually. “Do you miss Kylo?”

"Yeah, I love him.” He nodded. “He was sad when he was hurt.”

He was. But he was getting better. The changes since the spring had been huge and the distance of the early summer was almost over.

But inside, she was nervous. They spoke all of the time but some conversations didn’t work on the
phone or the computer. The hardest things to pack had been her underwear. Would Kylo care about something like that? In the shower, she thought long and hard about shaving her pubic hair. It wasn’t thick but it was still there. She always made sure she wouldn’t stand out in a bathing suit but this was different now. Kaydel suggested a real bikini wax offhandedly. It would just be another lady at a salon. Should she have done that?

The thoughts were sometimes exciting. Other times, they made her nervous. No one had touched her in so long and she almost liked it that way. She could hug her friends and family and that was enough. But Kylo was very physical. And big.

This was the thing that they couldn’t talk about on the phone. They could almost talk around it, letting the conversation drift closer, but she could never reach it without getting worried. Kylo had still been with mostly men. She couldn’t help but wonder why on the days when she was sad or missing him. Grey didn’t seem to have a problem hanging out with them, but he still knew how Kylo felt and tasted. Her distant conversation with Liza occupied a corner of her mind. What made her special? Why did she get to know how Kylo sounded in bed? Why did she know how it felt to have him inside her? The same woman who screamed obscenities at him, drunk and broken in a hallway, knew him better physically than she did. Of all of Kylo’s mistakes, she confused her the most.

It hurt too much to think about Poe. How were they ever going to talk about him? Talk about him in a new way, in the new way that they were.

They’d spoken a lot about him before, but now that life was different, she was truly petrified of being around Kylo and being reminded of how much he had meant to him. He was in so many pictures at Kylo’s house. She had to look at him all of the time. He would never get any older. It was going to be hard when she was turned twenty, when she got to be his age. Twenty-one, and she would have outlived him. In her mind, when she thought about the what-ifs, she knew that the two of them couldn’t resist being apart for too long. Kylo would have married him; that part made it hard to focus on their future. They’d be married in that big house and Kylo would be infinitely happier than he was alone. They’d kiss and hold hands but then at night, he’d be his. They’d have been together for over a decade. There wouldn’t have been an inch of skin that Kylo hadn’t kissed.

How were they going to talk about this without both of them getting upset?

She was still afraid and skiddish about sex and Kylo seemed to crave it. He needed someone who could give him that. But he said that he still wanted her and wanted to take time. She hoped that when they were together, they could really talk about this.

She hugged Benji when he yawned and pouted. He still liked taking naps but was getting more tearful when he was tired. His dark hair could almost be worn in a ponytail. That would probably change when he started pre-school next year.

Did she want to miss that?

She’d have a month to decide.

And that time wouldn’t feel long enough, she could tell already.

-=-
He caught George by the elevator. He’d been distracted and had meant to go home earlier but felt caught up rather than only working ahead. Normally, they were both the last to leave the office but he wanted to be better today and failed at it. But he was back to wearing the neutral shoes he wore to and from the office so it might be okay.

“You’re allowed to be angry with me,” George said, smirking as the doors slid shut. “Any other section head would have been happy with your work and your efficiency.”

“No, you were being fair. And maybe they would have thought I rushed through it because it bothered me in a different way.” Kylo returned the look lightly. “Whatever piles up while I’m gone, I’ll go through more…methodically.”

George waved his hand. “We’ll put this into the learning column again. And we’ll move on from it. Are you and Rey still able to come over on Saturday?”

He nodded. “She wants to see more of the people I work with. And we’ve already promised Grey to help set everything up. I’m meeting him tonight so we’ll talk about it more.”

“I’m glad you can both make it. I don’t particularly like having so many people at my home but it will be worth it. I have meetings all day tomorrow and Friday so I’ll really only be available by phone but I’ll be at home in the evenings if you need to talk.” George held his eyes for a second as the elevator continued to descend. “You’ll need to figure out how to present her. I won’t do it for you.”

Kylo didn’t want the elevator to reach its final destination, but thought about the comment. “We will talk about it on Friday. She’s looking forward to seeing you.”

“I think she’s looking forward to seeing you more.”

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Han hugged her just outside of the security barrier and she felt bad again. It was a rotten feeling that had built the last week. “Have a good time with him, sweetheart. You both have earned a bit of a break.”

She nodded. “We’ll still…Don’t worry about me. Kylo is there. And I have George and Grey. I’ll see you in a month.”

That was the plan. She’d be there for August and then they would join them for a week in September, for their anniversary. She really hoped that they would be able to bring more of her things if she decided to stay. When she decided to stay. She had pretty much everything she needed there, but there were still some memories she would want to take with her.

Han clasped her shoulder before glancing at Leia. “Are you okay?”

She was leaving in the late afternoon. But the time seemed to pass so slowly. She had spent most of it texting Kylo, asking if he was nervous too. He was. He had some time off but he was always on call. There really was no guarantee that he wouldn’t have to leave when his vacation ended. They hadn’t made any real plans other than having the conversations that had hung over them in the meantime, since June.
She smoothed her new dress and shrugged. “I’m just tired. Hopefully I will be able to sleep on the plane.”

Leia nodded. “Let us know when you get to the house. But we’ll talk to you soon. The cat is going to be fine. We love you.”

“I love you too.” She’d already looked up how it would be to fly with Bee to Virginia. He was getting older now but he would be okay. She wanted him to be with her but could wait the month. He had too many sunbeams to sleep in. And Benji liked picking him up and carting him around the house.

It was always hard to walk away from Han and Leia. The added pressure of a secret made this time the most difficult. She’d learnt so many things from them. They’d accepted her into their home without asking a single question and handled her at her worst. Her own family didn’t want her and they still did, accepting good and bad days. Kylo was sure that they would understand but at the same time, she’d called them mom and dad for so long that it would be hard to see that bond change. She wanted to talk to them. She wanted to ask what she should do.

But waiting would have to work.

Waving, she picked up her backpack and stepped into the line. Soon she’d get to see Kylo again. Soon, she’d have some answers to her questions and the process of relearning her own heart could be truly started.

-=-

He was waiting for her at the gate. She thought she’d have to go through the airport alone and collect her luggage before she saw him on the other side, but he was standing there, leaning against the barrier and waiting for her. Handsome, tall, and strangely professional in his work clothes: a dark suit and tie, a long jacket that hung to his knees.

And he was smiling.

Wrapping her arms around him had never felt so sweet. The anxiety and questions that had occupied her thoughts vanished instantly when she could be drawn into his bubble again. They would be back, but right then they were gone, lost outside of their bubble. Her feet left the ground and he hugged her tightly.

“How did you get in here?” she asked against his neck.

He shook his head, stepping back to set her down. “I have a badge and a gun. And a purpose.”

“Was it me? Or is there a suspect on the plane?” She wasn’t sure how to flirt. And she had no idea how to flirt with him.

Still, he smiled at her, taking her backpack and leading her towards baggage claim. But it was really like no one else was in the airport. She heard them, she saw them, but it really felt like they were alone on the brightly lit concourse.

“I might have said something like that,” he replied. “It wasn’t a lie. Was the flight okay?”
She had to shrug. “It was quick. I’m almost used to it now.”

Nodding, he looked at her for a moment. “I still remember the first time we flew together. It was so surreal.”

So that’s what he was thinking about. That day. That strange day that she still had trouble piecing together. He must remember every minute of it but for her, it felt so distant. After the hospital, the airport was the first real-world place that she saw. There were so many people. There was so much food. She got to see stores for the first time. Everyone had different types of shoes. And Kylo had been so angry and afraid.

And now he could just go anywhere and do anything.

Looking away from him, she noticed how people looked at him. No one was bumping into her. On the other side of security, back in Connecticut, she had to dodge so many people in her new blue flats. Now, it was like he parted the crowds for her.

And she liked it. Deep down, it really felt like he projected their bubble around her to keep her safe.

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“George asked about Saturday,” Kylo said, putting Rey’s suitcase on the bed. He still regretted not kissing her in the airport. It had been the right thing to do but he couldn’t figure out how to do it. Yet she hadn’t looked sad about it. She just got off the plane and was in his arms where she belonged.

The long week and the long wait were finally over.

“I want to go, Kylo. I want to see him and Grey and…the people you work with.” She sat on the edge of the bed — his bed — and swung her legs.

“It will be boring,” he said, flatly. He sat beside her and brushed his hand over hers. “Everyone there is used to being in charge. It can be really frustrating when we have to relax.”

She tilted her head, eyeing his hand. “I’ve been to mo-,” she paused, only for a fraction of a second to correct herself, “Leia and Han’s parties. I can talk to you or Grey if it gets boring.”

He hadn’t stopped thinking about kissing her. It had been so brief and confusing the last time. And then he had to dive into breaking a man’s mind at the same time his own was turned upside down. He knew that she had so many questions. And he didn’t know if he had answers.

Slowly, he reached over to cup her face. Before the early summer, before he realized how he felt about her, he would have had another emotion behind his hand. Was innocence really gone? It still shook him how her eyes shone in a different way when she looked at him. Her beauty should be for someone who wasn’t so broken.

“I missed you,” he whispered. “It’s been such a hard week, but I’m glad you’re here.”

She reached for him too, gripping his knee and moving closer. “Kylo?”

“Yes?”
“Can you kiss me now?”

At the words, he leaned forward and met her lips in the afternoon sunshine of his room. Holding and kissing her reminded him of how easy it was to lose himself in another person, someone he loved and cherished. The hurts of the world, the things he’d seen and felt in the past and those that still haunted him at night and on computer screens at work, vanished as his mouth met hers. It was so hard to hold back. The patience he fought to draw on meant that he had to draw a careful barrier between what he wanted and how he needed to treat her. How in the hell was Poe able to handle this? To take someone so fragile, who you wanted so much, and pull away at the word stop felt impossible. But he did it for him. He had to do it for her.

But the urge to press harder, to dip his tongue into her mouth and press her down on the bed, arose.

And it made him lean back and cover up his panic with a smile.

“I…thank you.” She blushed, soft red streaks spreading across her cheeks.

She was so small and delicate. But she’d also seen the hard sides of the world. He knew her nightmares and her darkness. He had heard her scream at him. He had seen her reject kindness because he couldn’t keep horrible things from happening to her. Most of it was his fault. All of it was his fault.

And she still wanted him.

“It wasn’t too much?” He knew these words. Even if he wanted more, he had to hold back. How many times had Poe sat like this? He had been forced to hold hands and kiss without asking for more for so long.

He met her eyes and she shook her head. “Your lips are so…soft.”

Now it was his turn to feel heat find his face. “I moisturize. Mostly for the scar.”

Her hand traced up his face before falling down the reminder of his failure. “It doesn’t look that bad. Does George still want you to go undercover?”

He sighed. “Eventually. I’m supposed to take a course next month to prepare. I’ve been listening to the radio more. Grey and I found this Hispanic bar and he likes it more than I do, but that helps. I’ve always had problems rolling my r’s. Poe and I used to practice and I…I still can’t get it right.”

There wasn’t a change in her face at the two names. Her hand stayed warm against his face. “You are white. Maybe it’s not supposed to be perfect. But you know that we don’t want you to do that. It’s so dangerous, Kylo. And Owen won’t be there.”

Sighing, he bit his lip. “If I need to do it, I’ll have to do it. It’s like the case right now. Bad things happen and we have a duty to stop it.”

She withdrew her hand, folding them in her lap.

She had her nails done before she left.

How was he not going to ruin this?
It was strange to put her things into the empty drawers and closet space in his room rather than the space that still held most of the things she’d already moved to Virginia. They were mostly books and some clothes and some of her pictures; Rose and Kaydel, Benji and Paige, Han and Leia. Kylo and…him. She had already started bringing things when he’d first moved into the house.

But all of her things were still in her room. Her room with the stars. He hadn’t moved anything. But he had cleared out parts of his room for her.

“I thought…” Kylo started then paused, shifting on the bed. “I thought it would still be good that you have your own space for a little while.” He still watched what she was doing, toying with a quilt thread. He finally nodded at her and left the room. “I’m going to make dinner.”

Since getting back, Kylo had looked quietly stressed. He kept straightening random things when they got inside: pictures, books, anything that was close to him. It had been good enough for her before, but now he was acting differently.

But then he kissed her. He had looked at her with openness. There were still so many things to talk about, but this was a good start.

Sighing, Rey finished unpacking her suitcase. Whatever was happening, they’d talk about it later, during dinner, probably after. He also looked tired. She had noticed over the last month that he had talked about his cases less. He’d mention things that he’d done, but only vaguely. And the last week he had poured out more of his other thoughts to her. He missed her. He wanted her there. He wanted them to finally talk.

She filled her side of the dresser with the clothes she had packed. She hung up the dresses. Tilting her head, his closet looked better with her things there, even though there were only six or seven dresses against his wall of black and off black. Even if she decided to go back in September, she’d leave these things there. She’d be back for them.

She filled her side of the dresser with the clothes she had packed. She hung up the dresses. Tilting her head, his closet looked better with her things there, even though there were only six or seven dresses against his wall of black and off black. Even if she decided to go back in September, she’d leave these things there. She’d be back for them.

Sitting on the side of the bed that had always been hers in the past, in their other life, she looked for a place for her phone charger. It should go there, right? That’s what couples did, right? That’s how the boys used to have it at their…

She shook off the thought the second it hit her.

Kylo was hers now. Not his.

There was another dresser with a mirror beside the large window across from the bed. She could put her makeup there. She was more than ever thankful for Kaydel and Rose. They’d gone to the mall last week and she bought new brushes and pallets. She would mostly still just wear mascara with a hint of shimmer, but maybe they would go out at some point. Maybe when they went on their tour of Virginia, she’d have to dress up. Like in the airport, Kylo could just get what he wanted from the people around them.

Looking at herself in the mirror, she titled her head at her reflection. He used to tell her that she would be beautiful when she grew up. And she was glad that she didn’t disappoint him.

She wanted to put her makeup bag in the top drawer but it was locked. Frowning, she eyed the lock. The other two drawers weren’t locked and were mostly filled with extra bed sheets.

Swallowing, she left her bag on the top of the dresser and left to help with dinner instead of worrying about what he had in there. It was probably just his back-up weapon or something else
that was official. Like George’s house, there were secrets everywhere that weren’t meant for everyone.

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He poured himself a glass of wine and looked at her with raised eyebrows.

Rey licked her lips. “Can I just try a little?”

“I don’t want to pressure you or anything, Rey, I’m…”

“You’re just being polite.” She found an easy smile. “I never really went to parties.”

He sat down beside her at the corner of the table. He had a perfectly good dining room and they were eating in the kitchen. Maybe it was because they could be closer. He lifted his glass and she took hers up too.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he said, smiling at her. “I’ve been…I’ve been so tired, Rey. I’ve needed you so much.”

He brought his glass to his lips and she followed him, sipping carefully. It tasted awful and she made a face. He smirked at her and quietly, pushed her glass out of her hand.

“I didn’t go to that many parties in high school either. But you like trying things. So you’ve tried it.” He turned to his food and started cutting into the grilled chicken. "I think I only learned how to drink because I had to."

Again, she mirrored him. But she still wanted to tease him. “I’m glad you learned how to cook.”

He snorted. “I’ve taken care of myself for a while now. I’m still bad with breakfast and eat lunches out at the office. But dinner is easy. I get the groceries delivered now. We can go through what you’re planning to make and put the order in on Sunday.”

The evening went on like that, making plans and deciding how their time together would be. Their road trip the next week was the first point of excitement but the rest of it distracted her. The previous summers, the last times that they were together, hadn’t been like this. Now, Kylo was quickly acting like she’d always been there. She did know his house but it was a rush to hear him talk about dinners, laundry, cutting the grass and taking care of the yard…when to take out the trash. Before, he’d just done most of those things without talking about them. Now, she saw the calendar on the fridge. It was like at home. She had to think about the recycling.

But Kylo still let her talk about her summer and the end of school. It really had felt like the end of everything. There had been a last party, but she didn’t go. Finn had texted her. And it made her hurt inside. He was probably drunk and shouldn’t be. He told her how much he was going to miss her. And if she was ever in California, ever near his campus, she should call him. She was a California girl, after all.

He remembered.

Kylo listened to every word, taking her hand when she thought she was going to cry. Why did he have to do what he’d done? Why was it so hard to put everything in the past?
Kylo didn’t know either.

He poured himself another glass of wine as they finished the dishes, finished cleaning up. His kitchen was so clean and she had eyed him with suspicion. He sighed, long and hard as he dried the last frying pan.

It had been a bad case. Combined with how worried he had been about her, he had been having trouble sleeping. Cleaning and organizing kept him from doing worse things.

His sleeves were rolled up. She could see that scars could fade but the memories of them wouldn’t.

She asked to hear more about the case. After a pained look, he asked if he could have another glass of wine to talk about it.

It wasn’t good for him, but she still let him.

He put on some music on the television. She loved his living room. It was broad with comfortable furniture. It made her smile to see that he still had a gaming system hooked up. She’d seen it before, but now it wasn’t the old system. This one was new.

He welcomed the distraction, telling her how it was mostly Grey who made him play; they argued over headsets and it made her almost laugh imagining George in the background listening to them yell at one another. But Owen also played some dumb team shooting game. She knew it. Everyone in her class played it. But it was so weird to think that two FBI agents and a son of an FBI agent logged in and played as a team against a bunch of idiot teenagers. And still lost most of the time.

But he wasn’t downing the wine. He was sipping at it carefully, waiting to find the words to talk about what he was working on.

“George didn’t want me to do it, but the rest of the team had their tasks and I…I had to watch it.” He spoke slowly, rolling the glass in his hand.

Shifting to sit closer, she put her hand on his leg. “What’s it about?”

Kylo sipped at his glass then set it down to look at her. The lights were dimmed. The high ceiling made it feel so different from home. But now this was home.

“There was a raid at a suspected paedophile ring. They went through everything on the computers and they found…a number of videos. We spread them around, going to other units, trying to track down the kids and the men in the videos. I got…I got a bad one. Everyone got a bad one so I don't feel sorry for myself, I feel sorry for the kids. He was just a little boy. He didn’t know what was happening. I had to watch and describe every detail about what happened to him and who did that to him. George didn’t…he didn’t want to give it to me. But he had to. I would have had my credibility questioned again if I didn’t do my job. It hurt me a lot, Rey. It brought a lot of things back for me that I had to keep buried deep down until it was done. Maybe that’s why I’ve been distant lately. It hasn’t been your fault.” He stopped talking with a sigh and then reached for his glass. He took a long drink before setting it down again. “But I could feel what he felt. I knew that fear. I knew how all of it felt. I could put that in the report in a way that other agents couldn’t. So maybe…maybe I am good at my job.”

She felt her breath shudder. “You had to watch a boy get raped?”

His eyes flicked over. “And then get his throat cut. And I haven’t really been able to cry. I asked Maz about it yesterday. She thinks that I’ve gotten, maybe, better at compartmentalizing. I was angry, yes. I wanted revenge, yes. I had to listen to his screams and I put myself in his place and
“it…it just made me want to work harder.”

Blinking, Rey sat back and shook her head. He took and finished his glass.

“Is every day like this?” she asked. “Do you really have to do this every day? Kylo, you’ve always told me that it’s okay to cry, that we need to cry. And if you can’t…”

“Maybe I was waiting for you,” he said, leaning back to stroke her cheek. “Maz said that too. Maybe I needed to talk to you to understand how I felt. Rey, it was like watching what happened to me. It happened over and over again. I had to watch some parts so many times and I’m…I talked to Grey and he told me that it’s getting what I wanted. I wanted this darkness. I wanted to feel this pain. He’s so…he gets it. He’s so much like Hux and I need that.”

His hand brushed down her cheek to find her mouth and she breathed out in a shudder. “I’m trying to figure out what to say. Are you going to find who did it?”

“We’re going to try.” His hand drifted to her shoulder. “We’ve made a lot of progress. If I get my hands on the man who killed him, he wouldn’t leave the room alive.”

It was like Grey had said. Kylo could just flip a switch in his head. He had gone from lover to friend. She had gone from child and too fragile to handle what he was working on to an abrupt and sharp turn into her being an adult, one who he wanted advice from. But from the look in his eyes, Kylo wasn’t really himself at that moment. This had been burning for too long. And he’d kept it from her because he didn’t want her to worry.

“I’m sorry, Rey,” he said, standing suddenly. He grabbed his glass and stalked off for the kitchen. “I shouldn’t have…I shouldn’t have told you all of that. If it’s too much for me…you didn’t need to hear that…”

He was scratching his face when she got to the kitchen and she had to grab his hand to get him to stop. “Kylo, I just said I needed to think. Not that I didn’t want to know what you were doing.”

He looked at her hand and she saw quiet acceptance there for a moment. “I still let it out too quickly. This is…I can’t push things. I haven’t been alone. I have George, Owen, and Grey…but it’s hard to sleep alone.”

His hand turned to grip hers and she moved into his arms, unafraid. He bent down and met her lips with a long sigh.

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Kylo took a long moment to himself in his washroom to figure out what had happened and what he wanted to happen.

He shouldn’t have told Rey about the case. There was already too much hanging over them. This should be about them. He shouldn’t be dragging in old hurts and new ones on top of that. Even after baring his heart to Maz, he had still stumbled through Friday until it was time to leave from the airport. Now all of those feelings were coming back as he stared at his dumb face in the mirror.

She wants to be there. She wants to be with you. He wasn’t sure the words came from his own mind or from somewhere else.
Sighing, he finally left his moment of calm for another moment they would have to deal with.

Rey was reading through her phone on the other side of the bed. She looked up and smiled at him. “Benji sent a video.”

He blinked for a moment, looking at the expanse of the floor between them. He forced himself to move and smile, climbing into bed beside her like he’d done for thousands of times. Only now, this was entirely different. This was them as a couple. *Fuck* they hadn’t talked about tomorrow yet. That panic could wait for later. “Show me.”

She tilted her phone and he leaned in, smelling her face wash. He should tell her that she looked prettier without makeup.

The video jerked to life. It wobbled and he heard his godson’s voice. He was holding the phone, moving it up and down above a flower. He rambled about it, asking if Kylo knew what type of flower it was. He turned the phone and mostly filmed his mouth, telling them both that he missed them. Just when the video was about to end, he heard Hux’s voice and saw him come into view, asking if he needed help sending it.

It was thirty seconds of chaos. It was thirty seconds of a child who had never known any hurt and if Kylo could do anything, and he would to his dying breath, Benji would never know any real terror in this life. Resting his head against Rey’s shoulder, he sighed.

“He’s still perfect. You can help film something with me tomorrow. I think I know what flower that is.” He glanced up, catching Rey’s smile.

“It was a dandelion.”

He grinned. “They are every kid’s favourite.”

She sighed and rested her head against his. “I feel weird.”

“Me too.”

Sucking in a breath, Rey shifted away from him to rest her head on the pillow. He shook off the distance and took his place on the other side of the bed.

“Kylo, I know that you like sex and…”

Shame burnt his face. “Rey, I’ve had over ten years to learn how to like sex. Nothing will happen here until you’re ready. I really promise you. And if we never get there, then I will still love you and want you to be here. I know tonight hasn’t been perfect. But life is never perfect.”

She still licked her lips before she nodded. “I used to…look at you when you came in from running. I could see…how you looked.”

Another dose of humiliation. “Sometimes I just do things and don’t care about how it looks. Like with Leia and her friends…*fuck.*”

Rey managed to smile at his embarrassment. He held her eyes and moved to click off the lamp on his side of the bed. Darkness filled the room.

For the first time in so long, there was someone else in his bed who he cherished, who he wanted to stay there forever.
No matter how it felt, no matter how many years had passed, he still felt like he was fourteen in a hospital room for a moment. He was yanked back there violently by his evil mind. She was just a child. She was just a small girl, one who he had to protect and raise. No matter how much he loved her, maybe that love was still wrong maybe…

And then she yawned and he grinned before leaning down to kiss her goodnight. Instead of meeting her lips, he brushed her forehead. It was all he could do to keep his guilty mind from ruining him.

“We have a month to talk about this,” he said, lingering for a moment. “But I love you.”

She kissed his cheek. “I love you too. But Kylo?”

“Yeah?”

“Am I your girlfriend now?”

He’d never had a girlfriend before. But he needed to follow George’s orders. “You are. That’s how we’ll talk to people tomorrow.”

He wanted to bring up her childhood again. He wanted to remind her of all the times she’d asked him to be her boyfriend, before she really understood what that meant. All of those moments crashed into him. And so many other memories trailed with them. I just want a boyfriend who realizes that he’s my boyfriend. Forcing those words, those shouts, down into the box that they belonged in, he kissed her forehead again. “I love you.”

When she rested against his chest, he sighed deeply.

Even if it was selfish, even if he left her with unanswered questions, he could finally sleep instantly for the first time in months.

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“Hi,” a blonde girl said, stepping beside her on the deck of George’s house. “Which one is your dad?”

Rey sipped her juice to keep from looking that embarrassed. She hadn’t been introduced to the girl when everyone arrived. They must have showed up late, or maybe when she was helping Grey in the kitchen and watching him purposely trying to ruin the blue cheese dip by making it too strong. He really needed to move out. “I’m not here with my dad. I’m with…my boyfriend.”

There. She’s said it. And her heart was about to flop over itself by saying it out loud.

“Oh, cool.” The girl smiled, not really caring how important the word had been for her. “I’m Brianna.”

“I’m Rey.” She returned the look before gazing out at the lawn again. “This is the first one of these things I’ve been to.”

Brianna nodded then made an annoyed face. “My dad made me go to tons of these dumb mingles when I was small. Then he gave me a break, like he figured out that I wasn’t a baby anymore. Now
that I’m home for the summer, he’s made me go to so many. He’s that guy by the fence, Peter Henderson.”

She spotted a balding man talking to a much younger agent and guessed it must be him. “I think I met him. I have no idea who’s really who here.”

She had taken a moment by herself to breathe. Everyone and everything had happened so quickly when people started to invade George’s house. They had spent the morning with George and his son, figuring out food and drinks and setting up chairs and tables. They’d brought over so many chairs from Kylo’s garage. It seemed like Han had been desperate to get rid of so many of the things from their home. She recognized every folding chair that they brought over.

“Oh, it’s really confusing. We move all of the time so I’ve known so many different field agents. And they all are the same. Like, they act like they don’t have guns on them right now but you know that they wish they did. It always scares my friends, the normal ones. Do you go to school in D.C.?” Brianna seemed nice. Her nails were painted pink and she was fit. Her loose fitting sundress didn’t look like something she wore everyday.

Rey had worn a strapless floral print dress that had felt so grownup until she got there. Now she felt like a kid, seeing all of the other wives and girlfriends walking around and talking. “No, I’m still looking at schools. I’m taking a break.”

“I totally get it. I wanted to go to Europe with my friends. And I still might. Where’s your boyfriend?” Brianna was scanning the small crowd. They were all people who Kylo worked with and she hoped that one day she would get to know them better. But she’d still been there.

She motioned at the house. “He got a phone call.”

Brianna offered to get her more to drink and she accepted. They found two empty lawn chairs and sat down, keeping the conversation going. Brianna was easy to talk to. She seemed comfortable around all of the mingling men and women and their partners on the lawn in the sunshine. She talked about where she had lived and how her dad had to take stress leave for six months when she was fourteen so he was finally around. Rey started to feel comfortable, opening up about going to Michigan when she was eleven because she had problems at school.

Finally, Kylo strode down the steps of the deck. He spotted her and asked if he could come over. She nodded.

“Hi Brianna,” he said. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“Hi Kylo. Where’s Grey?” Brianna tilted her head as she said the name.

He shrugged, grabbing a chair and sitting down. “Brent’s wife has him cornered in the house. She wants to donate some old books to the library and he doesn’t want them. He tried to get me to make it stop but I needed to find Rey.”

Are you okay? He blinked. Is everyone still being nice to you?

She nodded. Yes. I’m sorry for keeping to myself. I don’t know who to talk to. I’m glad she found me.

He quirked a light grin before reaching to take her hand. I’m sorry for leaving you alone. Han couldn’t close the back garage.

“How’s school?” Kylo asked, reminding her that another person was sitting there.
Listening to Brianna reply, talking about her plans for the fall, made her think again about what they hadn’t spoken about last night. There were so many things left to go through but she was still unsure of how Kylo felt about her not having a plan. It was one of those Kylo things: have a plan and follow it. But she wanted to take a break so she didn’t really want to fall into worry about it. Having Kylo there, next to her, made it easier for her to lift her head. Most everyone was standing with their partners. It felt better now.

Hearing steps down the deck again, she caught Grey’s gaze and he rolled his eyes in relief at seeing her. Sitting down on the grass next to Kylo, he took a long drink from Kylo’s beer bottle before getting a glare. “Don’t leave me alone with that woman again, Ky. I don’t want her shitty books. Hey Bri, hey Rey. Bored yet?”

They made their little corner of the lawn their own for a while; it seemed separate from the others circulating around. Grey said it was like a kid's table and Kylo didn't think it was funny, but Brianna laughed. The people, the strangers to her but not to Kylo, would sometimes drift into the house for more to eat or drink, looking at the four of them as they passed by. Kylo would nod at each one until he was finally summoned by one of them. He reached for her hand then and she followed, leaving the other two behind.

*It will be quick, I hope.*

She responded by squeezing his hand in response.

Her boyfriend. Kylo was her boyfriend.

But the other man, Agent Lake, trapped them in an endless conversation about Bureau politics that went right over her head. It was dizzying to be in Kylo’s world: last night, hearing about the case, and now today having to see so many new faces. His hand tightened in hers like he sensed that she was getting overwhelmed. He had said that they could go at any time, but she had promised George and Grey that she would help clean up. She wanted to try this life for real, not just dream about it. But it was so boring. Some Assistant Director had made some decisions that another director disliked. Maybe it was something about cars? And the agent wanted to hear Kylo’s opinion about it. She was surprised when Kylo didn’t look annoyed at the questions, but he did squeeze her hand again as he took on the face that he wore around the agents. She realized that she would have to get used to seeing it more often; it was a sudden rush that made the world tilt in an instant. This was all happening so fast and her earlier confidence was left shaking as the agent kept talking. Still, Kylo would glance at her throughout the entire thing, asking her if she wanted to leave with her eyes. She just moved closer to him until he put his arm around her. That put her back in the moment.

That finally made Lake stop his rambling. “I’m so sorry, I’ve been really rude. Rey, how are you finding this part of Virginia so far?”

She was really there. And Kylo really had his arm around her. She licked her lips, happy to be let into the conversation. “I like it. It’s really beautiful here. I can’t wait to see more of it.”

That was the plan for next week. They’d take a drive, exploring more of the state. Kylo hadn’t seen much of it either. They could go anywhere and she’d be happy. She’d have him all to herself.

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By the time everyone had left, Kylo was certain that Rey didn’t have a good time. He’d seen her looking nervous and stressed, balancing in new shoes she had never worn before. He should have known it. He should have waited longer. But he couldn’t really skip it. And she had wanted to go with him in the beginning, back when it was just something that they talked about on the phone. But he guessed that she had come to regret it after getting odd looks from the much older wives and somewhat older girlfriends. Thankfully, Brianna had been there. She was someone she could talk to if he got pulled aside to talk about inane things, dying to get back to her.

Grey nudged him and handed him a glass. He smelt the booze and sighed. “Stop zoning out. She did great. Better than my stepmoms ever did at these snake pits. Bri will be around too. They exchanged numbers so if you have to head out of town, she’s got a friend here.”

They were waiting for George and Rey to finish the dishes. He had offered to help but Rey had quietly blinked that she wanted to talk to George alone. Grey had excused himself from all house clean up after collecting all of the chairs and picking up the trash.

“I saw them talking and I was relieved,” he said, finally accepting the rum. “But I’m still worried that all of her friends will end up being the daughters of people I work with.”

Grey snorted. “Your only friend is the son of someone you work with.”

“My only friend here.” He rolled his eyes. “And that’s the problem. Among the million other problems…”

Lifting his eyes to stare at the stars, Grey shook his head. “She’s going to find them. After next week, I’ll introduce her to some more of the other students and new people at the library. The chicks that work in the café next door are nice. And if you have to head out of town, I’ll take her into D.C. and see if any of my old classmates want to meet up.”

Kylo looked the other way, focusing instead on the inside of the house, through the glass sliding doors. Rey was sitting at the kitchen table with George on the other side. She was mostly smiling and so was George. It was a good conversation. She was safe with him. Forever their hero.

“You don’t have to do all that.” Kylo turned back, taking another drink. “I mean, you can ask her if she wants to. She has an easier time making friends than I do. She’ll be able to do it on her own.”

Grey’s eyes shifted to his and gave him a small smile. “Yeah, I know. I’m just trying to find things to do that aren’t boring. Oh, I forgot to tell you. I found a rental not that far from here. Some guy at the Bureau got placed overseas and he doesn’t want to sell his house yet. As long as I cut the grass, don’t have parties and pay enough to cover utilities and property taxes, I can have it.”

Grey needed to get his own place, desperately. It would mean he would spend less time hanging out at his place. With Rey there and how much they needed to talk, he really wanted him to have his own space.

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“I’m so tired,” she said, sighing. “Everyone there was so…adult.”

Kylo pulled her closer. They were finally home, finally free from George’s backyard. On Kylo’s couch, she cuddled against him as he sighed. “I’m sorry Owen and Silla couldn’t be there. But
you’ll get to meet her soon. We’ll have dinner with them. You’ll like her. She’s a teacher.”

Nodding, she felt a shiver as he traced a finger up her arm. “I know, Owen told me. I’m going to call Brianna soon. She seems nice. How many times have you met her?”

His hand kept stroking her, setting a small fire in her stomach. “A few times. I’ve had dinner at her house once.”

Yawning, she shut her eyes. “I wasn’t miserable. Just nervous. It was like Han and Leia’s parties. All I was asked about was where I went to school. It was annoying that everyone just thought I should be in school.”

Kylo’s exhale was slight, but she still heard it. “They’re…a lot older than you and even me. Many have kids your age. It’s about finding a new way of dealing with people. But you’re good at asking them questions. You care about people. I just fake it.”

Maybe she did care more about people than Kylo did, but he cared in a different way. She’d seen even more of the many sides of him that afternoon. He met people’s eyes; he listened to their questions. He looked like he wanted to be there most of the time. It had really only been when he was alone that she saw the slight shake in his eyes from across the yard. He’d find her and look slightly annoyed at always having to talk. He never liked parties. He’d always find a reason to be alone. And now he couldn’t.

No wonder he was exhausted all of the time.

“Are you hungry?” he asked. There were things in the fridge, she remembered. He was just thinking about her.

She’d eaten enough. She smiled to herself, remembering helping Grey make the buffet and setting it out in the house. That had been when she was the most relaxed. He helped tie the apron over her dress and they set to work in mid-morning. He kept his eye-rolling only for her whenever Kylo or George would pass through the room. It was like…

The thought made her smile fade and she sat up. The afternoon hadn’t just been hard in one way; it had been hard in so many other ways. “Were you attracted to Grey because he reminded you of Poe?”

The shocked look on Kylo’s face made her sit up more. His hands froze but he shook his head instantly. “What are you talking about, Rey? I don’t compare them. And I don’t compare them to you. We’ve…”

Shutting her eyes, she bit her lip before speaking. “I know we’ve talked about it. I was just thinking…he sometimes jokes like him, he calls you Ky, he does whatever you want…”

Blinking, she looked at him again when he sighed, cutting her off.

Kylo briefly rubbed his eyes, but then shook it off. “They are different people. They don’t even look similar. I’ve told you about Gregor. We had sex because I was lonely and thought…I thought it could be something. I liked him then. And he hurt me because I was stupid. I don’t like him in that way now but I’m proud that he’s found something to do with his life that isn’t meaningless. And it is…” he paused to swallow, “it is a problem that I use him like I do. I know that he still has feelings for me. But I’ve told him that I’m with you now and he still wants to be my friend, to be your friend. So he will get over that when he finds someone better. And he likes working with you so please don’t be angry with him for how he feels.”
“I’m not mad at him. I’m just confused sometimes. Bri and I were talking after, when you were talking to someone else, and she told me that her mom thought that you and Grey were together. Bri was just glad that it wasn’t true and that maybe he’s single, but how many of these things have you gone to with him?” She folded her arms, settling her eyes on him.

His eyes darted around for a moment before meeting hers. “I hate these things. I hate talking to people outside of work who aren’t George and Owen. So yes, Rey. Yes, I made Grey go with me to these stupid social things. I wanted him there because I don’t like people hitting on me. I didn’t want someone’s daughter or wife to talk to me longer than they needed to. And he said that it was fine. He likes fucking with those people so he’s not doing it just because he does what I tell him to.”

He wasn’t talking like he was himself again. He hadn’t had that much to drink but he sounded different as he defended himself. It was a strange sort of anger that was coming out of him in that moment and Rey didn’t know how to manage it. She wanted to hug him but his shoulders were rigid.

“I haven’t slept with him since that summer,” Kylo finally said. “I haven’t been with anyone else since then.”

She knew that. The bite marks hadn’t returned. He hadn’t cut himself in so long. He just worked out or studied. And now, he just worked.

“I told you this would be hard.” He finally sounded like himself for a moment. “I want to lay out everything you don’t know about me, Rey, but I’m afraid that it will make you hate me.”

“But I know everything about you,” she said, trying to get him to look at her again. “You’ve done some things that I don’t like, but I could never hate you.”

He didn’t lift his head. Instead, it looked like he wanted to stand from the couch. He somehow still stayed in place and frowned. “You hated me once.” That’s when his eyes finally flicked to hers. “And I don’t want to make excuses. I’ve had a hard week. I’ve had to watch some horrible things and write about them, analyze them, and try to find a boy who’s been hurt in the worst way and then murdered. I also have to try to find the man who murdered him so others could get off to it. I’m not okay right now and it’s not fair to you to start arguing about these things right now because I’m like this. Just tell me if you’re okay right now.”

“I…” she started and then shook her head, “I’m worried, Kylo. I’m worried that you want to be with me only because I kissed you.”

His eyes stayed level. He only blinked at the question. “I want to be with you because you’re you, Rey. This would be so much easier if I’ve never been with anyone else, but I have. And I can’t take that back.”

Her lip finally trembled at his words. “Is love ever easy?”

She saw tears in his eyes as he shook his head. “I’m worried, Kylo. I’m worried that you want to be with me only because I kissed you.”

“I…” she started and then shook her head, “I’m worried, Kylo. I’m worried that you want to be with me only because I kissed you.”

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Her lip finally trembled at his words. “Is love ever easy?”

She saw tears in his eyes as he shook his head. “No. No, it’s not.”

She took in two deep breaths and then reached for him, needing to take away his tears along with the ones that were about to erupt in her chest. Kissing him, she felt his hands instantly around her body, pulling her closer by the hips.

He rested his forehead against hers. “There’s…I can’t talk about him tonight. Please don’t make me do that. But we will. I want to take care of you like I used to do. Tell me how I can do that.”
Blinking, Rey tried to find an easy path in her heart. But it was so clouded. Part of her wanted Kylo to unzip her dress, to kiss down her neck. She wanted him to unclasp her bra, to freely press his mouth against her breasts and taste her skin. She wanted to feel his hot breath against her stomach as he erased years of aches yet again. Of all of the memories, all of the pains, that she wanted to erase, it was finding someone to love her enough to take away all of the hurt rather than causing more.

She could ask Kylo anything.

But right then, after what she’d asked him, it didn’t seem fair or right. Her own anger and confusion made it hard to think right. He had really fallen for Grey because of the hints of Poe he had seen in him; she was sure of it. And he kept him around as another reminder. As much as she wanted him, she couldn’t erase that thought from her mind. It was a hard thought to fight, despite what he’d just said. She was back to being six years old again. Kylo had a friend. Kylo liked to kiss him. Kylo wanted to fuck him.

Her tears finally came heavy as she sobbed. “I’m stuck, Kylo.”

“No, no, don’t be.” He pulled her close, onto his lap. She curled against him, hearing him hold back tears as well. “Rey, I’m sorry. I’m sorry that this isn’t easy. But we’ll get through it, okay? We can’t…we can’t kill the past. I fucking want to. I want to burn it all down and give you the love you really deserve. But we can’t. We will just have to deal with it. Together.”

She sniffled, nuzzling against him. His embrace tightened and she sighed. “I don’t want to be jealous. I hate it. I hate thinking about the people who’ve touched you. You’ve been in love before Kylo. I haven’t. I don’t know what to do right now.”

His lips brushed her ear. “It’s all part of being in love. You have your heart telling you one thing and your head telling you another. I’m not perfect, Rey. But someone doesn’t have to be perfect for you to love them. And I want to love you as you are and just be in our bubble. But we can’t. There are sorrows. There’s pain. We’ve always had one another. And right now…we’re figuring out how to be together…together.”

Leaning back, Rey looked at him. His eyes, his lips. How his hair sat on his forehead. How the scar crossed down the side of his face. “So it’s okay that…sometimes I can still remember things and hate you? And you won’t make me leave?”

Shaking his head, Kylo sighed. “We can argue without…without ending things, Rey. And I’m confused too. Maybe I haven’t been really there for you the last couple of days, hell, since you’ve gotten here.” He paused for a moment and she watched as he squeezed his eyes shut. His lips moved but he didn’t speak. Finally, he exhaled. “Next week, it will just be us. And we’ll find a way.”

She had to believe him. When they were alone, things were so much easier. Around other people, there was always a thick layer of expectations.

Slowly, she shifted off of him and he took her hand to lead her upstairs.

Meeting his eyes, she turned and lifted her hair. His breath briefly warmed her neck as he gently pulled the zipper of her dress down. Holding it to her, she turned again. “It won’t be like this every night?”

Kylo licked his lips and then shook his head. “I hope not. I really hope we can…talk about other things too.”
She swallowed hard. “Do you want to have sex with me?”

He took a slow step back. “Only when you’re ready. When we’re both ready.”

Turning, Rey nodded. It was the same as last night. She felt like she wanted to get closer. She wanted to drop her dress and ask him to take her. She wanted to be like the others that Kylo had been with. But still, a small voice in the back of her head told her that it didn’t matter. Maybe it was Kylo’s. Maybe it was someone else’s. Maybe talking to George earlier had stuck with her in a different way. Kylo loved her. And rushing things wouldn’t take away the hurt. You’re allowed to be sad, sweet pea. And hey, you can hate me a little. It’s okay.

Why did she hear his voice at that moment?

Quietly, she let her dress drop away and moved to grab her nightgown. Kylo had looked away, still balancing what he wanted with how much space they still needed to cross.

When she met his eyes again, he gave her a small smile: one of the ones that she remembered from being small, being trapped. It was always hard to think that anything good could come from pain. No matter how far they got from where they began, it was always there, lurking. “Can we go to bed?”

He nodded and stepped aside.

So this was what it was like to live with Kylo like this. After closing the washroom door, she sniffled a little and shook her head as she picked up her toothbrush. “I’m okay.”

She stared at herself in the mirror until she believed it.

Chapter End Notes

I guess standard warnings, especially for references to past relationships because that’s where we are now. It will work out but it will be tense! I’m sorry that they can’t just be in love and happy just yet.

On a personal note...I'm not sure if you guys know or not but I'm from Canada and we recently had the biggest mass shooting in our history (aside from...you know...war). Between this and quarantine/pandemic, maybe I've gone over an edge into the black with this. Hugs to everyone. You're not alone. Sometimes it's okay to cry.
Just getting out of town on Monday eased the tension out of Rey’s shoulders. There had been no arguments on Sunday; there had just been packing or planning. But she had trouble getting through some of her thoughts. And Kylo was careful to avoid certain topics. She’d tried not to feel off when Kylo called Grey to tell him that they were leaving and could stay at his house if he wanted. He would just have to replace anything he drank. Kylo had a wine fridge in the basement that he was oddly proud of because he ordered it himself and had started filling it with expensive things. He looked forward to showing it to Leia and Han at the end of the month.

Telling them would take time. But they would get there. This had to be what she wanted after all. The future had to look better than the past.

It would also give her someone to talk to as she tried to figure out why Kylo still clung hard to his memories of Poe and his dependency on Grey.

He checked with her before they left, asking about Grey staying at the house, wondering if she wanted him to change the plan. She couldn’t come up with a better reason than she didn’t like it so she said that it was fine. He was Kylo’s friend. It was how it usually worked when he was away: Grey had a place to hang out and be himself, while also keeping watch over the house in case anything happened.

It didn’t really bother her firmly one way or the other. They’d talked about in again and Kylo assured her that they could work through it, cupping her face before he kissed her. Then he seemed to change the subject to show her pictures of the bed and breakfast they would be staying at.

He saw that she needed space and would give her careful looks, finding reasons to leave her alone for short periods of time before they left. She called Leia and said that everything was fine on Sunday afternoon, but it was hard to talk for long without wanting to ask for advice. Instead, she went into her room to call Rose. She was busy packing for college but took the time to listen to her worries. Rose had always thought that it was weird that she’d grown up with an FBI agent in her life and even weirder still to think that she had to find a way to adjust to that life if she wanted to be with Kylo. To Rose, even though she knew all of the pains in Rey’s past and all of her troubles growing up, she didn’t think of her as being that different from their other friends.

People had reasons to hurt or be sad, but they also had reasons to be happy and content. The most important thing was to think about her happiness.
She was happy with Kylo when they were alone and she wasn’t reminded of everything else out there. So it was nice to leave Kylo’s neighbourhood and that house for a place that was new for both of them.

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“You’re so beautiful when you smile.”

Rey turned from looking out the window of their room to grin at Kylo. “Why did you say that?”

Kylo shrugged. “I was just thinking it.”

He’d been quiet on the drive but also seemed to relax when they arrived. There was a large garden that bloomed around the two-storey building; walking paths and ponds and small tables for lunch made the place look like it was from a movie. There was only space for ten guests, but the kitchen and common area were large enough that they could avoid others if they wanted to. Kylo probably wouldn’t be talking to that many people; he would be focused on her or his own thoughts. There were bicycles if they wanted to go into the small town nearby. Kylo had read about it but maintained his hatred for biking. He said that he knew had to do it and could if someone forced him, but he just hated it and didn’t know why. He’d rather just drive if they wanted to go shopping, explore, or eat dinner elsewhere than at the house. There were a few places in the town.

Hearing him mention driving had made her apprehensive. She had still avoided getting her license. Maybe this fall she would finally do it. When she had been home, Kaydel would always volunteer to drive wherever they wanted to go. Going to the mall or the movie theatre or taking little day trips had been so normal for a few years. They’d have picnics and look at clouds, or talk about nothing. She reminded herself to call her soon. She’d be going to college where Kylo had studied. So at least she would be nearby when she went home.

Smoothing her dress, Rey sat beside him on the bed. He had looked a little proud of himself when they checked in and could present his FBI identification. He raised his eyebrows, smiling to himself, when the nice, older lady finished inputting their information and complimented him for his work. She saw the scar. She could see that he had put his life at risk for others. And Rey was glad that she didn’t ask exactly what he did.

Taking his hand, she sighed at the memory. “You could have just shown her your driver’s license downstairs, you know.”

That made him smirk. “I didn’t want to. I’m allowed to show off sometimes. It just reminds me that I really have this job. That it’s not just a fantasy.”

He was always on call, even with time off. He’d brought his gun; he’d had to. The first thing he’d done was lock it in the safe in their room, just like at home. He still had never had to fire it on duty, but he was consistent with practicing. Dad and Hux still hadn’t listened to him; there were no guns in their houses. Kylo would look annoyed during those conversations, but had come to accept that safety had to come from something else. Yet he had suggested again that she learn how to shoot, for her own safety; at the time, she shook her head. That was part of his job and didn’t need to be a part of her life.

“Were you also trying to get a discount?”
Smiling, he shook his head. “I’m not Han. I’m not going to go through the list of every person I’ve ever done business with or met to try to find a way to get something cheaper. That’s why it took his so long to fix the siding on the house. He wanted a bargain. I should have just paid for it myself.”

Tilting her head, Rey traced up and down his fingers. His hands were so large and strong. No wonder she felt so safe in them. “It was weird in school when we had to learn about household finances. I never really thought about how to budget things or why we would have to. I know that Leia tried to teach me when I was younger, like getting money for chores or to buy presents. I feel stupid that I didn’t really figure it out. I knew…I knew other people didn’t have money but I thought it was easier just to get more.”

The idea that she didn’t really need to work for the rest of her life bothered her because it really only came from something horrible. Kylo didn’t have to work either but chose to. No, it was more like he had to.

Shaking his head, he watched the movement of her hand. “Even if what happened to us hadn’t happened, we still would have grown up with too much. I had a nanny when I was very small and Leia was travelling a lot for work. I hated her and I’m glad it was only for a couple of years. No one else in my class had a nanny so I felt like a freak. But she took care of me and Hux so it was…nice to be able to play with him.”

But if what happened to them hadn’t happened, she never would have met him. She would have grown up in California to two poor parents, hooked on drugs. She wouldn’t have had the chance to live in a nice, clean house with a mom and a dad who loved her unconditionally. There would have been no dog or cat to give her comfort. Her grandparents might not have ever taken her to the fair. Would anyone ever take the time to braid her hair before a dance recital? Would she have grown up angry and sad for different reasons? Everything would have been a struggle and Kylo would have been Ben and would have had everything. The house, the dog, loving grandparents…He would have been friends with Hux and Paige, hanging out at their houses and getting into trouble rather than remembering being brutalized. Poe would have probably still moved to town and fallen in love with Kylo. But if Kylo hadn’t been abducted, would he have ever had that relationship? Would Ben have loved Poe?

He lifted her hand and kissed her palm, breaking the thought. “You look worried.”

Sighing, Rey didn’t know what to say. “I was just thinking about what ifs again. It’s silly. We can talk about it later. I’d like to walk around and see the garden before getting ready for dinner.”

“Do you want to be alone?” He tilted his head.

She thought about it and she did. She wanted to walk around the outside and see the house for herself. Nodding, she sighed. He had to understand because he mirrored her expression. He kissed her forehead and she left him to do whatever he did in his spare time. He had brought books and his journal. She hoped that soon she’d get to read what he was writing about her.

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“Hey Hux.”
“Hey Kylo. What’s up?”

Kylo stood near the window, watching Rey studying the trees that lined the garden. She touched the bark of one and then moved to sit beneath it, looking up at the green. Sighing, he turned from spying on her. It was a very romantic place; he wasn’t sure what he was thinking when he booked it. It was reasonably far away: a long enough drive to be somewhere new but close enough that he could get back if he had to. It was relatively private. He checked the backgrounds of the owners and found nothing but a drunk driving charge from twenty years ago. It had been the type of place that he knew normal couples went to; that’s what the reviews had said. But now, standing there in the large bedroom with a pale peach bedspread, he felt entirely too awkward.

“You know, driving myself insane. The usual.” He sighed and sat down in the armchair in the corner. At least there weren’t doilies everywhere. Why didn’t he look more at the interior pictures?

“What are you doing?”

“Well, crazy is very you. But right now I feel the same. I’m preparing the budget for the fall and it’s so boring. We need to allocate funding for an expansion and I’m about to smash my head against my desk arguing why it’s important to present to the county and the state. We need to renovate the chemistry lab too, or at least upgrade some things. Remember our fucking chemistry labs? I would have never passed that if…” he trailed off, also clearly thinking about the past. He grunted and then kept speaking. “I’m never going to like doing this part. I didn’t go to school for this.” He heard Hux shifting around, reordering his papers. “How are things with Rey?”

He could almost see the look on his face when he asked the question.

“I don’t know. Complicated. I want to give her everything and I don’t know how to do it. We went to a barbecue on Saturday with people from work and we ended up arguing. I don’t know if I said the right things. Sometimes I forget that she’s only eighteen and has really only dated someone who…who hurt her.” He started biting at the cuticle of his left hand, nipping at the skin. “I can’t take the pictures of him down from the house. I should have done that before she came and I couldn’t. It would be like…forgetting him.”

“Ky, I…yeah I think I get it. When Paige is angry and a little drunk, she’ll sometimes hit me with how I cheated and could do it again and I just have to hold her and let her cry and tell her that I love her. She’s everything to me and I did something that hurt her. I tell her how much she means to me. And that I love her and Benji. I can’t take it back but we can keep moving forward. And I think that’s what you have to do.” Hux sighed and Kylo shut his eyes. “I miss him too. I mean, obviously not like you miss him, but you know what I mean. Without him, maybe we would have never been friends again and my life would be so much fucking worse even though you drive me nuts sometimes. Benji loves the tricycle you sent him. My shins don’t feel the same but he loves it.”

That image made him smile, despite the first part. That night with his car had really been pure teenage idiocy and unhinged rage on his part, but it also intertwined them throughout the rest of high school. If it hadn’t been for Poe’s friends, he probably would have only interacted personally with three other people until the end. At least no one on the wrestling team had given him shit when word got out that he almost killed a guy. With how tall he was and how he had finally started filling out his lankiness, no one could stop him. He never made state but the few regional gold medals he won were on his mother’s office wall.

Again, he was falling into the past.

Present. He had to be there.

“I’m thinking of getting him a sled for Christmas. We can take him sledding where we used to go
when we were kids.” He’d already bought the sled. It was in the garage. But there were other things to talk about. “Paige can blame me for not being there more for you then if she wants. Whatever makes it easier for her.”

They were both good at apologizing for abandoning one another at different points in their lives.

He could almost hear Hux roll his eyes. “It still doesn’t work that way but I appreciate the thought. Kylo, it’s your life but you never do anything easily. Being with him, banging Liza, hooking up with the other guy, going into the FBI because you, I don’t know, wanted revenge? Wanted to be George? All of that shit is going to confusing and hard on her, especially if you’re being hard on yourself about it. Maybe give her a little time and be honest with her.”

Sucking in a deep breath, Kylo returned to biting at his finger. “She asked me if I was with Grey because he reminded me of him. And he didn’t but now I can’t stop thinking about it. We work as friends, so why couldn’t I do that for him and her like he kept asking me to? Was it just because I liked sleeping with him? Was it because he filled some part of me that I didn’t want to lose? Maybe my stalker wouldn’t have killed him if I’d just…”

“Kylo.” His name, spoken sharply, cut off his rambling. “It’s like you tell me when you’re not overthinking things. There are no maybes or what ifs. It’s what happened. And I know that you’re probably misusing government resources to poke around in the case and somewhere in your house is your fucking evidence map and his fucking phone. Yeah, I want you to be happy with Rey. You both fucking deserve it. It’s going to be fucked up to see because I still remember her being four years old and tucked into your bed while you sobbed on my shoulder. Seeing you again for the first time and not knowing what to do. But you really have to be honest with her.” Hux sounded tired, but also repeated again what he needed to hear. “And stop chewing on your fingernail. It sounds disgusting.”

“Sorry.” He dropped his hand. “It’s like it was that spring before I lost him forever. It’s like I can’t keep him without hurting her, even though they’re just memories now. And that’s not fair to him or her. I wish that my head could sort these things out like I do at work but there’s no grey there. I loved him. I fucked up a lot because I’m fucked in the head and I can’t do that to her. I got that feeling again when I was picking her up from the airport. Suddenly, all I could think about was finding her and keeping her with me and…it didn’t feel good.”

“I’m worried about that too. You made it so hard for him to have anything but you. Don’t do that to her.” The warning in Hux’s voice again confirmed he was wrong for many of his impulses again. “Look, Kylo, things aren’t just going to snap into place because you want them to. Does letting go hurt? Of course it fucking does. I’m still angry that my dad isn’t still around so I can ignore him to his face so I’m still working on my own shit here too. Benji asks about his other granddad and I don’t know how to talk to him about that. But you’re not forgetting him by finally moving on with someone else, especially if that someone else has loved you for her entire life.”

Sighing, Kylo stared at his bloody fingertip, turning it to watch a bead of crimson drift down his finger. “I think that it also bothers her that I’ve mainly been with men. Hell, I slept with Grey more that weekend than I did with that woman those messed up months.”

He cringed again to himself. Desperation and grief had driven him to do so many regrettable things.

“Kylo, I teach teenagers. I have meetings with a queer student at least once a week. I don’t care what you do in the bedroom but keeping you from messing this up is more of what I care about. Talk to your shrinks more. Read more articles. Fill another shelf with journals. Just because you’re going to be with her doesn’t mean you have to go around thinking that you’re straight and lose that
part of your, whatever, identity.” Hux was starting to pace. He had other things to do than talk him through another minor crisis. “And don’t tell me that it’s not important to you because…”

His face burnt. “I know. I know I’ve talked about this way too much.”

“Kylo, those seven years that you were gone, what happened to you…you’ve really worked through so much of it. I’ve fucked up too. Paige fucked up. You’re not…not normal. I meant what I said that day in the gym. I can be pissed off and annoyed and give you a hard time, but I don’t judge you. That shit with Liza was bizarre but I…I’ve also listened to my dick at times when my heart was hurting.” Hux took a long and deep breath. “And now I’m watching my son in the backyard and really thinking that we should have another kid. We’re just people. My dad made me angry for so many years and I…I picked up the pieces. You’ve done that too. But if you’re thinking about it, that means she’s thinking about it too.”

The words Liza had said to him at the hotel shuddered through his mind. She had also felt like she had to please him in some way that she had twisted in her head. He would have to answer so many questions from Rey and didn’t want to dread them. Being open, being honest. But some parts of that honesty could still hurt her.

“Yeah, we have a lot of…talking to do.” He rubbed his tattered hand on his dark slacks. It was August and hot and he was still dressed like he was working in an office. He needed new clothes. “But thanks for listening to me. I know you’re busy.”

His friend laughed. “It was more interesting than my fucking budget that the school board will hate. When you’re back at home we can chat more when I can’t sleep and just want to shoot some guys in the head. Grey has a good kill count going on. But anytime, man. You help me think about myself too. Um, Benji will probably want to call later to say goodnight. So I might call you later.”

They exchanged goodbyes and Kylo tossed his phone onto the bed. It sat there for a moment before he reached for it again.

Are you at my house?

U bet I am. And Im naked on ur bed.

I know you are joking. Can you do me a favour?

Yeah sure. Ill add it to the list.

Can you go through the house and take down some of the pictures of him? Not the family ones but the ones of just him and me or just him. Put them on my desk. There is a recycling box beside the printer.

The reply bubble was achingly slow in arriving. Ok. R u ok?

Just do it for me please.

Ok. But im taking a bottle of tequila.

He pinched the bridge of his nose before replying. You deserve it. Thank you.
Kylo was extra attentive at dinner, touching her arm more often and smiling without prompting. He asked questions about what her friends were doing in the fall and if she wanted to visit them. She wanted to make those trips soon, that was true. Carefully, he asked about Finn, if he still talked to her. That part still brought up a dose of shame and pain, but he held her hand when she swirled her water glass to distract herself. It had been hard. It had been awkward. The pain never really went away but at least they could have conversations, remembering their childhood and trying to keep in intact. Kylo was better at holding grudges than she was. Forgiving Finn was still something she wanted to work on.

He asked her about how much Benji had grown and if she still liked being around him. She did, but he could sometimes have tantrums that would make her upset with him. It gave her a chance to ask about if he still thought about the times she had been angry as a kid and as a young adult. He flinched at the question, admitting that he did, but he didn’t take it as personally anymore. There were times that he had made mistakes because he had troubles sorting through his emotions. He had never meant to make her angry or hurt. And he didn’t blame her if she still thought he had been selfish at times because he had been. Stepping over the barrier at Niagara Falls had been entirely an ego-driven action, he confessed as he finished a glass of wine. But the true reason why he put himself in danger was still outside of their bubble, just waiting to burst in.

But he changed the subject and things felt calm again. They were just two people eating dinner, on vacation. Still stroking her arm, he asked about her art. She was into pastels now and had brought them with her, planning on sitting in the sunshine and drawing the next day.

The careful way he asked about if she was still thinking about what they’d talked about after the party finally narrowed down more of his anxieties. She did her best to smile and take his hand; they could save the more difficult things for later.

She wore another one of her new dresses, a deep green one, and put on lipstick. There were only two other couples there but they were older than they were and without an obvious age difference. She’d spoken with one of the women in the garden, when she was still sorting through her thoughts. She was from New Jersey. They had always wanted to come to a place like this. Her children were in high school and driving her insane. Rey managed to smile, trying to take the lessons from Saturday and use them rather than dwelling on the argument that had followed.

And then the woman asked her what her husband did for work.

And Rey had just blushed and said they weren’t married. She couldn’t even find a way to explain that they’d been together for eighteen years and few of those years had been easy, but they had been worth it all now.

The woman hadn’t said that to be mean. Like the people from Kylo’s office, they were just trying to make conversation. That’s what Kylo had said for many years. But seeing him on Saturday had shown her that he could actually do it now. There were other people in his world and he could talk to them in a way he never could when they were younger.

Kylo was an adult. His body had been that way for years but now, outwardly, he could often act like everyone expected. He probably broke fewer phones now.

Upstairs in the washroom, after a short walk around the garden at night, she took off her makeup before brushing her teeth. Then she stared at the nightgown she’d bought. Kylo was checking his phone, swearing to himself as she closed the door to the washroom. He’d already done everything he needed in the washroom, even letting her watch him delicately apply cream to the angry line
down his face. Then he sighed at her and looked tired before telling her he had to check in with work.

He was an adult with a very serious job. One that he was proud of, even though he had a hard time sorting through the darker parts. She had to help him with that, but he was also trying to help her. The entire time at dinner, he hadn’t mentioned the case. And she didn’t want to bring it up.

So it was silly to worry about what she should wear to bed. Kaydel said it would look sexy and now it just felt stupid. The memories of lying on top of Kylo in the bathtub flamed on her cheeks. It had felt so right at the moment, to make him show her what she really meant to him. He had always been leaving, taking, and demanding. He had always been filling and taking over her thoughts. When he had helped her, touching her in such a caring way, he had started to undo so many old hurts.

But had he really acted in those frustrating ways, the ones from the past, to hurt her? She knew better than to think that way but the thought still swept in. He really had just been trying to live his life, taking careful time to plan the bigger picture while forgetting other people in the process. It really wasn’t his fault that so many of her thoughts were about him, despite how often she went to therapy to try to disentangle them.

Looking at herself in the mirror, she frowned again. It really was weird to think about what Kylo wanted physically. She had thought her underwear had been pretty before but now it looked childish: a soft pink bra and matching panties. Finn had liked her breasts but they still hadn’t really filled out, even now. They probably never would. Liza had big boobs and it made her jealous before Paige’s wedding. She’d been there through all of the fittings and the lady at the dress store even suggested that she didn’t need a bra, but Liza got fitted with one.

And Kylo had wanted to sleep with her again that night.

But still, when he lost himself in anger and heartache, he’d turned to her and wanted to kiss her when he was at the very bottom. He would always turn to her for help, for the light that he saw even when she felt like everything was black inside.

Maybe Grey really was right. Kylo just picked people he believed in, even when they were broken or damaged. They just always happened to be attractive people so there were some physical desires there. Or maybe Kylo just drew attractive people to him.

Lifting her chin, she smiled at herself, meeting her eyes in the mirror. Leia had always called her beautiful, helping braid her hair before dance or taking her to the mall to shop for jeans or dresses. They’d talked about her worries about feeling fat because of her birth control. Before she left, they talked about changing to another type; her internal pains hadn’t returned in all of this time so it was maybe not a good idea. How was she going to book a gynaecologist exam without Leia’s help? How was she going to find a new group to talk through how she felt? The worries pounded hard a for a moment, drawing her back to when everyone was concerned about what she ate. When she hated her body and didn’t understand why she always hated her body.

It never really went away. Like everything, she would often feel the pull to check her weight when she did poorly on an assignment or someone started a new rumour. Being fit was fine. Being sick wasn’t.

Smoothing down her stomach, she turned in the mirror. Kylo liked fit people. She heard how many times the boys…

Again, she had to glare at herself in the mirror. Kylo and Poe. Poe and Kylo. They hadn’t been the
Scotty for so many years, despite how Han and Leia sometimes talked about them when they thought she couldn’t hear. She’d sometimes sit outside of their room at night when she should have been sleeping, even before she kissed Kylo. It was only in the last few weeks that she would creep there, outside of their open door, with the apprehension about telling them how she wanted to be with Kylo. And their conversations were mostly about boring things, taking care of the house or what to make for dinner, when to get the oil changed, if they needed a new furnace. She didn’t care that it all sounded inane because it was about them, how both worried about getting older and how the kids would handle it all. That part made her afraid. Those conversations made her remember Leia after her parents’ deaths. She hardly remembered grandpa. There were pictures of them as a family and he was a big and proud man and she wished that she could recall a hug or a conversation but she had just been too small. There were just hints of feelings and kindness that tasted like butterscotch. But grandma…grandma hurt more. Those memories tasted like strawberries.

But some nights, the conversations would drift to other worries for the both of them. Not applying to college was a problem, but they didn’t want to pressure her. They seemed to blame themselves for not talking more about careers or jobs and they didn’t have to. But they wanted to give her time, how she needed time to figure out what she wanted to do, and even if she didn’t they needed to support her. They wanted her to be happy.

When they spoke about Kylo, there were so many more things. Ben needs to find someone. He’s so alone. They also hated that part. He has George’s kid. Whatever happens there, he’ll at least tell us. If the boys were still together, he would have probably finished a PhD by now rather than running around doing all of this shit. Maybe they would have finally worked through their issues.

That conversation, only a few weeks ago, had made her sit up and frown, part of some of the anger that she had taken with her to Virginia even though she had tried to forget it. I miss him. And he does too. If he just had someone then he’d…I don’t know, settle down.

So they thought about it too.

But Kylo and Poe had argued, even if it had always seemed to end in acts of devotion: deep kisses and long hugs. She had thought it was perfect but she knew now that it wasn’t. Kylo liked working out. Poe just wanted to sleep or do nothing but be in bed with him, to not feel exhausted all of the time and not get sick again. The times she stayed with them, one of them was going to the gym every day. She used to like those moments because they meant just spending time with Kylo or just hanging out with Poe. But now it felt strange and another part of her heart started to hurt.

Rey hadn’t just thrown out those words at Kylo during their argument from nowhere. Poe had loved him deeply and really had done everything to be with him, everything that he told him to. He left his family, he changed his body, he did something he hated…

She didn’t want to cry about him but tears pricked her eyes. Hitting the faucet, she shook her head and sat on the closed toilet lid. If anything, Kylo would think she was peeing.

Kylo wasn’t treating her like he did him. He had already said that she could go home, to decide what she could do with her life if she wanted to, and they would still be together. He wanted her to see her friends; Kylo hated seeing Poe’s friends. The few times they had come by the house when they were all living together usually ended in the two of them sleeping in separate rooms. He told her she was beautiful and never pushed her to work out; she only joined him in running to be with him and he made sure that she never went too far. He asked her if she wanted to taste the wine; but, she remembered around her tenth birthday, how much Kylo apologized to Poe that he had let him drink too much, for not taking care of him, for not being better to him. And then how hung over they both the morning of…when everything started falling apart until it could be put together
again.

Standing, she shut off the water.

She decided against changing into the lacy, dark negligée and instead grabbed the other pyjamas she’d brought with her into the washroom. It was an old shirt she’d found in Kylo’s closet: a deep brown one. The loose black shorts that followed felt better than the silly nightgown.

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Finally done with going through his email and texts, he set his work phone to charge. His personal phone would hopefully be a much more pleasant experience. After going through various summaries about tips for other cases, preparations for court dates, and the daily unit report from George, he was more than eager to look at the other side of his life. He was still on call, but it was technically a vacation. He’d had three glasses of wine over dinner and dessert. Running in the morning, whenever they got up, would help purge it all.

He could have had more but he was still thinking about their time together.

Kylo didn’t want to show Rey his nerves and he was glad that she didn’t seem to care when he took a glass of sweet wine with dessert. It was a small place, run by a local family. The same woman that checked them in had served them and he knew that her husband and brother worked in the kitchen. They had earned their reputation, trying to sell them on local wines even as Rey sipped at her water. He had still considered taking a tour of the local vineyard. But only if Rey wanted to.

But he didn’t really feel like he was trying when he asked her questions to catch up on parts of her life that she was maybe worrying about. The ideas had come easily to him, looking at the shape over her mouth and curve of her smile. She was also settling in to being there. Maybe she felt the same about how weird it all was. Getting to Friday wouldn’t be that hard. He could take her into town and they could walk around without anyone knowing anything about them. It would be freeing. It would be them.

The only part that they couldn’t get to was meant to be out of range of the nosey people around them.

He had almost wanted to wear his FBI badge on his belt when he had left the room earlier that day, when Rey was still wandering the garden and being herself. The other couples there were in their forties and fifties. He’d seen how they had looked at them. But he couldn’t let that really bother him. Sitting in the common room, with its safe high ceiling, he read a short article about the Cotard delusion, flipping through the pages and making notes. It was the only thing that he’d brought with him that wasn’t a notebook or something to do with a case. His mother was still right; he needed different reading material.

Still, it would keep him from panicking about how he’d come back to a house that suddenly lacked the images that his weaknesses had made him ache for. That face and smile. The good moments. Pictures never really captured memories so maybe it was better that the glimpses of their private side were gone: them on the beach in Florida, a picture that he used to hate but had later printed out and framed; them on the couch with Poe smirking and him still asleep, one that he’d taken from Poe’s phone, a picture that he had kept close to his bedside and turned to when he was alone. At least he could trust Grey when he couldn’t trust himself.
And he could replace the empty nails with new pictures. His own annoyance reminded him that tomorrow they should get someone to take a picture of them together. Rey had bought so many new dresses. She had filled her side of the closet.

It was hers now.

He answered the texts from Han and Leia. Things were fine. They were fine. Sorry for answering late.

He watched the video from Paige, seeing her and Benji at the park. He wanted them to come in September. Even without Hux, he could take Benji to the office and show him what he did. Owen would love it. That would be a new picture. From their conversations, he knew that Owen had wanted kids but was worried about being too old. He’d have to talk to Silla again at the dinner he had planned for them.

Only if Rey wanted to. Don’t force her to do things. Let her learn.

He sent a quick text to Paige and Hux, apologizing for replying so late. They could call in the morning. He got caught up in…figuring out everything.

Then he had to look at the text from Gregor and grunted. Hey u know Im drunk now but i did it. Ur great and i love you. ur couch is great. we should see this movie im watching. Its totally f*cked up. Youd like it.

He looked at the sent time and dared to send a reply. We will. We are going to bed soon. Drink some water.

Inside, he wanted to write how he loved him too. He knew how he thought Grey meant it. And that would have been how he replied. It would be like telling Hux or Paige that he loved them and…

Sighing to himself, he heard the facet turn on and narrowed his eyes. He was overthinking it again.

I will. Gnight ky.

Goodnight Grey.

Putting his other phone on the other charger, he reminded himself to tell Rey that his ringer would have to be on, at least for one phone.

He changed, grabbing a t-shirt before deciding to slip pyjama pants over his boxers. More layers. Keep it safer.

Then, he shook his head at himself. It would be different. He hadn’t cared about those things before, so why now?

He tossed the pants and climbed into bed, finally disturbing the cover fully.

And the washroom door opened.

“Can you turn out the light,” he said, feeling embarrassed that he had to ask. He was always so demanding. “I’m in bed.”

The lights went out and he clicked on the lamp on his side of the bed. The tassel jangled as he yanked it too hard.

And then he saw her.
Why did she have one of his shirts on?

Biting down the hurt inside, he smiled as she climbed into bed and rested against his chest instantly. Gentle, warm. He was still working through a dozen emotions at the same time. He didn’t want her to feel his heart pounding and tried to still it. He should have already worked through how she wasn’t a child and how he shouldn’t want to only protect her. He should not care that he saw the shirt and felt his heart crack. He wanted this to only be about her and was failing at the same time. He lightly kissed her forehead and hoped desperately that she would think that his nerves were about being close and not about the other heaviness surrounding him.

“Did you have a good night?” he asked, having to touch the familiar shirt. It felt the same as it did the last time. They’d come home for a weekend, towards the end. There had been snow. They had argued. But they got home in time for dinner and Rey had hugged his side when he had just wanted to corner Poe and ask what was wrong. But as they ate, as Poe gave him soft eyes and calm eyebrows, he let go of some of his panic. He could finally turn to Rey that night. They went through her school work. They looked at her art. He made her happy by just being there. But when he finally went to bed, he was able to pull that shirt off of him and find out what was wrong. The physical memories remained but he couldn’t remember what the hell had been the problem.

Stop it. Stop it. I love you but go away, he thought bitterly to himself.

“Yes, dinner was good. I’m glad the people stopped staring at us for a while.” She yawned and cuddled closer. Her hand stroked down his chest and he nodded. Everything was too quiet. And he’d also been triggered. He hated that word but he had to lean on it to stop his panic.

“It will…get easier.” He kissed her forehead. “Other people have ideas. They really only have their own lives to think about. I…maybe I’ve finally learned how to put up with them.”

She turned, resting her chin on his chest. With her hair down, she looked so much younger. Another problem that he hadn’t worked through yet. “You still hate it.”

Smirking, brushed his hand down her face. “I’ll always hate it. People are idiots but I can’t treat them that way.”

She held his eyes for a long moment. “I’m glad we’re here.”

“Me too.” At least they were alone now. They could talk about anything.

She put her head down again and sighed. “I need to get my license. Han’s worried about it.”

Knowing that sleep was coming soon, he reached over and turned out the lamp, letting the wash of darkness take over. “Take your time. It’s good to have. I know you can drive. Most people fail the first time.”

“You didn’t.”

Snorting he hugged her closer. “I was an asshole when I was sixteen. Everything I did then or wanted to do was wrong.”

It was self-deprecating but also honest. He felt her turn again, shifting to run her hand down his face, studying him in the dull light. He liked her touch, but still worried where it was coming from. Was it to please him? She didn’t need to do that.

He was about to say that when she lightly kissed him. The brush of lips made him lean in closer, awkwardly trying to find a way to make her feel wanted while also not asking for too much.
She surprised him by deepening the kiss. Holding back for a moment, he returned the gesture, dipping his tongue into her mouth and feeling her jolt. Pulling away, he licked his lips.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “It’s okay.”

She shook her head. “I just…maybe I liked it too much.”

Her hands weren’t shaking but she still reached for his. She drew them to the t-shirt and he was glad for the darkness. He’d pulled it off another body a long time ago, in much different circumstances. He’d been in complete control then; now, he had to navigate the barriers between them.

Gently, he nudged her up and removed the shirt. He tossed it across the bed. He really wanted to throw it as far away as he could, but she needed it nearby. It would help her feel better if she could put it on quickly.

And then she was kissing him again, tugging him down beside her.

And Kylo knew that if he kept kissing her, he would want to go further than she was ready for.

His relationship with sex was still murky. On good days, he could easily find his desire and get himself to release with just memories and his own hand. Before Rey kissed him, he’d shuffle through seemingly perfect physical moments and not let it be ruined by guilt or terror. He didn’t want to think about Grey or Liza; one was a friend who had feelings for him and one was someone who he badly wanted to forget. He’d go over memories with Poe that just seemed to get better the more he touched on them, like polishing a stone. What his mouth could do to him. The shape of his neck and the strength of his thighs. What it was like to finally be able to undress him without his hands shaking. The first time he came inside him without a condom.

But those memories were off limits now that Rey was in his life in a new way. He couldn’t do that to her but deep down, he missed feeling anywhere close to good about sex. When he had thrown himself at Grey again in a panic, he could have created new ones that had led him into a different relationship than the one he had then.

His body was betraying him and he had to refocus. Pulling away, he rested his forehead against hers. “I don’t want to push you.”

Rey exhaled and nodded. “I really don’t want to be afraid, Kylo. But I am.”

“It’s not…” he sighed, stroking her cheek. “I know you ask about my first time a lot. It was important to me. We had talked about it a lot but it took us time. We did…we did other things until I felt better about it. Here, we can take time too. There’s still so much healing that we have to do and I want…I want to be good for you.”

Gentle. Careful. Patient. When he got drunk with Grey once, a month before his parents were able to bring all of his furniture and the other things on the list, the only place they really had to sit was the bed. And he had been in a mood of not being able to forgive himself for something that was lost to drunken memories. But he asked Grey if he could describe how he was in bed; he could say no or nothing and he wouldn’t be mad. It was something stupid to say because Grey laughed hard. The first time, he said, had just been pure energy and he understood why. He wanted it just as bad and had everything prepared for him. But the second time, Grey said it was like he was finally comfortable and could slow down and really touch him. It was always strange to hear himself described in a way that wasn’t angry, sad, or frustrating. Poe had always rested against his chest, looking up at him with a smile…
But he could still hurt her. The old fear flared inside of him as the kind faces and words faded into panic, daring him to fall into a spiral of thoughts. He could pin her down. He could easily overpower her. Snoke was a tall, hunched-over beast who made him help and watch and learn how easily girls hurt. And if he didn’t obey, Rey wouldn’t survive the night when they were there. No matter how many years and miles he put between them and there, he could always fall into the hole of pain that came at night. He had all of that still within him, the screams and the terror…

“How are you feeling?” he asked, trying to put himself back into her head rather than his own well of sorrow. He ran his hand up her side, feeling her shiver as he felt up her arms. “You are so warm.”

He should have opened the window. Even the light blankets made it hard not to sweat. She hugged him and shook her head. The feeling of her clothed breasts yanked him from his other thoughts back to her heart. “Kylo…”

Her voice sounded so small but not afraid. He knew those tones. Whatever she had been thinking about in the washroom was about to emerge.

She turned her head. Instead of speaking, she blinked. Can you touch me?

He had a hard time seeing what she meant, understanding only after a few seconds. Kissing her cheek, he trailed his hand down her stomach. He wish he could feel her pulse, to try to understand if she was panicked or really wanting this. “Tell me to stop if you…”

“I will,” she whispered. “Please.”

He traced along the edge of her shorts, taking in how firm she was. He knew that people still watched how he ate; she got the same.

“I’ll go slowly.”

And he did, his hand slipped under her shorts and paused when she sucked in a breath. He kept his eyes on her, watching her lids flutter shut as he caressed her form through her panties. Smooth. Silky. His blunt fingers didn’t belong there.

Rey leaned over and kissed him as he felt down her thigh. She deepened the kiss as he kept his hand moving in slow circles. He hated how his mind kept whirling back to his time with others. Liza had shown him this. It was years ago, but his memories were always crisp.

Rey’s mouth shuddered against his as he edged his hand beneath her underwear.

“It’s me. It’s okay,” he whispered. “Tell me what you’re feeling, if I should stop.”

“I’m…” Her eyes were closed. “I’m okay. I’m…I should have shaved…”

“I don’t care about that.” He moved his hand lower, trailing through the slight, wiry hair. “Don’t change anything about yourself because you think I’d like it.”

She nodded. “Your hand feels different than mine.”

If only she knew how nervous he was; he kept rubbing small circles, not wanting her to feel it. This was a point of no return, embracing his future with her. “Tell me how you touch yourself so I know that you’ll feel…safe.” He pressed a kiss along her neck, hoping to take away some of her worry.
“I…I think about you. Sometimes, I can’t stop thinking about how you’d feel when we…if we had sex. How you’d feel. I used to…I used to feel guilty when I did it.” Her soft voice kept guiding his hand as he felt the start of her slit. She gasped and he stilled. Slowly, she sighed as he teased her legs apart more. She could say stop and he’ll pull away in an instant. Someone once taught him how good intimacy could feel; he couldn’t let him or her down.

He could take away more of her hurt.

“You shouldn’t have felt that way. I’m sorry.” He traced small, slow circles until he found her clit. She felt different than Liza but knew he was doing something right when she let out a small whine. “How does that feel?”

“Like I…like I want more.” She bit her lip and he quickened his hand. “Oh Kylo…”

He forced himself to stay in the moment as he kept his hand moving faster. Every sound she made wasn’t from pain, rolling only into pleasure. She wanted him. For everything he was, how much he’d hurt her, he was giving her this. Ignoring how his hand was starting to cramp, he kept going, drawing her closer and closer. He would plant gentle kisses on her neck, tasting her skin.

The gasps grew quicker.

Her hand gripped at his side.

And then she moaned, turning rapidly and suddenly in his arms, shuddering against him and trapping his hand between her legs.

“Shh…” he whispered, slipping his hand free to pull her into an embrace with both of his arms. “It’s okay.”

She whimpered, but nodded. “That felt…that felt so good. Why am I shaking?”

Holding her, he sighed. It would get better; it had to. “It’s a natural reaction. Your body is normal. You’re perfect.”

Lifting her head, she kissed him lightly. “Are you…do you want me…?”

Despite the sounds and feel of her, he hadn’t reacted. He’d kept his focus totally on her. It still happened like this from time to time, but he tried not to let it affect how he felt about himself or her. He’d wait to stress over it all later, breaking down everything wrong with himself in the shower when she couldn’t see him. “I’m okay. There’s…we can take our time.”

He hugged her for a long moment before she gently pulled away. She reached for her shirt, redressing before sliding next to him again.

He knew that she fell asleep quickly.

But sleep eluded him until it was nearly morning.

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The rest of the week played out like that every night.
Kylo would go running after breakfast, leaving her under the tree in the backyard or sitting in the salon. She’d draw. She’d read. She’d text Rose or Kaydel, letting them know she was okay. She’d take pictures or show them the house on her phone. Both of her friends thought it was so adult to be staying there, especially with her boyfriend. She texted Brianna, getting to know her more. They made plans to meet for coffee sometime when she got back. She messaged Grey about what work she’d be doing for the rest of her time in Virginia; he’d sometimes be slow in replying, but he was at work. He'd reply with emoticons or jokes, but also making sure she was okay. And her name was on the schedule for the reading circle. And the shirts were lime green this summer. There was one waiting at the library with her name on it when they returned to normal life.

Whatever normal was now. It was hard to untangle how the future would be, if she'd go home in September or stay forever.

Kylo had work to get back to. And she'd have to learn how to be comfortable with him being away or overwhelmed by traumatizing, frightening things. But he promised to talk to her in a way that wouldn't give her nightmares or would bring things back for her. She could share her worries too. They were together now and had to work through how it would be when they went back to reality.

But couldn't their time together go on forever? Going back might change things and she was just getting comfortable having him to herself.

They’d eat lunch there or in town. He gave her a sly, secret smile when they went into a small store and she tried on a pair of over-sized sunglasses. She didn't buy them but picked up some postcards for her friends and Han and Leia. She wanted to send more postcards. She wanted more vacations like this, maybe to places further away. Brianna was talking about Europe, being able to see other places and explore the world. She thought about the art in George's house; had he been to Africa or Asia? He probably had. He'd been alive for so long and must have other thoughts in his head than for all of the people he helped. She'd have to ask him when they got back, maybe at the dinner Kylo had planned with Owen and his girlfriend.

Thinking about the people around her made thinking about going back. Almost.

They went on the tour of the vineyard; Kylo explained that he was trying to grow a personality. He needed more interests that other people could understand, he said. He bought several expensive bottles and tried to act like he knew more than nothing about wine. She still stuck to water or juice at dinner, but he drank a few glasses at dinner. But then he would run every morning, returning to the room to complain about the other women there staring at him again.

She’d hear him sometimes talk to his friends or his office. He’d look stressed or annoyed and sometimes went for a walk after those phone calls.

They spent so much time together that she didn’t mind him slipping off to be alone. He needed space. He’d always come back to her calmer and more focused.

But every night after dinner, she let herself find release with his hand. The old fears were always there until she reminded herself that he was there, keeping her safe and giving her pleasure rather than wanting to cause pain. He never got frustrated or pushed her, giving her space and time. He never said anything other than kind words when she shuddered or shivered against him, wondering why she still wanting to cry some of the time, her heart racing. He offered to use his mouth and even though the thought excited her, she couldn’t say yes to that yet.

He never asked for anything in return, holding her as she moaned and gasped in his arms. They’d kiss and she knew that he was learning her body as she slowly learnt his. The shape and feel of his arms and chest, the soft spots on his sides…when she ran her hands along his clothed thigh and
brushed his cock, she’d hear him sigh in the back of his throat.

Soon. She’d be ready soon.

Chapter End Notes

Standard warnings for past references to harmful events, along with references to past relationships, along with f/m digital stimulation.

And thanks everyone for the kind comments on the last chapter! Hugs to you all. Thanks for reading and stay safe and healthy!
Chapter 50

Chapter Summary

Rey and Kylo return home and deal with some of their issues.

Read chapter notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I can make the bed, Grey.”

Rey had found their houseguest upstairs after he’d quickly greeted them at the door, before sheepishly saying he wasn’t done straightening up yet. Only a flash of annoyance had crossed Kylo’s face. Grey had rolled his eyes at him before leaving them to unpack. When Kylo had left her alone in his room to disappear downstairs to start the laundry and dinner, she went looking for the other man.

He looked up at her and shrugged, finishing putting the comforter in place. She didn’t recognize the pattern and wondered when Kylo bought them. “Nah, it’s okay. I already changed the sheets. It’s part of the deal. I take care of the messes I make and Ky let’s me stay here and have my own space.” Grey fixed the quilt at the edge of the bed, another remnant from grandma’s house and smirked at her. “Did you guys have a good time?”

Rey blushed a little. “It was…nice. We had a big room and the garden was beautiful. I spent so much time out there with Kylo. But it was like everyone there was older and looked at us weird. So maybe it just wasn’t for us.”

“Yeah, it can be like that sometimes.” Grey tilted his head and frowned. “But Rey I…wanted to apologize to you for,” he paused, looking serious for a moment; the resemblance to George was so much stronger in that moment, “yeah, I wanted to say I’m sorry about letting Ky drag me to those office things. I knew how it looked and he did too but if you’re worried about something going on, there’s nothing. Like I said, just friends is fine with me.”

She folded her arms. “Did Kylo make you say that?”

“No, absolutely not. This is coming from me trying to be a friend to the both of you. Ky’s worried that you won’t feel comfortable here, not having your friends. And you know, I care about you too and really understand how isolating it can be here. It’s fucking like you’re on another planet, like some Stepford wives shit. So I thought I’d just, put that out there.” He gave her a light smile, trying to charm away how he sounded. “I’m still trying to grow up here so cut me a little slack.”

“No, Grey, it’s okay.” She looked down at her feet for a moment. Maybe not having a real conversation with Kylo since the argument was still bothering her, despite how good she had felt with him in bed. Sitting next to Grey, she tried not to let those feelings take over. “He has a big house. Why didn’t you just live here so it would be less weird?”
He lifted his shoulders. “We talked about it a couple of times. Like, Ky, why do you need a five-bedroom house to sit alone in? But I wanted to help dad out a bit more at home and try not to let Kylo take over every hour of my life. I also think he would have scared the shit out of anyone I tried to bring home. And at dad’s I’m not even tempted to.”

Managing a light smile, she nodded. “Finn used to be afraid of him. I used to wonder why he liked working out so much when it makes him look so scary sometimes.”

Grey snorted. “He wants to be stronger than everyone else so no one can hurt him or the rest of us. Getting knifed threw him for a loop. I helped out a bunch when he was here and recovering and we watched so many surviving edged weapons videos. I think he was this close to him asking me to come at him with a knife. He got this look in his eyes one night when we were making dinner and…yeah. So, like, I’m used to him getting obsessed with things.”

“I was going to ask you.” Kylo’s voice from the doorway made them both jolt. “But then I thought about it and didn’t want either of us to lose a finger.”

“Yeah, I fucking knew it. I was this close to ratting on you to dad or Owen. ‘Hey guys, Kylo wants to play with knives.’” Grey’s grin was instant, looking first at her then to the man lurking across the room. “Do you need help with dinner?”

He shook his head. “It’s under control. Come downstairs.”

He studied them for a moment, then left them alone.

“Fucking weirdo,” Grey mumbled before sighing. “But we love him anyway.”

Smiling, she nodded. Maybe it wouldn’t be that bad being back at the house, back to finding out how life would really work there. Grey reached for the laundry basket and she quickly shook her head and stepped in to take it. “I can do it.”

Smirking, he nodded, letting her take the used sheets. “Yeah, I guess it’s your house too now.”

The thought stuck with her as she brought the basket down to the basement. The first thing Kylo had done was put their clothes to wash also sorting out what needed to go to the drycleaners. This was her house too but how much of it could she change? Kylo had set up his basement very much like they had it at home. He had his gym area set up. He had a couch and chairs around a television. There was another bedroom down there. How many people did he have space for there? Leia was right; he really didn’t need this big of a house. But he wanted it, so he got it.

She sighed loudly when she came upstairs and saw the two of them pulling knives from the block to look at them. “What are you doing?”

Kylo turned and grinned at her. “I’m telling Grey about how different blades leave different types of wounds. And how to defend against different types of attacks. I did learn something from getting injured.”

“How much do you think about it?” she asked, sitting at the table.

He slid the knife back into its slot and lifted his shoulders. “When people stare at me, I end up thinking about it.”

“It will fade,” she answered. “Like the other ones.”

Grey glanced between them and winced a little. “Not to be a downer but do you guys still get
questions about what happened? I listened to another shitty podcast about that fucker and boy, did they get some shit wrong.”

*Do you want to talk about this?* Kylo lost some of the earlier playfulness when his eyes snapped to her. *He can also leave.*

*No,* she answered quickly. *It’s been a while since someone asked who cared.*

“People used to tease me at school,” she started, lightly. “I mean, no one really knew what happened but I have Kylo’s last name so people figured it out. I wasn’t just adopted; I came with him. I know that Han and Leia worked so hard to make sure I felt safe, but it still happened. I had my friends and they never treated me differently. I don’t want to forget the other kids but it’s been hard with everything that’s happened. Now that I’m an adult…I could talk more about it. But I don’t know.” Rey didn’t want to mention too much to Grey. Kylo never cared about social media; he’d stare at Poe’s and ask about it until they both decided he should delete it all too. But Rey still wished she could share more of her life with her friends. She didn’t have to be anonymous anymore; it was her choice, but it was another thing that she’d have to discuss with Kylo. “I still get mad sometimes that we’ll never know why it happened, why he wanted to hurt so many people.”

Kylo sat down beside her, taking her hand. He rubbed a small circle with his thumb. “I don’t get asked about it at headquarters, unless it’s by someone working on a profile or psychological article or presentation. I’m a living case; they want to use me and I want to help. I’ve given a talk at the academy to new recruits and it felt good when most of them didn’t recognize me. Other field agents or cops will ask about it when they figure it out and I just ignore them if we’re on a case. I know that I get more scrutiny at work because of the past but they also let me use what happened to help others. I don’t feel like a freak most of the time. But I know that there are some journalists who are still trying to make me look like a murderer. And some days, I worry that I’ve changed my memory and maybe…maybe I did worse things than just…help him kill everyone.”

“Kylo, you know that’s not true.” Grey stared at them and shook his head. “And you’re both still sitting here. That counts for a lot.”

Kylo looked distant for a moment before settling his eyes on her. “It’s everything.”

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“You don’t have to listen to everything he says,” Kylo said, running his hands through her hair. He’d put on a movie but wasn’t really watching it. Shifting in his lap, she looked up at him and shook her head. Dinner was long over and Grey had said goodnight, reminding her that he would be picking her up at 9 a.m. on Monday.

Soon it would be getting back to real life. Kylo had work to get back to.

With the look, he muted the television to let her talk.

“No, it was fine. Maybe I’m still a little jealous, I guess, that he got to spend so much time with you when you weren’t home. He’s not like Hux. He knows…he knows so much about you.” She stared up at him, watching him frown. “Han and Leia think that you’ll end up with him, or that you should be dating him.”
“They…they should know by now that I’d tell them if anything was going on. And there’s nothing.” He ran his hand along her face, tracing her cheek. “And Hux does know a lot about me. Just because I haven’t slept with him doesn’t mean that we don’t talk about things like this. He’s also worried about you. If I’m going to treat you right.”

Looking up at him in the light of the television, Rey studied how he was sitting. He hadn’t been relaxed when they were away. He’d always be turning his head towards some noise or keeping his shoulders rigid when others were around. Even in their room, it was like he was nervous about what others were thinking about him. Give him time, Grey had said once. But how much time did they have? Kylo had been hurt in the field and could put himself in danger again and she’d lose him forever. If Han and Leia didn’t understand that she wanted to be with him, they might take her home. And if she did go to school, he might meet someone new or Grey would get tired of just hanging out. He could give Kylo so much more than she could. They did boy things together; they both liked drinking and playing video games. Grey knew about his job, he’d grown up around it. Maybe that’s why Kylo didn’t want her to touch him.

“How could you treat me wrong?” She shook out of the thought. “Is that why you were worried when we were away?”

He licked his lips and briefly shut his eyes. “Rey, I know I’ve talked about the problems that Poe and I had. You know that we argued, but always tried to talk through things. But I kept him from doing so many things. I made it hard for him to have his own friends. He hardly got to see his family. The guilt I feel about that and how he died…I don’t want to treat you like that. I never want to hurt you like that.”

“He…” she paused to swallow, “he really did tell me that he didn’t want to study there and that you made things hard on him.”

Kylo’s head dropped. “And he still loved me anyway. I can’t take it back but I can’t let that happen to you.”

Sitting up, Rey shook her head. “Do you want me to go to school?”

“Yes.” He shifted his weight, but nodded. “But I want it to be for something that you want to do. I liked studying but I know you’ve had trouble with it. There’s nothing wrong with that but there are so many practical things you could do. Grey liked his programme, but I don’t want to tell you to take it just because I think you’d be good at it. I’m worried that in a few years, you’ll meet up with your friends and realize that you missed out on something. I like making plans for the future. And they’ve always included you, but I also want you to be your own person.”

It was hard not to let a little hurt emerge in her heart.

“But I don’t know what I want to do. Han and Leia try to talk to me and I just don’t want to think about it. Grey and I have talked about the programme and I guess I could do it. But it’s like…I can’t think sometimes when I’m in the classroom. It gets boring and I start drifting off and just remember bad things. Even with therapy, it still happened. It’s like my friends were good at things and I wasn’t.” She felt him reach for her as she spoke and she went willingly against his chest. “I still don’t understand how you could be so focused with everything in your head. You had everything in high school, Kylo. You had a boyfriend, you had good grades, you were good at your sport…”

“Rey, it’s like I’ve always told you. I was almost too focused on those things. I did them so I didn’t go insane and kill myself. I had to keep moving forward or I’d lose myself and leave you behind.” He took a deep breath, holding her tighter. “Most people like me, like us, end up hurting others.
They turn into rapists, molesters, and murderers. The people who loved us didn’t let us end up that way and I don’t want to think about how difficult it was to get through to me. But I knew that it was inside of me all of the time. And it scared me when other people saw it too. I have killed someone, Rey. I can still remember the rush of hearing his throat crack. I was finally in control and I could overpower and feel him die, see him gasping and...what he did to me, what he did to us, he deserved to die. I had to watch how he’d brutalize the other girls. He’d rape them and I had to stand there and watch or he’d go after you. I don’t…I know that it made me who I am. If I wasn’t so focused, I could be like that monster.”

Shaking her head, she felt drawn back to the screams of her memories and the pain that always made her stomach ache. But Kylo’s hands had helped starting to ease that buried damage. Both last week and when she had been fifteen and all too fragile, Kylo had been there to show her how much she meant to him.

“I don’t think you could ever be like that.” She shook her head. “You care so much, Kylo. Even if you get angry, you’ve never hurt me in a way that I couldn’t get better from. Everyone has always helped us. Sometimes I feel bad for feeling alone when they’ve always been there.”

“You’ve never really been alone.” His lips brushed her forehead. “I still wish that your family wanted to be a part of your life. They could have had a chance to love a really special person.”

Shutting her eyes, she let that old hurt roll through her too. “I remember when you used to be afraid that they’d take me away. But then you took me to see them. They could have asked me to stay and you still did that for me.”

“That was a hard day, but we were together.” He rested his head against hers. “I think I messed up last week, not talking about these things. I just wanted… I wanted you to feel what it’s like to be away with someone you love. When Poe and I... when we had weekends like this, we’d do things like we did. We’d eat dinner, look at stupid things, go hiking, and…make love. But at night, after, I was always going back to how my thoughts still wouldn’t leave me alone. And he’d have to put up with all of it. And maybe I was worried that talking about these things would make you think that I’m just sad all of the time. I’m happy here, really, or as close to happy as I can be on good days. But I should have talked to you more rather than just giving you what I thought you wanted. I did that to him all of the time too. I’d buy him things all of the time just because he looked at them. I got him Bee because he said once that he wanted a cat. I...I asked him to marry me because we had a fight about library books and I needed to find a way to fix it. He should have broken up with me and ran away to a place where I could never find him and drag him back to me.”

She had to look at him, pulling back to meet his eyes. He wiped at his face and turned away. Gently reaching out, she caressed his face, making him look at her again. Unshed tears still blurred his brown eyes. “He was still happy with you. And maybe that’s why this is hard for me to talk about too. I just start thinking and…”

“He’s gone, Rey. We’re...we’re going to be us. You just have to be you and I’ll be happy.” Leaning into her hand, Kylo sighed. “But what if all I know how to be in a relationship is a possessive asshole? It’s why I didn’t want Grey to live here. Even when I was living with Hux, I was so demanding.”

“They’re your friends. And I know you always apologize to them.” She paused, watching doubt still crease his brows. “I’m not afraid of you, Kylo. You’ve always wanted me to find things that I liked doing. I’m only here because you saved me. You gave me a family and a home. And just because I don’t know what to do with my future doesn’t mean that I don’t want one.”

Kylo licked his lips before inhaling. “How does...how would that future look to you?”
She blinked. “I haven’t… I haven’t really thought about it.”

“Just imagine. Imagine we actually lived in that perfect world we used to dream up when we were kids.” His voice wasn’t as filled with sorrow as it had been before. The softness was almost back.

*But that one had him in it*, she was about to say but swallowed the thought. This was about them. This was about what she wanted. “I’d like to… I’d like to try living here. I’d like to be here when you get home from work. I can make dinner and we can talk. I know I don’t know exactly what you do but I’d like to learn. Maybe I do want to go to school so I can work with Grey. I’d like to take care of the kids. I’d like to help them like Ransolm helped me. And if you have to go away for work, I can take care of the house.”

She tried to picture how it would be. Planning Christmas there, waiting for Han and Leia to arrive. Or maybe going home for Christmas, to spend time with Benji. He’d love visiting them too. They could go to the park and he could chase butterflies during the summers. And Hux and Paige could relax on Kylo’s porch and forget about everything.

But if she stayed forever, Benji would miss her too. And she would miss Paige and their chats, doing yoga and thinking about anything but hurt. And if she lived in Connecticut, she could visit Kaydel. She could go to the cafes that she liked back home. She could keep taking her art classes and biking to Paige’s house. She could help mom with dinner and dad could finally take her for her driver’s exam…

“I’d like to come home to you, but I’d also be worried about you. If they do send me undercover, it might be for a long time. And you’d have to be here alone and… that man is still out there. He might come after you if he finds out you’re alone,” Kylo said, interrupting her thoughts. “Let’s… are you tired? I’d like to go to bed.”

She wasn’t really but could see how his eyes were set that he was exhausted. “I’ll finish cleaning up. I’ll be up soon.”

He kissed her forehead, giving her a long look, before climbing the stairs to his room, no their room.

Maybe she should have thought more about how she wanted her life to look. There was so much of the world that she hadn’t seen. Kylo took trips in his head and didn’t really talk about seeing other parts of the world. Brianna had thought it was important. Her other friends liked seeing new environments and sites, tasting new food and learning how to do things in a different way. School hadn’t even started and Rose and Kaydel had already mentioned going away on spring break, how they had to save so they could stay somewhere nice.

Turning off the television and fixing the pillows on the sofa, she tried to think about something else. What was missing from Kylo’s house that she could add there, to make it feel more like home? She had her space in his office, but maybe she could have a comfortable chair, like Han’s, to curl up in and read.

She checked the kitchen, but Kylo and Grey had already cleaned everything up. She’d helped, but tomorrow she’d make dinner. That she was good at. Running her hand on the knife block, she managed to smirk at how silly the two of them looked when she came into the room.

Smiling to herself, she remembered how fun it was to follow recipes to create so many different dishes when she was small. They had been hard at times and sometimes confusing. An adult always had to help her with the stove or the oven, or even chopping things up. But over time, she was allowed to do more and more. It was like they had all of the food in the world in their house.
No one ever went hungry there; no one had to cry because of the pains in their stomachs. The water from the tap was always clean and always there. In Han and Leia’s kitchen, she could ask for any ingredient and it would be there the next day. The pantry held so much escape.

She remembered how Poe and Kylo would help her and she wouldn’t even have to ask. Poe would grin and joke with her, making her giggle until Kylo would finally laugh too. How some nights it was just them, when Kylo was at practice or on a road trip. Poe would read her a story, or let her read to him. He would tell her how much he missed and loved Kylo.

Wiping at her eyes, she wrapped her arms around herself.

Leaving the kitchen, she knew she’d see his face when she walked up the stairs.

But the picture was gone.

It had been the one of them on the beach, looking younger than she ever remembered them being.

It was just an empty nail.

Tilting her head, she quickly climbed the stairs and looked for the other frames, the ones that had just been there. And they were gone.

Biting her lip, she tried to calm her heart.

Kylo was reading in bed, flipping through another heavy book about something that would end up making him sad.

“Kylo…” she started.

He looked up and gave her a gentle look. “Hmm?”

Shaking her head, she forced a smile. “Nothing.”

-=-

She woke up before him, yawning but still cuddling closer to him. He was warm and soft. How could he ever think that he could hurt anyone? The fights when he was younger were never really his fault. He just thought everything was unfair and hated when anyone teased him.

Running her finger down his arm, she sighed.

“I want to sleep more,” he mumbled against her ear, pulling her closer. “Just another few more minutes.”

“Me too.” She turned in his arms, wanting to hear his heartbeat. That sound had gotten her through so much. In a distant memory, she knew that it had echoed in her head for as long as she could remember. Sometimes it was pounding so hard, she swore she could feel it trying to rip through his skin. Other times it was a gentle rhythm that told her that she was safe. “It’s Saturday. We can sleep.”

He groaned lightly, shifting against her. “There’s always something to do on a Saturday.”
She kissed his bare chest, enjoying the sound he made when she did. “What do we have to do today?”

“Laundry.” A yawn. “Dry cleaning.” Another yawn. He finally blinked awake to meet her eyes with a sleepy gaze. “Grey put the delivered groceries away but there are some things I can’t order from them. We’ll have to run errands. I have to work out.”

“You really do want to be strong enough to protect everyone.” She smiled up at him. “I love that about you, how strong you are.”

He smirked, but still looked away. “I think about all of the bad things I haven’t been able to stop. It makes it easier to get over being sore.”

Resting her head down again, she traced along the shape of his chest. So many of the scars had truly faded or moved. There was still a deep and old one along his collarbone. Running her hand along it, she heard him sigh. It was still hard to look at his arms or his face at times, but the changing geography of his skin made her wonder how much he had grown without her really noticing it.

“Kylo, do you like how you look?”

He snorted. “It used to upset me. I hated looking in the mirror. I looked skinny and stupid. I had annoying marks that made me ugly. This spring…it brought a lot of that back. But I’m…comfortable with how I look. I don’t like people staring at me but I understand why they do.”

Sitting up, she frowned at him. “No one ever looks at me unless I’m with you.”

“What are you talking about?” He opened his eyes, matching her posture. He took her hand, pressing a careful kiss to her palm. “You’ve always been so beautiful. People look at you, but maybe you just don’t notice. It’s like I tried to teach you, how to look at people to see what they want. The next time we’re out, you’ll see it.”

Slowly, he leaned forward to kiss her. The warm brush of his lips and kind words made her sigh. She’d woken up in a safe embrace, so many of yesterday’s worries forgotten. He parted, resting his forehead against hers. “I always knew that you would grow up to be so beautiful. You’re perfect.”

“I…” she started to speak, but stopped to smile at him as warmth spread across her cheeks. “Even when you thought you were ugly, I thought you weren’t. Looking at you made me feel at home, like I was the centre of the universe.”

When they were in their bubble, she used to feel so free. She wanted to go there in that moment and never come back.

He kissed her again, gently stroking her hair as he pulled her closer. This was soft, morning Kylo. This was the one who hadn’t thought too much about his pain, aches, and problems. But the kisses were deepening, making her heart race as his tongue teased its way into her mouth. The rush came instantly and she let herself be guided on top of him. He moaned lightly as she straddled his waist, his arms still pulling her closer. But her heart was beating too quickly. She could feel his erection. Even as she shifted in his arms, she realized what could happen as his mouth left hers to kiss up her neck.

“Kylo, did you like touching me when we were away?” she had to ask something. She had to keep talking. His breath was warm on her neck as he tasted her, making her shiver.

“I liked showing you that I could take away some of the hurt,” he whispered before his hands
drifted to her hips. He slowly leaned back to look at her. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” She knew she was trembling. He felt it. That’s why he stopped. “I want to do more, Kylo…”

“You’re allowed to be afraid. My body is just reacting to you.” He held her eyes. “I like having sex in the mornings. It’s the best feeling.”

Between the layers of clothes between them, she knew that she was desired. She wanted to swallow her fear and give him what he wanted. He liked heavy physical relationships. He was used to being with people who were his age, either more experienced or more open: people who weren’t afraid of how it would feel. They didn’t come with the dark marks of hurtful pasts. She had worked so hard and it was still clinging to her, refusing to let her go. She only managed to bite her lip, shaking her head. Kylo cupped her face again, making her look at him.

“But I’m afraid too. I never want to hurt you. I never want to lose myself in the moment and do something that causes you pain.” He dropped his voice, letting some of his apprehension leak through. “Are you okay? I didn’t say that to pressure you.”

“I’m…I want to make you happy but sometimes it’s like I can’t move. I know that you won’t hurt me but I feel so small around you.” She let her head drop before she weakly looked at him. “And I won’t be as good as they were. I’m afraid of letting go and not being good enough.”

He sighed, but nodded, guiding her off of him to lie beside him again. Meeting his eyes, she wasn’t close to crying, but was more frustrated than anything. She should be able to touch him like he’d done for her. She shouldn’t be so focused on how she’d have to take off all of her clothes and let him really see her.

“It’s not a competition.” He stroked her hair, softly turning a strand around his finger. “Please don’t worry about that. If what I did last week was wrong…”

“No,” she answered and shook her head. “I can touch myself and with you, I just imagined that you were a part of me. I know that sounds weird, but I trusted you to be my hand.”

He winced. “I should never have asked to try oral sex. I got in my head and that’s…” He started swearing to himself under his breath, rapid mumbled Spanish, and then finally looked at her again. “Have I told you how much I hate the word ‘triggering’?”

He needed to be home to be this unguarded, she realized then. She had been the one who’d wanted to go away, to get away from how the house made her feel. He’d done that for her, made a plan and followed it. But it took him coming home to act like himself. The small joke with Grey, the annoyed look just now about something that bothered him…

“I think you’ve mentioned it a few times.” She grinned, enjoying the feeling of warmth instead of heaviness. “But I know you’d be careful. And kind.”

“I want to be.”

She nuzzled against him and sighed. “I know. I love you.”

His arms were around her again. “I love you too.”

-=–
See, he’s looking at you, Kylo blinked and then raised his eyebrows to the corner of the café.

Rey narrowed her eyes and shook her head. *I don’t think he is.*

They had finally stopped for lunch after a morning of errands. Kylo had worked out while she showered and made breakfast. Then, it was several hours of driving around and getting everything done that couldn’t be done during a workweek. Kylo let her drive, offering only minor comments about following too closely or when to take a turn. He let her rant out of frustration about parallel parking, pointing out that Han’s ‘trick’ was impossible to master without practice. It still made no sense to her how he could park their truck in a space that looked too small without effort and she could hardly manage to fit Leia’s smaller compact into a larger space. And Kylo confessed that he spent an entire week practicing over and over until he finally got it right: *And then I got out of the car and dented the door by kicking it so hard.*

They dropped off the dry cleaning and picked up the finished batch. They picked up Kylo’s repaired shoes. He walked too much, the shoemaker reminded him. And he just smiled off the comment until they were alone to complain about it.

Now, sitting in the café. He had his FBI face on, watching everyone around them.

*No, he is.* He sipped at his coffee. *He’s only pretending to read and also figure out if I’m your dad or your brother. It’s like it always is.* He narrowed his eyes slightly. *You should go talk to him.*

Tilting her head, she smirked. “Just to prove that you’re right?”

He quirked his lips. “Maybe.” *But you are beautiful to me. And other people see that too.*

*You wouldn’t be jealous?*

*Only if he touched you.* He light look faded for a moment and he shook his head. *But I don’t want to feel like that. You can have any type of friend you want.*

She blushed a little, looking down at her hands for a moment before lifting her head again. *I have a hard time talking to boys.*

He took in her blinking before he nodded. “I understand why.” *I’m sorry I brought it up. I got caught up in an idea.*

She finished her cup and shrugged. “Can we take a walk?”

He nodded and stood, reaching for her hand.

And she took the chance to glance over her shoulder at how the green-eyed boy’s head snapped down to his book as she was leaving.

Early August in Virginia was similar to back home. It was warm enough to walk without jackets, but Kylo still had long sleeves. He couldn’t help people judging his face, but his arms he could keep hidden.

“I didn’t mean to bring it up, Rey,” he apologized again. “And that I wasn’t there for most of the time you were in high school.”

“It’s…it’s okay, Kylo.” Sitting down on a bench, she glanced out at the small green space across
from the café. Kylo knew these places. He’d been there for almost three years. He liked walking, studying everything around him. He’d known their neighbourhood since he was eighteen. Had that really been ten years ago? Were those six weeks in January that far away? Her heart shuddered at the sudden thought. “The boys were never that bad. I just didn’t feel comfortable around them. Rose and I would hang out at basketball practice and I couldn’t really get why they were always showing off. Finn always had to act tougher around them. It was like he was a different person. You guys were never like that.”

Kylo nodded. “We didn’t feel like we had to be. I liked winning but I never bragged about it. I only wanted to be good at something. Hux would try but he…we both have confidence issues.”

“Poe didn’t.”

Shaking his head, Kylo sighed. “Yes, he did. He never thought his grades were good enough. Remember when I gave him a hard time about the SATs? We used to get into fights that were all my fault. But he never really saw that he was really good at some things. I…I tried to help. And I messed it up most of the time. But I guess he was confident enough to tell me all of the times I was wrong.”

She had a chance again to bring up the pictures but held back. “I guess I missed a bunch of things.”

“You didn’t miss them. They just didn’t happen to you. You have your perspective and I have mine.” He turned to give her a small smile. “And maybe we’re both wrong.”

“Or maybe we’re both right in a different way?”

He kissed the back of her hand. “Hux and I used to talk about you and Paige. How we both wanted to be around you two more often but couldn’t.”

“I miss her and Benji. I still think about…what it would be like to live here and not be able to see them every day. Like, if I’m not there, he might forget you.” She frowned, shaking her head. “What did you guys talk about?”

“Mostly about the eating. I didn’t really set a good example for you with how I was. I know it wasn’t the same but it took me so long to like food. You helped me there, with how much you loved being in the kitchen. It was so easy for you and then…then everything happened and I kept thinking that part of it was my fault.” He sat back, studying her with low lids. “I’d talk to Han and Leia and they tried so hard to convince you that your life wasn’t so out of control. It was the same with Paige. She put so much pressure on herself to be perfect and Hux still feels like shit for cheating on her. I’m glad you both…got better. I think, like everything, it never really goes away. I miss smoking so much some days that it hurts.”

She managed to grin at him. “I’m glad you stopped. It was like you were a different person.”

“I think I was trying to be a different person.” His eyes drifted off into nothing, staring at a distant tree. “Let’s go home. I want to finish the laundry and catch up on some work.”

He drove home, letting her study her surroundings again. “Can I get a bike here so Grey doesn’t have to drive me every day?”

“Sure. We can pick one out tomorrow,” he answered only after a brief look of annoyance. “He doesn’t mind driving you. It will make him get there on time.”

She didn’t think that Kylo really believed that, but just shook her head at the remark. Kylo’s world was very much based on routine and Grey disrupted it enough to keep it from getting boring. “You
two can go out tonight if you want. I still don’t understand why he thought he needed to apologize. He never did…he didn’t do anything wrong.”

Stopped at a red light, Kylo turned to her. “I just saw him. I don’t need to see him everyday.”

“No, I know,” she said, working through why she suddenly wanted to be alone for an evening. “I think I want to chat with my friends. I haven’t really shown them the house.”

He was quiet for a moment before nodding. “I’ll see if he wants to do anything.”

-=-

Grey did give her a long and suspicious look before he and Kylo left that evening. One eyebrow was quirked for long enough that she had to grin at him to get him to leave.

Kylo had asked if it was okay at least three times over dinner. But it was fine, really fine. It would be easier to talk about him with her friends if he was out of the house. The way he could move silently when he wanted to made it hard to spill her thoughts. He wanted her to have privacy, she understood, but he might catch something that she wasn’t ready to talk about with him yet.

Hey, can you talk?

Kaydel responded instantly. Of course! Calling now!

“Hey, how’s Virginia?” Her friend’s bubbly face filled her screen. “Everything still good? I was thinking about you when I was packing up my room. I’m totally putting our prom pictures on my wall, like you used to do.”

“Things are great.” She smiled, shifting the phone around the room. “Okay, so do you want the tour?”

She guided the phone through the house. It was a secret excuse to spot all of the missing memories on the walls. Christmases were still there. Halloween and Thanksgiving were still there. But the ones of him alone or just them together were finally off the walls. Having her friend constantly asking questions about why there were so many rooms and so much space made it easy to laugh with her. She still hadn’t figured it all out really.

“How does he have time to clean it all?” Kaydel asked when Rey settled onto the sofa. “Like, he never really liked cleaning up when we were kids.”

“I don’t really know. I think he gets Grey to do it. Or he does it himself when he can’t sleep.” She settled down onto the chesterfield, pulling her hair free from its ponytail. “Like, he has stuff but no junk. I mean, it was like that at home too, but he’s so much more organized than I am. If I didn’t help move in, I wouldn’t know how he wanted things. It’s a bit…I don’t know. Weird.”

Kaydel shrugged, laying down on her bed. Rey could already see how many things had been packed up and it made her wince. Everything was really changing. “I think that’s why I always liked him. Like when he’d just stare at things and I’d just be going ‘what are you thinking?’ the entire time. And then he’d get up and just say something random and leave. God, okay, I know Rose will get mad at me, but have you guys…done it yet?”
She bit her lip, hard. “No, but…I want to go slow. He does too. We made out this morning and he just…stopped. Like, I know he wanted to have…sex. But I don’t know when I’ll be ready. And he stopped too because he wants it to be right.”

Sighing, Kaydel kissed her fingers and pressed them towards the screen. “I’m sorry, Rey. I know that I’m still waiting for someone special too. Like, I know it will happen at college and it’s freaking my dad out. My mom is like ‘just make sure to use a condom, sweetheart.’ So I don’t know what to think.”

“Yeah, I know. Leia has always made sure I know what to do. She was so much easier to talk to than,” she paused to groan, “ugh, sex ed was just awful. I didn’t learn anything.”

As long as she didn’t bring up Finn, she’d be fine. She thought she had found someone special and he didn’t listen. He’d made her hurt. He tore up so much of their past together. Time was healing that wound but it was hard not to be dragged back into that moment of frozen panic.

Kaydel grinned again. “I learned that if you get pregnant, you die.”

They both laughed, remembering their ancient health teacher trying to get through the basics of female anatomy. Then she frowned a little. “It’s weird that Kylo has to worry about that now.”

“Huh?”

She blushed. “Nothing. I was just…thinking out loud. When are you moving?”

“In a couple of weeks. We have freshmen orientation and my dad is already planning on doing all of it with me…” Kaydel kept talking, going through what she had to finish packing and what she had to leave behind. Her room would pretty much stay the same, but there were so many possibilities out there for her. She’d picked her courses. She was going to do a degree in English. It seemed to suit her. But then the question finally came if Rey was coming back or not.

“I still haven’t decided.” She sat up, looking around the broad room. “I like it here. And I want to…I always want to be around Kylo. We still have to decide.”

Nodding, Kaydel tilted her head. “You know that I’m going to miss you right?”

She smiled. “I’m going to miss you too.”

The conversation found its natural end and Rey was left in the peaceful house alone. Turning on the television, she tried to find something to watch that would let her drift off into her thoughts. It didn’t surprise her that Kylo’s watch list had mostly documentaries about crime and serial killers, along with a long series of irrelevant and bad comedies.

Settling for a show about art thieves, she pulled the quilt off the back of the couch and thought about the time that they’d already had together and how things might change when Kylo went back to work. She’d have her time away from him at the library, just like it had been last summer. George and Grey were always nearby. They’d have their promised dinner with Owen and Silla. She planned on texting Brianna to meet up soon, to test out that friendship more.

A thump at the front of the house made her jolt up. Sitting up, she swallowed, creeping towards the door. Peaking out the front window, she held her breath.

The garbage bin had been knocked over, lying on the driveway. The outdoor motion sensors had sprung to life, illuminating the lawn.
She couldn’t panic this time, but eyed the alarm system nevertheless.

“Okay.” She took a deep breath. This is what Grey did all of the time and apparently, he mostly just watched television and drank Kylo’s booze.

Stepping back, she reached for her phone again. “Hi George.”

“Hello Rey, how are you doing?”

She wanted to go out and straighten the garbage herself. She knew she could do it. “I’m okay. Are you at home?”

“Yes. Is everything okay?”

Biting her lip, she exhaled, annoyed at herself. “Can you come over? I don’t think it’s anything, but I’m alone and…”

“Of course. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

Kylo had always reminded her that she could call the neighbours. And she really only knew one of them well enough to trust to come over.

The lights outside clicked off before they sprung to life again. Agent Jinn waved for a moment and straightened the garbage cans.

She opened the door to greet him before folding her arms. “I’m so sorry, George, I know you’re busy.”

“It’s perfectly fine, Rey. I have the house to myself often enough that it’s almost boring to be alone.” He hugged her lightly, trying to loosen her fear. “You can always call me.”

“Do you want some tea? I can make some.” She still felt shame burrowing under her skin. She shouldn’t be afraid of every sound when she was alone in Kylo’s house.

“I’d love some.”

Kylo had grandma’s tea set. She hadn’t seen it in so long that it eased her thoughts to put her hands to work setting it out. “I know I shouldn’t be afraid but…”

“Rey. I said it was fine. I wasn’t doing anything important.” He sat down, giving her a firm smile. “I thought you might have gone out with them. But I can also understand why you didn’t.”

The water started to boil and she nodded, adding it to the pot. “I don’t really like going out. I wanted to stay home so I could talk to my friend and think. Did you have a good day?”

He smirked at her. “I spoke with my children today. It’s always a good day when I talk to all of them. Grant has started getting interested in astronomy. He wanted to tell me he saw a comet last night. And Grace got back from riding camp. I now know a great deal about stars and horses.”

“Better than just talking about bad things all of the time.” She sipped on her tea, wincing when it burnt her lips. “George, why did Kylo buy such a big house? Has he told you?”

“I’m sure he’d tell you if you asked him. But yes, we discussed it. I know he wants to be close to me. I don’t mind that. But I sometimes have to talk him through some of his… plans. He really wanted space for you, and his parents. I think he also wants Armitage and his family to move here as well.” George sighed and blew on his tea. “I told him it wasn’t a feasible plan to reconsider
Blinking, Rey glanced around the kitchen. “He thinks he can keep everyone safe.”

“He wants to try,” George replied.

“George, do you care that we’re…together?” Rey slowly met his eyes.

The teacup met the saucer and George rubbed his face. “I have to give you an honest answer, Rey, both as someone who worked on your case, and your friend. I’m obviously worried about dependency. You came together out of tragic and horrible circumstances that I still have nightmmares about. Keeping you together was important, but many people questioned me and Han and Leia. Phasma was one of them. I took the case too personally and haven’t ever been able to step back. But if you both feel like your feelings are real and you trust one another, I think it can be something very healthy. Especially after everything you both have been through.”

Swallowing, Rey turned the porcelain in her hand. “He…he took down the pictures. Poe’s pictures.”

“I noticed,” George said. “And I think my son had something to do with it. He was…morose when he got home last night and called his mother. He rarely does that.”

Oh. “I guess…maybe that’s why he apologized to me for…me thinking that there was something going on between them.” She took another long drink of tea, trying to work through her thoughts. “Did he really like the librarian programme?”

George sat up, reaching for her hand. “He worked hard at it. It’s the first time I’ve seen him take studying seriously. So I think he enjoyed it, really.”

“But he’s smarter than I am.” She met his eyes, managing to smile at his gesture. “I don’t know if I’d be good at it.”

George chuckled lightly. “Grey is clever and intelligent. It doesn’t mean he’s exactly smart. I think you’d thrive with a new challenge. It’s much more hands-on work than really being in a classroom. I think that’s why he was finally able to succeed at something rather than getting bored and switching to something else. But have you talked to Kylo about the pictures?”

“No.” She squeezed his hand. “I don’t know how.”

“I can help you find a way, if you’d like.” George’s hand was still warm.

“I think I need to think about it.” She tried to smile. “But I’ll let you know if I need your help.”

They finished their tea and Rey realized again why Kylo depended so much on George. Even if he was his boss now, he’d followed them their entire lives. He’d done so much for them that she hadn’t seen.

When she hugged him goodbye, she told him that she hadn’t knocked over the garbage cans as an excuse to talk to him.

-=-
She was half asleep in bed when she heard Kylo get in. The beep of the security system being set in place and the door relocking made her sigh again, rolling over to watch Kylo enter the room in the dim light from the side of the bed. It hadn’t felt right to turn it off without him.

“Hi,” he said. “I’m only a little drunk.”

She had to smile. “It’s okay, Kylo.”

He grinned at her then ducked into the washroom. When he came to the bed, he clicked off the lamp and surrounded her body with warmth. “Hmm. Was George here?”

“How did you know that?” She turned in his arms to catch the satisfied look on his face.

“I could smell his cologne in your hair.” He nuzzled closer, breathing her in. “I just smell like a bar.”

Kissing him lightly, she was glad that he’d already brushed his teeth. “You smell fine. I heard something outside but it was just the wind. The garbage cans blew over. But it was good to talk to him.”

Safe again in his arms, she heard him lick his lips. “What did he say?”

“That he thinks it’s good that we’re together,” she answered. “And that I’d do well at the librarian programme.”

“That’s good. You'd be good at it. And I know he's okay with us being together.” He hugged her closer then yawned. “I’m sorry. I really need to sleep. We can…there’s time to talk tomorrow. I don't have that much to do on Sundays.”

“I’d like that. Goodnight, Kylo.”

“Night.”

For once, he was asleep quickly.

Safe in the quiet house, Rey let herself drift to sleep as well.

Chapter End Notes

Standard warnings from the tags, along with nothing more than heavy kissing here (I know, I know) and references to past relationships.

And as an author's note I HOPE that this chapter doesn't come off as me trying to undo the last chapter. I've taken a lot of the feedback to heart and I really appreciate all of the comments. I never thought that the last chapter would be so...yeah (okay I knew it was unbalanced and will be doing minor edits to fix some of it in the future)...but I am overwhelmed with the amount of feelings that this story brings out.
As a whole, I'd like to go back and make Chapter 49 more like this one, but I think that it does play into Kylo still working through some big things - maybe I wrote it awkwardly because I was taking on some of his thoughts. Again, thank you SO much for the feedback on the last chapter. In theory, we are in the final twenty chapters but according to the master document, it will probably be more like 75 (especially if I grant myself the wish of an undercover subplot that will be more like a one-shot contained within the larger story but that will really depend on if it stops the flow entirely).

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 51

Chapter Summary

Kylo has a nightmare that brings about a conversation that's been building for too long.

See tags for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It had been too long since Rey felt Kylo have a nightmare. Maybe it was sharing a bed in a different way that made it feel all more real, like she was tumbling into the darkness with him, into whatever terror had stirred to life in his mind.

That night, he’d carefully pulled away when the kisses had drawn to a heated point and then tucked her hair behind her ear. There hadn’t been the same pressure from Saturday morning. His hands were still keeping her safe. Even if they had started to talk, it was part of the package of things she hadn’t also been able to talk fully about. It was strange to feel his hands in a different way from only a few hours ago.

The old nightmares had just meant he’d hug her tighter. In the nightmare world, he had hardly slept, waking up every time there had been a sound from downstairs, from below. She couldn’t remember real moments or memories anymore, just feelings.

But safe in their house, safe at home, he had been able to truly rest. She had been able to do it too. The first time she slept in a bed flashed in her mind. The memories were falling through her fingers as she tried to reach for him and soothe his panic. She was clean for the first time. That shined through the most over the layers of confusion. But when they left, when Kylo could be angry for real, he’d wake himself up, holding her as he took deep breaths and centred himself again. It used to be that just being there would help him feel better, to get comfort in the warmth of their bubble.

Then he grew up.

Now, she didn’t know how to help him.

Had it really been that long? He’d been so strong and stable since he finished college. He’d been there for her when she really needed him. There were so many things she was forgetting as she thought through what was happening.

Monday morning hadn’t quite dawned but the weekend had been spent doing small things together, finding new routines. They were about talking about how the week would go. Saturday had rolled into an actually lazy Sunday: or at least, as lazy Kylo let himself be. He had rolled over early on Sunday morning and went through his phone. Then he sighed and put it aside and rested next to her again. He finally fell asleep and she could slip out of the bed to make him breakfast.

If he was bad at making breakfast and taking lunch with him, maybe she could fix that. He had still looked tired when he came down for breakfast on Sunday morning. But the rest of that day didn’t
hold all of the tasks of Saturday. But he had said that most weekends, when he was home, were like that. He’d finally be able to catch up on sleep on Sundays if he wasn’t working.

But it had been a day spent just together. He wore a black hoodie and jeans when they picked out a new bike for her. And he let her pay for it. It was sitting safely in the garage, waiting for her to use it. They watched television and she got to put her head in his lap and feel him stroking her hair. It had been a quiet evening; there was nothing scary on the screen.

In her sleepy daze, she tried to find a reason why Kylo would be panicking. There had just been time on the couch, or eating dinner. There had been soft kisses but nothing more. And he’d softly spooned against her as they went to sleep.

Could it be the case? Could it be them? Kylo had said that he would never hurt her. But there were still things left unsaid. Maybe part of that was her fault. She just saw the empty nails and lost her voice, one that had always been there. The whispers in her ear had dwindled on Sunday but they were still there, reminding her that Kylo hadn’t said anything either.

Maybe he’d had nights like this before but woke himself up before she could feel it. Those other summers had been mostly spent apart at night so she didn’t really know. The last time he’d been truly agitated had been in the early spring, after the injury. He didn’t like being weak. And now he was again. But he didn’t have nightmares then. He’d just been annoyed. Then, when she graduated, he was only there for a couple of days.

All of those thoughts rattled through her mind when, around 3 a.m., she was shaken awake by low cries and whines, shaking and shivering from the large body beside her.

Turning, she tried to do what he did when she had bad dreams; she wrapped her arms around him and pulled him closer. Spooning against him, she felt his heart beating so hard that she thought it might burst. She tried to hold him tighter, to take away his fear, but it just seemed to get bigger. He moved rigidly, too bulky to be held easily by her slender arms. Rey desperately wanted him to wake up because she suddenly felt lost in how she was touching him.

Her arms finally shook him awake. And he shoved her when he jolted back at the awkward pressure. His hands had been hard and she had been knocked aside as he sat up, gasping.

Her own heart gripped her throat when she saw the terror on his face as she sat up again, forcing herself up by her hands.

A beating heart. Her heart was still beating.

She tried to reach out to him again but he pulled away, giving her wild eyes, like he didn’t know where he was, like he didn’t know who she was.

He looked stunned, almost tossed into a void. Pure panic lined his face, inhaling sharply as he searched her eyes for fear.

The change in his face, the shift in his gaze from the confident man who she went to bed with to this stunned mess, instantly rolled her back into who she was really with. Despite the dark eyes wavering into calm, he was still making sure that she was okay while he was suffering.

The thought didn’t come over her easily.

“I didn’t mean to… I didn’t hurt you, did I?” he asked, shifting and taking deep breaths. He pressed his thumbs into his eyes and shook his dark head. But his shoulders were rigid; he was fighting for control. It was just like it was when he was younger and turned away from her.
“No, Kylo. It’s okay.” She reached for him again and he shrugged away for a moment. His eyes were still wild, darting around the darkened room. The push hadn’t been hard but he still looked at his hands and shook his head. “Kylo, you didn’t hurt me.”

“I still could have.” He looked at her and scowled. “I didn’t mean for this to happen.”

“You can…you can tell me about it,” she said, sitting up and brushing his leg. “What happened? Do you want some water?” Every word that left her mouth felt awkward, like it wouldn’t work. She used to be good at this. She had been able to take care of him when she was much smaller, but then he had been smaller too. Fewer real-world hurts had greater carved holes into the void of pain that existed within him when they were younger. Still, she had to try. She had to find the old feeling from before and make it bigger. “I can take care of you.”

He took two more long breaths. The moment felt endless and then his face broke and he whimpered, a sound she had almost forgotten. He gripped at the bedspread for a moment before lying down and reaching for her. She pulled him closer, dragging him over to let him rest his head on her chest and wrap his arms around her. Now it was her turn to have her heartbeat quicken.

She sighed at the feeling as he took several more deep inhales, trying to calm himself. She wasn’t sure what to say, but went with the closest thing to honesty. “I hoped that you didn’t have nightmares anymore.”

He lifted his shoulders lightly, hardly a shrug, keeping his head down as he played with the edge of her t-shirt, the same brown one that she liked sleeping in. It was worn in and soft; and it had been Kylo’s so she cherished it. “I have them. It’s not as often, but they happen. Sometimes it’s why I’m afraid to go to sleep.”

Kylo had his head down for a long moment, falling quiet. She could just hear his breathing but was too unsure of what to say to be able to speak.

He swallowed and continued. “I don’t like taking sleeping pills but sometimes on cases, I have to. It knocks me out, but I hate not being able to sleep naturally. When I’m on the road with Owen or George, I have to make sure things don’t follow me when I sleep. Other times, I do things that George doesn’t like. I work too hard because I can’t sleep or I’m worried about what will be there when I do. But I still hate it when I wake someone else up because of them. That part has never changed.”

A long beat passed between them as she searched her thoughts for the last time Kylo had really thrashed awake against her: him gasping awake at fourteen or sixteen; him waking up almost weeping when he was twenty-one; him being angry and unable to sleep at twenty-seven. It all bled together into who he was now. He was so many things; but he’d never hurt her physically. Never on purpose.

“You…please tell me about it Kylo.” Stroking his hair, she couldn’t help but think about how many nightmares he’d helped her through. The only words she had came from her heart. “I’m here.”

He didn’t answer for a moment, his hand stilling instead.

“I know. And I want you to be. I missed you when you weren’t here but now…I almost hurt you. I could have hurt you. That can’t happen again.” He gripped her shirt and pressed against her. “I’m still the same. No matter what I do, I’m the same.”

“Kylo, no you’re not. I don’t think you are. Tell me about the dream. You always…you always
asked me about mine. I’m here.” Her hand felt up his forehead and he was still sweaty. She tried to brush it away. Taking away the hurt: that’s what they always had done for one another.

He took several long, deep breaths before he spoke again. “It wasn’t new, but it changed somehow. We were...we were there but it was my house at the same time. I hate dreams like that. I hate it when the spaces change. I hate it when my mind does this to me. And it always does. I take courses, I go through therapy, I talk to my friends and family and I’m still...I still get stuck. I try to tell victims that it will get better but what does that mean when I know that it doesn’t? That makes me a liar. This was like my nightmares always are. They are always showing me what I’ve done wrong and what I could do. I didn’t have a mouth, and he was chasing me. I couldn’t scream. I couldn’t breathe. I saw him take you and...Poe and he was making me kill you both. It kept changing and I just saw you both dying over and over again. It felt so real. I had to keep stabbing you and it just kept going. And I couldn’t breathe. I was me but also not me...and I just kept watching you both die...” He trailed off, sucking in a soft sob. “I can’t take another sick day. I need to sleep but I can’t now. I’m just going to disappoint everyone. I’m already disappointing you.”

Sitting up out of nothing, he shook his head and moved to leave the bed but she reached out to stop him.

“What do you mean?” she asked, holding his arm. “Kylo...”

“This is who I’m trying not to be around you, Rey. There’s so much of me that you haven’t seen in so long. It’s a person who I can’t help being sometimes. No matter how far away it all gets...I still go back.” He looked at her with an emptiness she hadn’t seen since...since forever. The vacant looks the summer that Poe was murdered. The pain in his eyes at Niagara. The desolation when Luke told him to leave...all of those moments layered on top of the boy who had saved her. And now he was the man she loved, or at least wanted to desperately love forever. Why did he think he needed to keep this from her? “I can go sleep in the other room. I don’t want to wake up again and hurt you.”

She didn’t know what to do. And he was suffering, worrying already about the next day. The softness of Saturday and Sunday morning had been shaken into darkness. “Don’t you sleep better with me? I’m not...you won’t hurt me, Kylo. I have bad dreams too. You know I do.”

“I’m sorry you do. And I’ll be there when they happen here.” His eyes held hers for a strong moment before they dropped. “But you’re not as dangerous as I am.”

The man who he was now was stronger in many more ways than protection.

Reaching for him, she tried to make him lie down, but he was still rigid. He finally stopped her with a light hug, pressing his lips to her temple. “I still love you. But I don’t feel okay. This isn’t your fault. I really promise you. This isn’t your fault.” He took a shaky breath and hugged her again. “I’ll be in the next room. I’ll talk to you in the morning.”

Her brain flashed her back to the bright, white hospital room. The first time they ever slept apart when they could help it.

But they were still together.

“I don’t want you to go,” she finally said, reluctantly. “But if you have to, I’ll be okay. I...it will be okay.”

“It will have to be. I’ll make sure it is.” He was standing from the bed when he turned. He was
only in dark boxers, looking nothing like the boy who had rescued her. “We can talk more about this over breakfast. Just…don’t hate me right now.”

The desperate look on his face made her torn whether or not to let him go. “Kylo, are you sure?”

He shifted his weight before reaching for her. She slid up to her knees, letting him hug her. “I’ll just be next door. Don’t be afraid.”

She nodded then slipped out of his arms.

Even as she put her head back down on the pillow, curling up where he should be, she realized she probably made the wrong choice.

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Kylo retreated to the room that was for his parents, but also the one that Grey preferred. The room in the basement should have been his but he made his own choices. But he always cleaned up after himself. He would have made a good housemate if they had been different people.

Thinking about his friend made it easier to feel the edging of the doorway. It made him realize that he left a bed that he never thought that he would leave because of the shape of his body.

Collapsing on the bed, he took in as much air as he could manage.

He needed to tell her to stop wearing that shirt.

His lungs couldn’t take much more and he finally sobbed, like the weak person he was at his core. No matter how many therapy sessions he navigated, no matter how much talk he spilled out, he was always weak and broken. A badge and a gun didn’t stop nightmares, no matter how much he wished those accomplishments to erase the past.

He had been shaken awake and had wanted to strike out. He had woken up and wanted to do more than push the body next to him.

It had been so long since that urge had hit him.

His hands had itched to find a throat and hear a death gasp. The last time this happened, it had been Poe. They had been alone and Poe had just punched him in the face and brought him back to himself. And then he’d been allowed to sob onto his shoulder, mumbling apologies as someone rubbed his back and reminded him that this wasn’t his fault.

But this had been Rey.

She could never overpower him. Despite how strong she was, despite what she had inside of her, he could just as easily turned over and broke her. She could have been screaming beneath him and he might not have been able to stop. When he had been shaken awake, he had wanted to strike out with pure violence, like he had done so many years ago. Choosing to sleep alone wasn’t just because he couldn’t trust others; it was because he couldn’t trust himself. It was like so many nights back at the apartment. Back at the house. It was another lifetime ago but in his exhausted state he couldn’t help but imagine every moment when he realized that Poe had left himself open for an easy death stroke.
And then someone else came along and did that for him.

Curling up on the comforter, rather than fully crawling into bed and disturbing all of the effort that it took to make a bed, he tired to centre his breathing. He wouldn’t get to sleep if he didn’t put all of this aside, into the black box that it belonged until it could be dealt with properly. He had work tomorrow, important duties and tasks that couldn’t be done without focus. He momentarily flashed to how often he woke his parents up in the middle of the night. No wonder they both had to retire early because their stupid son kept chasing ghosts of himself. But to chase the real demons, to make their sacrifices worthwhile, he had to sleep. He had to get up in three hours. He really was letting everyone down. That’s all he did. The positive moments were washed away in the darkness from his mind telling him that he wasn’t good enough.

What hurt the most was that he couldn’t go back and crawl into a bed with a comfortable body beside him: a body that was soft but still too fragile. The fear of harming her was far greater.

His mind wasn’t right. He knew Rey better at that point. He knew himself better at that point.

Finally forcing his eyes closed, he focused on finding the point of nothing to drop off from. Neutral thoughts. Sitting on the beach. Watching the shoreline of the ocean. The ebb and flow of the waves. His feet in the water. The fountain in the courtyard, steadily flowing, his hand dipping into it and disrupting the ripples.

Gripping weakly with his feet for the quilt on the edge of the bed, he pulled it over himself and finally found nothingness to fall into.

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Routine. Morning. Find the pattern and follow it.

Monday meant work.

He was already showered, dressed, and fixed breakfast when he stopped to finally look at Rey in their bed. There used to be mornings like this all of the time, but that was another lifetime ago. Maybe his mind was finally telling him to trust her with his darkness again. He’d poured it on so many people the last few years, but spared her from many of the more terrifying thoughts; he’d already started by telling her about the case. She had seen him at his worst; why was he so reluctant to take the relief in her arms that he so desperately wanted to take? That was where he felt comfortable and always safe. Taking his gun out of the safe, he tucked it into his holster and took a deep breath, still feeling the exhaustion burning his eyes. If he hadn’t needed to shave, he wouldn’t have even bothered to look at himself in the mirror. But he needed to refocus and talk to Rey like she wasn’t angry at him. He couldn’t just presume how she felt anymore. She was curled up on his side, her arm reached out for him despite him not being there. He fixed his tie, the dark charcoal one that he got last Christmas from his parents, and set the morning into true motion.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, he finally reached for her. “Rey, angel?”

She stirred, blinking slowly then gasped. “Oh, I should have…”

“No, it’s fine.” He tried to smile but it bled away. “Come downstairs. You have time before Grey gets here to get ready.”
She groaned, taking his hand but still letting her head loll to the side. The curve of her neck made him want to kiss it again, to take away the aches of last night. But that would just be selfish, like he had been on Saturday morning. “What time is it?”

“Seven.” He stepped back, pushing off the bed. His hands could do so much damage. It was better to back off. “I’ll…just come downstairs.”

He left her before he could see her sit up and stare at him.

Last night had been embarrassing but also continued to open up old wounds. Everything he’d done the last few days had been trying but also rewarding, to a point. And they could never get beyond that point. The week before, he’d tried to be perfect but hadn’t been able to find the right way to be at ease. Back at home, he felt okay again. If he hadn’t fallen into whatever hole he’d found in his mind, they might have been able to start this week right. This wasn’t going like he had thought, mostly because he couldn’t trust his own head.

Or his own body.

Reacting to her so soon had made her uneasy. He just missed the soft release of easy lovemaking in the morning so deeply. He wanted to write her a million apologies for reacting like he did though. He was not imagining anyone else and that’s what he was sure she was thinking about. He wasn’t exactly broken; he could get hard but his thoughts could still make things difficult. Desire and need were emotions that he wanted to embrace again. Even if his body had betrayed him when she was moaning and gasping against his hand, he still wanted her. But what if it all made her scared and confused? All of those thoughts had made him ashamed throughout Saturday. He’d put most of his energy into talking to her on Saturday and then Sunday. It had helped that he could talk with Grey on Saturday night. He should have brought it up to her on Sunday, but he didn’t want to ruin how lifted he felt when they could just fall into an easy pattern of being around one another without expectations.

Staring at the empty nail on the wall, in the vacancy that the un-replaced space created, he grit his teeth and kept moving down the stairs.

In the kitchen, he started scrolling through his phones. His parents were asking random things that he’d ignored last night. Fine. Yes, he would get the baseball tickets. He could make the reservations for the restaurants in DC at the end of the month. They were both fine. Rey was excited for her work with Grey. He had a bunch of things to catch up on. Could they ask again if Paige and Benji wanted to come in September? He was going to put a swing set in the backyard for him.

Then he sat and waited, sipping coffee from his travel mug.

Rey came downstairs and turned to the kitchen. She had a pained look on her face. Was she finally afraid of him?

“About last night…” he started.

“No, Kylo. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let you leave.” She sat down and bit her lip. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help you enough.”

He shook his head at the apology. “Rey, I was afraid of hurting you. I made the choice. I felt better with you but I couldn’t get hurting you out of my head. I needed to be alone to figure that out.”

“I should have checked on you.” She frowned. “But I didn’t. I fell asleep.”
He reached for her hand. What would George say in a situation like this? It was always about learning how to be better. “We’ll…we’ll remember it for next time. Okay? I don’t want to have these attacks, but I do. Grey and even Owen have heard them, even if I let myself forget that it happened. I didn’t mean to leave you alone.”

Rey finally nodded. “I could have at least made breakfast.”

“Tomorrow,” he replied. “You can do it tomorrow.”

He didn’t have much time to eat, but he managed to finish his omelette. Rey seemed to be feeling better, but still gave him careful looks as she ate. She took delicate bites, reminding him that she was really there and really wanted to be with him. It shouldn’t be this way. She deserved to love someone better and he was still just him.

He hugged her one last time and had to leave for the office. She lingered in his arms and reminded him to eat lunch. He promised to pick up dinner on the way home; they deserved not to worry about dishes that evening. Grey would be there soon to take her to work. He wouldn’t be leaving her alone for long.

Standing in the doorway, he shook his head. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“Kylo,” she said, taking his hand. “I’m okay. I just feel bad that I let you leave the bed.”

“I’m going to think about that,” he said. “But I’ll also try not to let it happen again.”

She squeezed his hand. “Just let me try too, Kylo.”

He pulled her close, dropping his forehead against hers. “I will.”

Stepping away, he watched as she tilted her head. It wouldn’t be like this every morning, he promised himself. He’d figure this out.

Turning, he finally focused on starting his day.

He didn’t feel as exhausted as he thought when he got into his car. There was a long day ahead and he needed to be centred and really there. He needed to show up not looking like he wanted to crawl back into bed, safe in someone’s loving arms.

Driving to work, he let routine take hold so he could think.

He had really wanted to seek comfort from her. He had honestly wanted to stay in bed and sob on her chest. In the back of his mind, he had a good idea of why the nightmare had come upon him. Memories from the most recent case had rattled him, despite decompressing with Maz and having his thoughts turned upside down by Rey. Maybe it was Grey asking them about there. Maybe he could only see himself as the one taking that boy’s innocence and then his life.

Owen had never felt compelled to hold him on the road. He kept some distance between them, but still held his hand as he calmed down. There were things that he had seen and done that haunted him too: his first serial rape case, his first infant death, the first time he had to draw his weapon and kill a suspect. Dreams were there to remind them that they had seen and experienced things that the human mind had trouble comprehending. And then he wouldn’t bring it up the next morning, other than to insist that he take the proper breaks and then eat healthily.

Grey had fewer problems climbing into his bed so he could let go of the last of his fear.
He had to let Rey try to understand how it was now. He shouldn’t keep this from her. Again, he’d messed up.

Sitting in the parking lot, he glared at his building before looking at himself in the visor mirror. Smoothing his hair, he rolled his eyes at himself. He was the only person who showed up after a vacation looking even more exhausted.

A little girl wouldn’t stop staring at her at story circle. It was weird because Grey was enthusiastically reading a book about forest animals working together to stop their homes from being destroyed. The child would flick her eyes from him to her, then back to her, then back to him when Rey met the inquisitive gaze.

Watching the curious eyes finally got her mind to steer away from the pained look on Kylo’s face when he left, followed by the blank one when she watched him sitting in his car.

Now, she was torn between two thoughts. One was how much she wished Benji was there. He liked story time but would get bored easily and try to wander away. He was getting into more and more things, Paige had texted her; he’d figured out how to climb onto the counter to steal cookies. They had to teach him about lying, Paige wrote. And he hadn’t quite understood yet. Her other thought drifted to herself at that age, climbing onto Kylo’s lap to hug him as he struggled not to cry. He’d taught her what lying was when she was very small. Snoke was a liar; never believe anything he says. She had to be stronger than he was because he was starting to believe him: they would never get out of there, they were all going to die, and Kylo was worthless and as monstrous as their captor.

And then all of the times she’d called Kylo a liar. Those words had hurt him.

Rey finally waved at her and the girl looked away for a second before crawling over to where she sat at the edge of the circle.

“Hi,” she whispered. “I’m Clara.”

“Hi Clara.” She kept her voice just as low. “I’m Rey.”

Clara smiled. “Can I sit on your lap?”

Rey nodded and the girl climbed onto her lap, turning so she could still see Grey. It was comforting to hug her. The morning had been a good diversion from her thoughts about Kylo. On mornings after she’d had a nightmare or too many intrusive thoughts left her unable to think, she could just stay home from school. Leia would make sure she ate breakfast. Han would sit with her and talk over lunch. She could text her friends and they were always worried for her.

Kylo had been forced to handle all of this on his own. Even if Grey and Owen knew about it, they weren’t there every night. He couldn’t go to mom and dad’s room and crawl into their bed. She’d have to be better the next time it happened. She knew that he would hate himself even if he accidentally hit her, but she would have to find a way to get him to forgive himself.

“Do you like this story?” she whispered to Clara.
The blonde-haired girl nodded. “I like it when Grey does the squirrel voice.”

She smiled. The other kids liked it too. She’d do the reading after lunch. It was a hard act to follow. Grey could throw out his long arms and grin into infinity, keeping the kids engaged when other people would have just bored them. She remembered feeling that way when her teachers or the librarians at home would read to her. She never felt that way when Kylo read to her. Even as his voice fully depended, he could always keep her mesmerized.

When they were finally done, Clara asked if she could hug her goodbye. Rey embraced the girl firmly, letting go of more of her tension.

Grey was going through the bin of returns when she found him again after straightening up. He was glaring at every third book before he noticed she was looking at him. “It’s exhausting being a fucking clown sometimes.”

“I thought the kids really liked it.” She grinned, still pushing the hard morning behind her as far as she could. “I liked it too. Do you want kids one day?”

He smirked before shaking his head, still scanning the books, one after another being taken up by his hand. “I’ll have to find someone who wants to date me longer than two weeks to even start thinking about that. And I think it would break dad’s brain. He loves kids but anyone calling him grandpa would probably drive him to date someone your age rather than just my age.”

“Why would he do that?” she asked, wrinkling her nose at the thought. There were only ten years between her and Kylo, but she’d known him her entire life. Dating anyone Kylo’s age who wasn’t him wouldn’t be anywhere near her thoughts. And dating someone George’s age would just be weird.

“You tell me and we’ll both know.” Grey grabbed the last return and grinned to himself when he could add it to the sorting cart. “Do you want to grab lunch? I haven’t gotten violently ill from the place across the street yet and I’ve been eating there all summer.”

She agreed and promised herself that she wouldn’t spend the entire time talking about Kylo.

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“There you are.”

He turned from his computer at the voice. “Jannah. You’re back.”

He stood and embraced the woman. She eagerly accepted it before stepping back and folding her arms. “Owen said you cut lunch short. Why are you sitting here working?”

It was just a ViCAP search, he wanted to snap, but he tried not to let his tiredness continue to affect his mood. Instead, he shook off the feeling. “I had a rough night. If I sit and do nothing for too long, I’ll just fall asleep. So I’m killing time before the afternoon briefing. When did you get back?”

“Last night. I couldn’t believe how good it felt to sleep in my own bed and take a real shower. But my plant died so I think I’m done with trying to keep plants.” She smiled and tilted her head. “I heard about the incident. I thought about sending flowers or booze, but things kept piling up. How
are you doing now?"

He shrugged, almost forgetting that she’d been gone since January, poking around in the Middle East. “Better. They put me on leave and I thought I was going to go insane. I had to stay at my parents’ house. I felt like a child again. But I kept going and now things are more or less normal. I only squint a little when I shoot but Owen and I are working on that. How are you doing?”

“Sick and tired of sand. It’s infuriating and gets everywhere. Sand and caves…sand and more caves…There are contacts and assets that will be there one day but then gone the next.” She shook her head. “I have two weeks off. Maybe that will get the smell of car bombs out of my nostrils.”

He winced. “But you still came here to say hi to me.”

“I needed to remember what beardless men looked like. Don’t you dare follow the example of your boss or your partner.” She sighed as she studied the scar. He could feel her eyes tracing the healed wound and wanted to grimace. “God, he did get you good.”

“It was just another lesson,” he answered. There was always a lesson.

She narrowed her eyes at him and then sighed. “We’ll catch up soon. I have to finish putting together this report and then sleep for a week. Jetlag really only set in this morning. Have a good day, Scarface.”

He glared at the joke. “Please don’t start that nickname. I’ve managed to go almost seven months without anyone daring to call me that.”

Taking a step back, her smirk faded. “Okay. I won’t. I didn’t mean to…look, I’ll talk to you later. We can get drinks some time.”

He apologized again, saying that he was just oversensitive because he hadn’t slept well. They hugged and he was left to his computer again. He finally clicked off his search when he heard Owen’s and George’s voices approaching.

Better start getting prepared for the afternoon briefing rather than his secret side projects.

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She heard Grey arguing but didn’t understand the language. Poking her head into the break room, she caught his eyes and he just put his head back and groaned. He waved her into the room and then finally wound down the call.

By the end of it, he tossed his phone onto the table before pinching the bridge of his nose. “Fuck my fucking mom. *Suka.*”

He slumped down on the chair and ran his hand through his hair before crossing his arms. She sat down next to him and tried to catch his eyes. “I didn’t know that you knew other languages.”

Shrugging, Grey folded his arms behind his head. “I’m full of surprises, I guess. It’s just my mom. She’s been pissed at me since I moved here more or less permanently. I still have a bunch of shit at her place but it’s like, kids’ stuff. I’ve been trying to avoid her but I called her the other day so now she thinks that she can call and yell at me about anything. I mean, I can speak Russian but I didn’t
give two shits about learning how to read it. She always hated that I never took Russian lit.”

“Are you okay?” she asked, trying to lean in closer. His tone was oozing with bitterness that she hadn’t really seen from him before in a serious way. Maybe he saved that side of himself for Kylo.

“I’m fine,” he said, staring at his phone. “I just want to be my own person. Like, dad has mellowed out now that he sees me doing good things. They aren’t big things, but I get up and go to work. Mom still thinks I’m throwing my life away. I was so stupid to call her.”

It felt so good to put her own problems behind her and focus on him. Still, she shuddered when she remembered yelling at Han and Leia so many times. They were always kind and patient, letting her take her time and giving her so many freedoms. They let her have a boyfriend even though it worried them. They were letting her think about moving there permanently. They’d helped her when her own family didn’t care; how could she leave them? Shaking out of the thought, she tilted her head at Grey. “Why did you?”

She already knew the answer. It was entirely unfair to ask that question. She wanted to take it back. She could just walk out and leave the room instead of prodding further. If Grey was upset about Kylo taking down the pictures, he might be able to tell her why.

Grey looked over at her and then shrugged again. “I guess I missed her or something. She’s a fucking bitch and I wanted to make sure she’s still alive. I haven’t seen her in a while and I started thinking that you never know when someone can drop dead.” He exhaled sharply, suddenly reaching for his phone and standing. “I’m going to go find something to do. How are you feeling? You’ve got the older kids in a few minutes.”

She nodded. “That’s why I was looking for you. I haven’t read the book that I have to read to them before. Do I have to...will they know that it’s the first time I’m reading it?”

It felt like a silly question, because it was a shorter book. She could just sit down and do it but she had spent her time doing anything to avoid sitting still. Kylo wouldn’t like her texting all of the time. He had work to catch up on. Seeing him the last few days with his badge, suits, and gun was starting to really crystalize that he was proud of himself. Kylo got good grades in school, but only cared about the bad ones. He won many tournaments and could only think about how to be better the next time. He got angry in a different way now. She couldn’t imagine this Kylo shouting until his voice was hoarse; this Kylo didn’t seem to want to hurt himself in the hidden ways that he used to. He had still been immature when he was her age, but he had everything planned out. But he had never planned on her coming to love him in a different way.

Licking his lips, Grey’s blue eyes shifted from annoyance to concern. “I mean, it’s like that sometimes. I guess, looking surprised when you turn the page won’t feel as fake? I’m pretty phoney when I’m out there but they laugh and smile and I feel good about myself for it. That’s why we’re here, right? Kids see why reading is good and get a good story out of it. They also get to know that there are other adults out there that care. Like that little girl who hugged you today. She got it.”

Rey wanted to hug him but held back, sitting there but still keeping a smile on her face. “Thanks, Grey. I think I got it.”

His tongue swept his lips again but he still nodded and left the room.

She only had a few minutes, but she checked her phone. Kylo had texted her, reminding her that he was okay but stuck in a meeting until at least 5 p.m. But he’d pick up dinner before he met her at the library around 6 p.m.
There was more than enough to do to keep the time filled with other things, people, and thoughts.

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Maz tilted her head when he found her outside in the courtyard, sitting on a bench. He had watched her smoking for a few stolen minutes before finally approaching her. “You look like you need to speak to me, Agent Solo.”

He frowned. “I was looking for you. I didn’t think it would be so obvious.”

“Kylo, it’s fine,” she said before offering him a cigarette. He had to shake his head but really didn’t want to. “I have a few minutes now. Otherwise, you should make an appointment so we have it on the books. I believe we have one scheduled in two weeks, but we can move it up if you need.”

“I’ll be in to see you soon. I just thought I would give you a preview.” He rubbed his face before sitting beside her. “I’m having trouble focusing today. I had a nightmare and reacted…poorly. I need to clear my head before the afternoon briefing. I feel like I haven’t gotten anything done today and I’ve been staring out into space more. Owen noticed and said that I should find you.”

“Well, what do I usually say when you’re being too hard on yourself? You’re only human and trying to answer your own questions by yourself doesn’t always lead to success. Who have you reached out to?” She flicked her cigarette, staring at him.

“You.” He shook his head. “I’ve been trying to catch up on things that piled up when I was away. There hasn’t been much time to talk about things that aren’t important.”

“Please. You won’t get out of this mindset if you’re self-deprecating. Quite often bad dreams are just there because of something external that we can’t control. But many of your nightmares come from how you’ve experienced and internalized events. What has changed recently in your life?” Maz really must have somewhere to be because she was getting right to the point.

“I’m…” He started then shook his head. “I’m trying to find a way to be a better person in a relationship and it’s bringing back a lot of guilt that I didn’t realize was still there.”

“It’s not a step back to examine those feelings now. Tell me about some of your thoughts.” She snuffed out her cigarette and took another. He watched with greedy eyes as she lit it and had to fight from giving in.

“I’m worried about some of my intimacy issues. I have to be in control but it also terrifies me that I could hurt someone.” Shaking his head, he looked out at the small green space, trying to find something else to look at. “That’s part of why I get angry when I talk about my previous sexual relationships. I was more comfortable with men because I knew that they could stop me if I went too far. There were times when Poe was forced to overpower me when I had a nightmare and now I’m with a partner who physically can’t stop me.”

She nodded. “Many people have those concerns…”

“Many people haven’t killed someone.”

She smirked at him. “What did I tell you about trying to answer your own questions?”
He shrugged and folded his arms. “I think I want it to be the answer because I need to find a way to build a healthy, equal relationship and that means having to talk about a lot of fucked up things that I’ve kept from her over the years. He knew everything about me and I knew almost everything about him. I want that back but without me taking over every conversation with how much I keep hurting inside. She wants to know and I want to tell her but I don’t want to overwhelm her.”

“So you have the two sides of yourself again: the physical and the emotional. But you know that people are more than just those two things. There’s also the intelligence side, the loving side, and the many other good things that make you who you are. We’ve talked about this before. Have you done something today that was just for you that you took genuine pleasure in?” Maz put out her cigarette and motioned towards the office buildings again. “You can tell me as we walk. I have appointments to keep.”

Had he really only just agonized over things all day? He walked Maz to her building and tried to come up with one thing and he couldn’t really find it. “I…made breakfast. But it was more because I wanted Rey to have something good to wake up to.”

Gripping his elbow, Maz shook her head. “It’s good that you are thinking about these things, Kylo, but don’t dwell on them until they become too big to handle. We’ll talk more about this at your next appointment. And please do something nice for yourself this afternoon or evening.”

He opened the door for her and nodded, watching her disappear across the lobby before he turned to take the short walk back to his office.

What in the hell could he do for himself that would not just leave him feeling guilty?

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The pizza box warmed her lap. Giving Kylo a careful smile, she ran her hands on the cardboard. “I can make sushi tomorrow. We have salmon in the fridge.”

He nodded. “They have the rice at the Asian grocery store. It’s not that far of a walk, but the bike will be faster. I think I’d like that.”

“I made it at home for my friends once. Some pieces fell apart but I want to try again.” It was a good memory of rolling rice with Kaydel and Rose. Simple things like following a recipe and laughing together made her start to miss them more.

“I saw the pictures. It looked good.” He was still tired, but at least his tie was loosened now. Still, he sighed. “I haven’t had a very good day. I don’t like it when I fall into my own thoughts.”

“You…work really hard. I remember when you didn’t want to leave your bed some days and that happens to me too. Ahsoka has to remind me that sometimes, it’s okay to take a break and have a down day. Maybe you do too.” She spoke and tried to read his reaction. He was nodding, but she could tell that he was still in his own head.

“I used to…” he paused and swallowed, “when we were in college I’d get mad at him if he didn’t make me get up. And then I’d get mad when he was just listening to me and making me go to class. I think I understand now why he’d just skip some classes and go home to be by himself.”

She didn’t want to hold it in anymore. “Kylo, why did you take down the pictures?”
Staring out at the light traffic, he licked his lips. “I asked Grey to do it because I couldn’t. So now he’s worried about me. We talked about this on Saturday night and he asked me the same thing. I don’t… I don’t think that you need to be reminded of what we were to each other. You looked sad or angry every time you saw them. I noticed that and it’s your house now too. It can’t just be how I want things to be.”

She let the quiet settle into the car, watching as their neighbourhood came into view. “Thank you, Kylo.”

“It’s no big deal.” He hit the blinker and they pulled into the driveway. “Can you take that inside and set the table? It is supposed to rain tonight so I need to put the car away.”

Rey left the car, knowing that he also wanted to be alone with the thought. Yes, the pictures hurt but Rey had also started thinking about how Kylo dealt with things. He liked having his memories in a form that he could return to. His journals were there. She wanted to read them. But she also wanted to wait. There might be things hidden there that she wasn’t ready for. The copied page from the stolen journal held so many intimate thoughts that she was afraid to open up that side of him fully.

As she was setting the table, she shook her head and moved the plates to the coffee table instead, taking a roll of paper towel with her.

She knew she made the right choice when Kylo came inside and gave her a genuine smile. “Thank you. It’s like you read my mind.”

So she made him smile once. It was a good start. “We can watch a movie. Like we used to do.”

He nodded again. “Find something. I’m going to go change.”

It would be nice to fall into a fictional world for a while. It would also be nice not to see Kylo’s holster.

At some point, he would need to talk more and she’d have to be ready for it.

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About the only thing ‘nice’ that Kylo could think to do for himself was to put the order in for the swing set after dinner. He’d ask for help building the bigger pieces, probably dragging Grey over to help him and paying him with beer and company, but it would be a good afternoon project for a future weekend.

Rey had been watching him most of the night, making sure he was really enjoying himself. He was home so he was comfortable enough to really start shedding his worries. Like removing his suit, he could be less controlled for the evening.

Sitting up, Rey looked over at his laptop screen. “That one looks nice.”

“I wanted one with a fort and a slide. It’s the one that I wanted when I was a kid but we never had enough room in the backyard,” he answered before closing the computer. Distracting himself had to end now. “Rey, I know I don’t have to apologize again but I feel like I have to. It wasn’t your fault this morning. I get like this sometimes and it really wipes me out.”
“I think I understand. But I want to try to help you. You don’t have to worry about hurting me. I know you won’t ever hurt me on purpose.” She reached for his hand and he squeezed it lightly in response. She wanted to be with him but there were so many sides that he’d kept hidden for too long. No one really knew them anymore; Maz was probably the closest but even then he’d pull back on some things, mostly to protect his job. And that wasn’t good. Still, Rey was looking at him like she was ready to hear all of these old hurts. “I don’t want you to be upset.”

“I don’t want you to feel that way either. You can talk to me about anything, Rey. But I have to be able to talk to you too. And maybe some of those things will be hard to hear.” He met her eyes. Wanting to protect her had meant essentially lying to her. “You’re allowed to be angry at some of them, but I want to share these thoughts with you.”

“Why couldn’t you…” she started then sighed. “Why couldn’t you tell these things to me before? Before June?”

Before I kissed you, he hears it even if she doesn’t say it. “I’ve shared a lot with you. But I also wanted to try to fix it myself. And you should never do that, but I’m made of mistakes.” His instincts were still telling him to clam up. He should run away from this conversation and keep things hidden. But he had to keep going. “Do you still miss him?”

She swallowed. “I’ve been thinking about him a lot. Looking at the pictures before, I felt jealous. I saw how happy you were and sometimes it’s like I can’t make you feel those things. I started thinking that they were only there to hurt me.”

That part stung. He’d acted selfishly so often in his life so he understood why she would think that way. He had just hoped that she wouldn’t have taken so many of his examples to heart. But so many of her actions towards him, even if he tried to deny it, were selfish but also from a place of pain and loneliness. He knew all of those feelings too well.

“You know that they weren’t. I wanted…” he took a deep breath. “This is the house I pictured that I would have bought for him. There’s no pool but I think he would have gotten over that. What I wanted was just to have some of him still with me. But I know it’s hard to see reminders of hurt. So I took down the pictures so this could be our house.”

“Han and Leia wish you were still together,” she said, her head dropping slightly. “They think that you wouldn’t be in the FBI if he was still here.”

He almost wanted to roll his eyes at his parents’ thoughts. “I might have waited a little longer but I was going to do this. And he accepted that because he loves…loved me. What about you? Rey, I want to be good to you, to be here with you but…I just want to know what you want. Because if you’re with me, this is a part of it.”

Shakily, she exhaled. “It’s hard not to think about him when you get sad. I was worried this morning that I was doing something wrong. You wouldn’t have left him alone in the bed.”

“That’s not true. I…sometimes I would wake myself up and just look at him and think how much I could hurt him if I didn’t do something. So I slept on the couch but…” Now he was going to harm her with his words, “but I always woke up with him beside me in the living room. And that’s not your fault. We were together for so long. It took him time too to figure that out and so will you.”

“Would you still be with him if he was alive?”

The air stilled in the living room and he flinched slightly. He dropped his head and sighed. “We’ve talked about this. It’s not helpful to think about what ifs. He’s gone and I miss him everyday but I
can’t bring him back. I just needed to keep some memories of him for a while longer.”

Tilting her head, she still nodded. “Do you think about him when you’re alone?”

He exhaled and sat up straighter, trying to get back to himself. He had to keep his voice steady for the next part. It would all spill over into hurt and rage if he didn’t keep himself together. “I think about him. I think about you. I think about my parents, my grandparents, Hux and Paige, Benji, George, Grey, Owen…I think about being fourteen and having to kill a man. I think about how many times I had to move the dead body of a child or be beaten. I think about him raping girls in front of me and how they screamed for help and I had to do nothing. I think about him locking me in a closet so he could molest you. I think about talking to victims or their families, or interviewing people who have committed the worst things imaginable. I think about a lot of things. And maybe, sometimes, just sometimes, I like to think about things that make me happy. You make me happy, but so did he. I’m allowed to think about him, Rey. That doesn’t change what you mean to me.”

“But if he hadn’t died…”

Kylo inhaled, drawing in as much air as he could manage. He couldn’t get defensive, but he was already there. “I don’t know, Rey. If he hadn’t died then I would have had to keep my promises. I would have married him because I wanted to take care of him. He would be living here and maybe we would have adopted a kid by now. He would have been a great husband and father but I will never know what that’s like because someone murdered him and is still out there. I wouldn’t have made so many mistakes. I wouldn’t have lost so many more years of my life to depression and emptiness. I wouldn’t have fucking slept with Liza. I wouldn’t have put Grey in this position of being my friend but still feeling deeper things for me. I wanted that life and someone took him from us — all of us, not just me. I had him in my life for five years and there are so many things I want to go back and fix. I’d take back smothering him with my dark side. I’d take back stalking him. I’d take back how hard I pressured him into doing things he never wanted. But instead my last memory of him is holding him dead on the floor and thinking that I did it. And I can’t take that back or forget it.”

He took a long and shaky breath and she just stared at him. There were no words at that moment.

She finally sat up straighter and swallowed. “I asked… I remember asking George if you did it. It’s the first time I ever saw him mad. I’m sorry I thought that way, Kylo. And I’m still sorry that…the last thing I ever said to him was that I hated him. I want to go back too, Kylo. I want to go back and have one last hug and have him call me sweet pea. I’ve never had another nickname and I don’t want one.”

Kylo shifted his weight. “I need to show you something.”

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Still trying to process all of his words, Rey followed. He led her upstairs, up to the dresser. Taking out his key ring, he unlocked the drawer. “It wasn’t locked to hide anything from you. I just get paranoid about break-ins. I lock up my gun, my computer, and other things that I don’t want…stolen. If I’m away, I’m worried that people will come looking for things I don’t want to lose.”

Beside dress socks, some ties, and cufflink boxes, was a familiar phone and charger. On top of it was a ring box and she bit her lip, hard.
Sitting down on the bed, Kylo opened the small box. But he was still holding the phone on his lap. “His ring was stolen. This is the one I bought myself. It feels like a lifetime ago and I know we were too young but...the last thing he texted me was that he loved me. And I never replied.”

Still standing by the dresser, Rey tried to find a way through her hurt. People died. They didn’t just go to heaven like Kylo used to tell her. People died from cancer, car crashes, murder, suicide...that was where everyone would end up. One day she would have to hold Kylo’s hand as they buried his parents. They had been the only parents that she’d ever known too. They had been forced to wait seven years to find out if their son was alive or not, while her parents probably died not caring where she was or what happened to her. No one ever looked for her, but someone had found her. And he had walked through a world of hurt so she could grow up safe. The thought finally shook loose the tears and she sobbed.

And Kylo left the phone and the box on the bed to hug her. “It’s okay, Rey. It’s okay to cry.”

“I never wanted him to die. I never wanted anyone to die. I’m so sick of everything always having to end up in pain and hurt. I don’t want...” she sucked back a sob, “I don’t want to stop calling Han and Leia mom and dad. But it feels wrong to do that. I don’t want things to change there but it will have to. So I think I understand, Kylo. I think I know why you kept these things and his pictures. You can...you can put them back. I’ll just have to learn how to live with it.”

“You shouldn’t have to do that. It’s better if I try to live without so many reminders.” His arms were still around her, his warm breath on her neck. “I’m sorry. I’ve probably been talking more to Hux and Grey than I have with you about this but...I’m struggling right now. I want to make you happy but I’m also afraid that it won’t be good enough, that I’ll just hurt you. You deserve so much and I just have...I end up thinking about him. I think about Poe, Grey, and even Liza. I’m getting stuck on my own mistakes rather than just being myself. That’s all I want from you so you should get the same from me.”

Sitting on his bed, she shook her head.

“I want to be myself around Han and Leia too.” She wrapped her arms around herself but found easy comfort when Kylo put his arm around her. “I think about that too. I’ve slept in your bed for so many years and I don’t want them to think that you ever...did anything to me.”

Sighing, he nodded. “I hate hiding another relationship from them. I know they will understand but I don’t want them to think the same thing. I hate dealing with paedophiles. I hate thinking about some of the people I have to talk to. I’m still working on this case and it just makes me angry. I sometimes think about how...how I almost kissed you when you were so much younger. We’ll have to tell them about that. To know that I’m not a monster.”

“I understand why you wanted to kiss me then. You were so hurt and angry and being around people in love made you...remember him and miss him more. I remember your toast. I knew you were talking about him. I think everyone who knew him did. Paige told me...she told me how she cries whenever she watches the video and hears you speaking about him. We were so proud of you. I don’t think that mom and dad really cared that much that you were sick after. They were more worried that you were biting yourself.” He had confessed so much, it was her turn now. “I wanted you to kiss me then. When you were home, I was so attracted to you. I thought about you all of the time. I wanted...maybe I dated Finn because I didn’t want to ruin things between us.”

Shaking his head, Kylo’s arm tightened around her. “It felt good to hurt myself. That type of release is so unhealthy but it's hard not to crave it. I still want to do it sometimes. And I’m still forever angry that he did that to you. I hope that I was able to help you after, but I hate that I wasn’t there sooner. I...please don’t hate me Rey. I reacted when we were in the bathtub. My body
I wanted something from you and I couldn’t stop it.”

Turning, she had to meet his eyes. He’d wanted her then? “Kylo…”

“I hate myself for it, Rey. I told Grey and he let me try to figure out what’s wrong with me. You were so broken. And lost. I wanted to help you start to feel better. And my body wanted something else.” He took a deep breath. “I’m sorry I told him before I told you.”

She thought about how easily Kylo spoke to Grey, and how taking down the pictures had hurt him too somehow. Kylo should have been able to turn to her to help him with his grief but the past still made him turn away. He must also think about how mean she had been to Poe that last time at the apartment. “Was it…easier with them than it is with me? To talk to people like Grey or Liza?”

He sighed, leaned back, letting her go. He fiddled with the phone for a moment before pushing it aside. “That’s a complicated answer. Can you just…try not to get mad?”

She was sure that she caught a hint of his fear before he had the chance to blink it away. “I can listen. I always want to listen to you.”

Licking his lips, Kylo nodded. “Liza frustrated me but complimented me the entire time. I needed that. I needed to hear that I wasn’t worthless and unlovable. That I was good in bed. I was falling into myself and I just wanted to fuck someone who would go away at the end of the night. Being with her was…stupid but in those moments, I cared about her. I’ve had…maybe you don’t remember and I’m glad that you don’t. I tried so hard to keep this from you. But so many of the other girls were always hurting around us. He’d make me help him, threatening you if I didn’t listen. I’d have to stand there as he raped them and then have to go upstairs with them and you and try to pick up the pieces. I was always afraid he’d rape me again but he really…he only raped the boys at first. Never again. I’ve tried to figure this out for years, but it was all about power with us, and sexual perversion with the girls. I could only do so much. I knew how to help some of the hurt go away. And then one day, we went downstairs and I was the only kid left coming back to the room. It happened so many times and I had to tell George all of this when I was fourteen. I never thought I could sleep with a woman because I’m…like this. And the few times I had sex with Liza…they’re in the past. But at the time, I needed someone who I knew I wouldn’t get attached to. I know that you liked her for a while so I’m sorry again that I didn’t tell you about her.”

She sighed. “She told me what it’s like to be with you. I was…mad when she did. I still don’t think she should have yelled that name at you at the hotel. Even if she was mad at you it was…mean.”

“I’m not entirely straight, Rey. It’s a part of who I am now. Maybe if I hadn’t been taken and…everything happened, maybe I would be, but I’m not. This is a part of who I am. Hux and I talked about this and…have you ever felt different about another person that you are attracted to? Like you’re just drawn to them and you can’t let them go?” he asked before clenching his jaw.

The slight movement made her nod, understanding what they were talking about. “I’ve…when I was a kid, back in Michigan, I was attracted to Ransolm. You were right. You were so right about that Kylo. He didn’t get mad or anything, but I was hurting that night. It was when I got the letter and…” she trailed off and sighed. “But then with…Finn. I liked him but I don’t…I don’t know if I was really attracted to him like I am to you. Maybe if I had been, then maybe what happened wouldn’t have happened. Maybe I pulled back because I wasn’t sure if I wanted it to be real or not.”

Kylo rubbed his face with his free hand. “Do you know how hard it was for me when all of that happened? I know that part of why I slept with Grey was because of what was happening with you and him. I was alone. I was, I guess, jealous. I didn’t want to sleep with him right away but it
happened so fast. I almost slept with him again after that all happened at Christmas but he stopped me. I’ll never be able to repay him for that.”

Sighing, she put her hand on his leg. She wanted to be tender and understanding. Kylo had said so much and she had so many questions. They burned inside her. How much Kylo had been hurting and having no one to turn to. He’d felt alone too. And he should have been able to tell her everything but pulled away to protect her. “You can tell me now, Kylo, how he hurt you. I’m not a kid anymore.”

His shoulders dropped and he sighed. “I’ve only been able to talk about it because of him. That’s how our relationship started, me describing how I was raped when I was seven years old. And then it ended with him dead. Sometimes I want things from movies too, Rey. I wish that I had fallen in love with him because of something else other than how we were both suffering. But I still told him. I told him how scared I was, how each one of Snoke’s fingers felt different. He held me down and told me I was worthless and stupid. When he put himself inside me, it burnt and I wanted it to stop but no one could help me. And then when he did it to so many others, I could never tell them that I knew that pain, that hurt. I’ve been in two homosexual relationships and no one has ever been inside me again. I…wanted to try with Poe but I would just panic. I was always torn back to how it was and I lost all desire in an instant. The last time I kissed Grey, when we were in the hotel after I left you alone to suffer, I almost begged him to fuck me. I wasn’t okay and he saw that. And he said no.”

Listening to him speak, she was rocked back to distant aches of Snoke’s hands and mouth on her: knowing that she was doing nothing wrong by existing, but still being punished for it. She and Kylo shared that sadness, the feeling of being powerless. His memories were firmer. He lived that so many times; it was so clear why he would have nightmares forever. All she could do was love him through it but it was still hard. He was afraid of hurting her because she wasn’t a man. He had been afraid of talking about this to keep his darkest parts hidden within him. Poe and Grey had seen them. And Kylo had just tried to be strong for her.

Her head dropped. “If Grey had been like he is now, you’d still be with him, wouldn’t you?”

“Does that matter?” he asked, shrugging. “That was almost three years ago. He’s grown up and done a lot for me. I love him as a friend like I love Hux and Paige. But if I’m being honest, if Grey hadn’t stopped me after I got back from that Christmas, I would probably be with him. We’d fight and argue but he’d at least have figured out where he’s going in life.”

“He said that you talked but I didn’t think that…” She sucked in a breath. “Kylo, I’m eighteen. I need time to figure out what I’m going to do.”

His eyes widened and he instantly shook his head. “I didn’t mean it that way. I’ve had more than enough time to think about this. I’m worried about you moving here. It’s like we talked about. You need friends and I need to let you have them. You know how I was with Poe’s friends. I can’t let that happen to you. I want…” he sucked in a long breath. “What I would like to happen is that we actually deal with the past. And that you stop looking at me like I’m personally hurting you for having sex at some point in my life.”

“I know that you’ve been with other people. And I know that all of those relationships have hurt. But I want to be with you.” She had to keep going, to help him understand why she was there and how she wanted to help him like he had helped her.

“Why?” The question fell thick and heavy, his voice still doubting himself as his eyes almost drifted shut.
“Because I need you. I feel safe with you. I know that you’ll always be there for me. I also have trouble trusting people, Kylo. I’m also afraid of how I think. I wish that you hadn’t slept with Grey and Liza and…” she trailed off and Kylo’s face firmed again.

“Say it.”

“What?” She squinted at him.

“Say it.”

Sorrow still hit her easily. She looked at her hands and sighed before crumbling into a sob. “I hate thinking about how much you loved him. I hate how it ruined everything for us. If you hadn’t beat up his dad then he wouldn’t have been there all of the time. I hate how mom and dad talk about ‘the boys’. I am just me, Kylo. I’m not him. Maybe you’d have been better off with Grey. Then at least you’d get what you want.”

He didn’t react. He just stared at her. “What do I want, Rey?”

“You just want guys. It’s just like Liza said. Maybe I shouldn’t have fallen in love with you.” She lifted her head, knowing that tears were shining in her eyes. “Go and be with Grey. Go and be happy. I don’t care.”

He stood, making her flinch. He caught the look and took a step back to sigh, closing his eyes to centre himself. “These are the feelings that we need to deal with, Rey. I won’t fully be okay until I find out who hurt him. That doesn’t mean I want to be with Grey. He deserves someone better—you deserve someone better. But that doesn’t mean I don’t have real feelings for you.” He kept talking. His voice was steadier this time, making her look at him. “The last eighteen years of knowing you have shown me so much about myself. I love your kindness. I love how stubborn you can be. I love your strength. We…this isn’t a normal way to start a relationship but we’re not normal. I don’t make things easy and you know that. You’re closer to normal than I’ll ever be because you let people help you. You haven’t always but you figured it out before I did. If you want a life with me…this has to be part of it. He’s a memory that makes me happy but I want to make more happy memories with you, so I can have fewer nightmares. I want…I want to be able to let you take care of me in your own way, not just thinking that it would be something that he did.”

He knelt beside the bed, putting his hand on her leg. “But this is who I am, Rey. I’m someone who likes his job even though it’s hard and sometimes I’m good at it. I’m going to have to travel and feel terrible about leaving you behind. I’m someone who finds attraction through what people say and do. And you’ve shown me kindness when I sometimes didn’t deserve it. But you also have space here to be angry with me and that’s…what matters. I already love you, Rey, but I want to really fall in love with you with less of this hurt floating around. And if you can love all of me, despite all of these things and how I can be unsteady and unstable and sometimes think about someone who I used to love and have a friendship with someone I was once with, then…then we’ll be stronger together. I can’t change what I’ve done, Rey, but I can be better for you, with you.”

Rey took in the words but they had come so fast and hard that she had hard time weeding through them. She had to look at her heart in that moment, not her head. “I just want to love you, Kylo. I want to take away the hurt like I used to do. This is hard for me, but I needed to hear this.”

He sighed and squeezed his eyes shut. “It’s hard for me too. But if you want this, we can keep moving forward. But if you…if you don’t want to lose part of yourself, we can go back to how it was. I’ll still love you but I won’t touch you ever again. You know I’ve killed someone. You know the blood on my hands. I won’t blame you if you want to go back home and we keep living like we did. I want you to be in love and be happy. But if you’re happier finding someone else, someone
your own age with less of this fucking baggage, then I’d want you do that. It would be so hard for me, but I would find a way to live with it even if it hurt me.”

Blinking, Rey could only stare at him. “Is that what you were doing when we were at the café? Trying to find someone else for me?”

“No.” He shook his head. “That was me trying to get you to feel good about how you look.”

“Kylo…” she started then sighed. “What should I do? Tell me.”

He bit his lip. “I can’t tell you what to do. Do I want you to stay? Yes. But September will be here before we know it. And we’ll have to talk to Han and Leia. What I want is for you to be happy, Rey.”

“I want to be happy with you.” She met his eyes. “I need to…think about these things. But I don’t want you to sleep somewhere else. Please stay with me, Kylo.”

Nodding, he stood to hug her. “Of course, Rey. I will.”

She knew she wouldn’t sleep that night but hoped that by morning, she would be able to untangle most of her thoughts about him. He was strong, but also dangerous. He loved her, but still cared about others. He wanted her to stay, but could also let her go.

Again, she wished she was still four years old and the only thing in the world she knew was him before the world got to them.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Past references to rape and death; references to past relationships.

Thanks again for the comments and kudos. I’m hoping that this heavy, long chapter will let our characters start finding out who they really are together. There’s a lot of what ifs here that need to be taken with a grain of salt, mostly due to the passage of time and how they both remember things.

I’ve also set the chapter count to 77 just so I actually finish this at some point.

Thanks for reading. I have actual softness planned for the next chapter, along with kicking off the larger plot for the rest of this...thing.
Chapter 52

Chapter Summary

Kylo realizes some things, but then gets called away on a case and doesn’t cope well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

HonestlyKylo woke up around 2 a.m. and couldn’t find sleep again no matter how desperately he needed it. There was no nightmare this time; instead, it was just the constant pressure of guilt over last night.

There was no way in hell she would want to stay now.

She should have screamed at him but didn’t. Remembering his words, he would have argued until his throat was hoarse and instead she just dipped her head and nodded. She got ready for bed and shrugged him away, making the hurt radiate harder than any words. In the end, he’d ruined another precious thing in his life by being himself and now, this time, it would be permanent.

She was facing him but curled up on the opposite side of the bed. He had heard her crying throughout most of the night but flinched away every time he tried to touch her.

He didn’t even have to pick and choose which mistake was the worst. Maybe not resting more and letting the start of the day get further away from them had been the biggest. Rushing to get over the hurt while still struggling with it didn’t lead to the outcome he thought would arise. But what was that outcome exactly? Did he actually expect more than just hurt by being so stupidly honest? People had always told him to be honest and talk through his problems and he’d managed to screw that up. There was no way to respond to so much hurt without feeling most of it as her own; they had always been tied together and he’d worked so hard to protect her and now it had been obliterated.

Sleep. He should have slept on it. And now he couldn’t take it back.

He’d put his thoughts and feelings out there in a catastrophic way of dealing with the past while also refusing to move on from it. The way she had flinched and cried, heavy sorrows washing ashore in steady waves, showed him that he’d found a new way of carving out hurts in another person without giving her the true space to answer him with her perceptions. He used to depend on those thoughts and now he hadn’t let them surface. He’d pushed hard to get the answers he wanted; he’d fallen into training rather than what was really in his heart.

Maybe all of his talents really did rest in being manipulative, lacking true empathy and only able to mirror what he’s seen in others. Maybe he really didn’t feel anything but his own pain, struggling to let it erupt and put the world into chaos. He’d uncovered only the fears from her that he was willing to deal with rather than the larger, wider picture that he often lost focus on.

This was why he needed constant supervision. This was why he got sharp eyes from George or Owen when he lingered too long on a piece of evidence, his mind racing in how it fit into the puzzle rather than putting it into its individual context and stepping back to see more than just one
solution. Learning was a process that never stopped. So was healing. And both could be hindered by stubbornness.

It was more than worth trying to undo the hurt—hell, it was everything—but his inner pessimism also screamed at him that he’d just cause more of it by continuing on the path that he was forcing upon her. Rey was eighteen and hearing many of the things he’d laid out last night couldn’t have been easy to hear, especially from someone who she seemed to want desperately in her life in a bigger, bolder way. He’d faced that type of honesty many times and either found his way back through thought or bitterness. And the latter was far easier to fall into than the former.

Watching her sleep, he wished that she didn’t look so troubled but also deserved to witness the damage he could do. Even after years of working to be better, to stop harming himself and talk through therapy, he fell back into painfully comfortable patterns. There was always a voice in the back of his head that told him he wasn’t good enough: sometimes it screamed and sometimes it just whispered. But it was always there. The mark on his soul had receded but came roaring back in a moment of unintended brutality. Hurting her physically was the least of his problems when he was constantly barraging her mentally. He had become what he never meant to be, telling her she wasn’t good enough with his words and bringing up past actions that would say the same. He’d put that hurt out there and wishing things were different was about as constructive as losing sleep before a long workday. He should have taken smaller steps, easing his way out of exhaustion rather than giving in to frustration. Get it over with, his inner voice had screamed at him the second he brought her upstairs. Throw it all out there because no one is ever going to love you anyway. Old words that had been hurled at him over fourteen years ago came to him when he needed them the least.

You should have just given her to me. You’ve broken her in worse ways than I ever could.

Who’s the monster now, Kylo Ren? With how you’ve touched her and toyed with her? Made promises and then taken them back? What hurts more: a broken leg or words of love spoken and then undone?

Reaching out with one long arm, he brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. He heard her whimper like she could hear the voice too. Or maybe it was just because he touched her again.

Normally, he’d get out of bed and do anything to stop the voice from sounding more corporeal with every passing heartbeat. Some nights when he was alone, he could almost feel the breath on his neck and be torn back to how it was to awaken in confinement in a never-ending nightmare of abuse. Starving and hurting every hour of the day, while also trying to find ways to keep her fed and smiling, had left him empty. No matter how many years slipped by, it would still return to him when he was alone. The only thing that got him through much of those intense moments was to think about how he’d got her out, kept her safe, and could make her happy in a new way. Now, he’d undone most of that. The demons he’d kept inside had been unleashed and she was left in the aftermath.

Other times, when he couldn’t fight the darkness on his own, he’d turn to a more pleasant voice and have conversations beside the ocean, but even those memories would just tear him up more.

It was stupid to bring him up the way that he did.

The heartbreak in Rey’s eyes at eleven had been washed away in the brunt of his determination to answer his own damned questions without listening to her; Maz was always right. He’d shaken both of their bonds with his impulsive actions back then at twenty-one and he was doing it again now. Even the events surrounding Hux’s wedding were further soured with how he ineptly rambled through old hurts without really considering her thoughts about the larger implications. He knew
that he’d listened to Paige talk about getting married one day at one of those distant dance practices when he had been sixteen and too busy thinking about school or Poe or Rey to listen to her with any clear focus. Her light mood during those times had guided him through so many problems and he’d pushed her aside and forgot about her, only trying to make it up to her by buying presents for her son. He was doing it again, trying to manage affection through things. He hated things; why didn’t other people hate the things he tried to gift to them too? Moments and memories were more important. Paige had had her day to be a princess and he’d worked beyond his abilities for control, proven by his many breakdowns that weekend, to try to give her that special time. Why in the hell didn’t he think that Rey wanted her version of a night surrounded by friends and family, filled with caring words and maybe one drunken asshole who freaks out over almost sleeping with a bridesmaid? That part she could do without, but Rey had goals and dreams that she was struggling to put into reality because he stood in the way.

Blinking, he realized that maybe so many of those dreams included him. They shouldn’t anymore, not after what he’d said. He’d seen so many of his plans crumble before his eyes and felt the brunt of that pain head-on.

If Rey had imagined a day filled with light and love and promises of forever, dancing and delicate touches and speeches about forever, he must have shattered it. And it ached inside to think that he would be standing with her in all of those dreams. He could see it in his mind and watched it crumble and sucked in a low sob. No matter what he said, the second she had kissed him, he had only seen the end as being with her. So why had he brought up what ifs? Why has his mind always been so cruel?

She went to prom with her friends and looked beautiful; he had that picture of her as the background of his private phone and would absently click it to life when he was alone with his thoughts and writing late at night. Across time, there were pictures that didn’t exist on the now-bare spots on his walls. He didn’t go to two proms because it felt like a stupid obligation that he didn’t want to deal with, despite the hurt he felt from his partner about missing out on something that everyone else did. In his mind, he realized now that she probably thought about him showing up and taking her. If she’d had these feelings for so long, it would have been such a release to have those emotions returned. Even in his old, stunted, feelings, he should have realized that. He should have shown up and given her that night of magical memories of just being together. All of her friends would have stared and he could have openly glared at Finn as he kept her safe in a way he never could. Even if he’d hated so much about high school, he’d had so many sweet moments that now were tainted with bitterness over how he’d treated him and how it all ended; combined with how he hurt Rey in the process, none of that felt good anymore.

She had two close female friends who she could turn to and he’d all but torn her away from them. He was doing it again: isolating, fighting, demanding too much while not giving the same in return. Shaking his head, he tried to pull himself out of the spiral. She could make new friends and, given time, she would; she had the freedom to go see her friends whenever she chose if she decided that staying with a monster was worth it. The world might seem isolating there; he’d heard Grey complain about it enough. When he was in that headspace he fully agreed, but when he was on his guard, he knew that the isolation also meant safety. Brianna was a caring girl, as far as he knew from her father and the few times that he’d met her. She was also a little lost in life, but that’s from the perspective of driven and sometimes overbearing people who craved control—a category he very much belonged to. But he didn’t want to fall into the trap of thinking of Rey as a daughter or a sister; it was impossible now. Maybe he’d talked about her that way in the past at some damned dinner that he wanted to leave early because it was impolite to text his complaints to others at the table while going over budget cuts to white-collar crime again.

Even though he told her that they could go back to how things were, they had been empty words.
Telling her she could find someone else and he’d learn to live with it had been all but lies on his part. He didn’t know how to let people go. He was only able to push people out of his life by hating them. But he still let them haunt his thoughts so what good did that do? Would he finally stop dwelling on what happened with Liza if he just had coffee with her and told her these things too? Dealing with the past meant not forgetting it, but this particular ghost wasn’t part of the myriad of hurt he’d felt radiating off of her last night.

You just want guys. It’s just like Liza said. Maybe I shouldn’t have fallen in love with you. Go and be with Grey. Go and be happy. I don’t care.

He didn’t know how to approach the accusation so he twisted her words into a response that was meant to be comforting and meaningful but had just left her looking defeated, despite her words. Did she really need hear all of that coming from someone she just wanted to love? And then to hear that she should find someone else?

In truth, deep down, he’d gotten the reaction that he’d been digging at. Like breaking a suspect, the more evidence he put out there, the greater likelihood of a confession.

He’d interrogated her, he winced again to himself. He’d given her just enough to respond to lead the conversation forward, then barraging her with more of what he thought was the truth.

So, break it down, Agent Solo. What answers were you looking for and did you actually get the ones that we need to move forward?

At least George’s disembodied voice didn’t tell him outright that he was a fuck up; it was only hidden in the colour of his shoes. Each phrase held importance in a confession, even if a person hadn’t considered their full meaning. It was complicated in terms of linguistic choices, age, and profile of the suspect, as things are framed both around education level and upbringing. Whether or not a potential suspect understands procedures also must be taken into account. But since he was conducting an informal interview in his bedroom with someone wanting to love him, he could really ignore that part and include it as part of his attempt at an apology.

Closing his eyes, he started working through the web of his sexuality and how it was perceived. That was the first part. Rey had been too young to understand what type of relationship he was in when it was thrust into her face that long and bewildering spring; it was a time that used to hold such wonder and preciousness and now it was only a constant stab into his heart. He had also been too immature to consider what it meant in the long term to a full extent. He was just desperately trying to keep him around because it felt good to be with him and some of the hurt faded away in his light. Then it turned into a bigger ache and…

No. That’s not what she said. He was putting answers in her mouth again and interpreting the signal from only one perspective because it was a more comfortable hurt than what she intended.

It wasn’t that she was in any way homophobic. He had enough background on her to put that into its right place. The greater issue that he should have thought about last night was that he had, for most of his life, been perceived as gay in her eyes. His bitter issues with labels made his resentment for himself surge. Had he ever, a deep sigh, come out in any way? In his mind, and speaking with Maz, he had begun to settle into the fact that he was bisexual, even though it still bit at him. He found attraction in both men and women, built on the trust of knowing something about them and their hearts. He never approached strangers he found attractive when he was out and rejected being set up on dates by Hux because many of those people didn’t understand how he thought because he was still working on putting a label on himself. Even if he didn’t like Liza as a person, she had been a caring and compassionate lover when they had been in the moment. He’d felt wanted in a different way with her. Smaller hands and breasts offered different ways of touching and being
But he never talked about that. He wrote it off as a mistake because of what happened afterwards, burying it because he truly came to dislike her as a person.

Rey still must have taken his sexuality as being only purely including one gender. His cautiousness towards sex with her obviously gave her that impression as well. Did he want to go further on that other morning? Yes. He had gone years without sex and that was also pressing on him. Jerking off was still not his most favourite thing to do with his body and he only found sporadic moments of enjoying it; he’d crumble afterwards, regretting every image he’d brought to his mind to get off to. It was another reason to question how and what he was inside. Would he be too eager and either go too far, too fast and hurt her or, worse, would she think she was just being used because she was there and he was getting his release? He’d done that to Grey and Grey had read the situation as the rightful one-night stand that it was while his brain had immediately spun towards something long term that would mean soft mornings with burnt eggs...

If Rey left, he deserved the loneliness that he’d earned by being such a fucking moron with everything and everyone around him.

Even when he’d only been with one person, other than the man who killed Ben Solo when he was seven, he never thought of himself as really homosexual. But what was that like to others? Just because he didn’t say it didn’t mean that it wasn’t there. He knew how he thought they viewed him; he’d tossed that around enough. Still, being called gay never worked with him and it wasn’t only because he hated labels in these terms. To him, inside, in the parts that were still able to grasp logic in the moments of despair he was rolling into, he knew attractive from unattractive. He’d only had attractive partners: Poe’s confident smile and hair, Grey’s eyes and cheekbones, Liza’s collarbone and waist, Rey’s delicate body and sparkling eyes. Her throat and her lips. Her legs and the softness of her hands. But those things were superficial. Beneath each of those attributes was a person. He was still baffled by Maz never letting him diagnose himself and that was probably for the best. He’d just get it wrong.

Poe had always talked about this and he’d only half-listened: what was queer, what was gay, what they were. There were expectations that he’d put into a corner of his mind that he dared to start uncovering in a real and solid way. He’d mostly bring them up when he was agitated during therapy or with Hux or Grey. But he’d never really talked about them with Rey.

So there was his answer. How he acted and what he hid in his thoughts opened the wound.

He had just hoped, hoped into the sun, that telling her how brutal it had all really been that she’d understand why he held back when it came to who he was. In the time he’d been in California, he’d seen at least a rape a day for four years. Snoke kept the boys to himself. But the girls, he made him watch. Another one of his side hobbies was trying to understand his timeline again. He had all of the memories as fading recollections on his skin but the move from Connecticut to Colorado had been abrupt. He didn’t know where they were going. But he kept his mouth shut. Even when he sat with an open car door, he knew he couldn’t run. But George would have found them in two weeks. If he’d run and hid, he could have fixed everything. Then Snoke gave them all something so they slept. And they woke up in a new house. And the first thing he did was make sure he hadn’t been hurt again that way. It was colder there. It was a new there but he thought he could still maybe, maybe someday escape. But then the last older boy died. And the next time they changed houses, he didn’t even know he’d gone anywhere. He just woke up on a new floor and accepted it as a further descent into the underworld.

Absently, even in the depths of his crooked thoughts, he locked onto the thing that always made
George frowned: how did he always know where to go with them?

But, at the end of the day, there was no other evidence. The cars had been burnt out. All of the fingerprints, blood, and DNA had been from them or him. He stole cars. And as much as Kylo knew that there was something more to Poe’s murder, nothing had surfaced for years. Maybe he’d imagined it all and everyone else had just played into his delusions.

No. No. Rey had been targeted. There was someone out there who could hurt her again one day and not just by sending pages from a stolen journal. That’s why his friends had been broken into. That’s why his parents still needed a gun. If he could have any wish it would be that no one noticed what he was always looking up until it became something.

But he was hiding something again. And waiting until it blew up in his face, like he knew it would one day, was going to be another disaster. He broke everyone eventually and George’s patience could only go so far.

Clenching his teeth, he could only see overlapping lines between his past and his present. The future was a mess of what-ifs. And the person, the young woman who he’d just shattered, had heard what he had wanted at some point in his twisted mind and read it as never being able to show her the devotion that she deserved.

She also had years of evidence on her own hands to analyze.

What had he done to come out other than just saying he had a boyfriend who he was emotionally and then physically attracted to? It had taken him years to admit the physical attraction part when he came to realize that he craved it; but in that case, he took it more as liking the affection and care the feelings brought. Was that why he had always been confused? Despite the too-many times when he couldn’t reach completion or had to pull away entirely to panic, the physical aspect of being with a person made him content; and for a long time, that person had been a man. He was in control and didn’t have to deal with the pulsing thoughts of the potential for causing harm. Liza really didn’t understand that it wasn’t just the anal sex part that brought him a, for him, relatively easy release into mutual pleasure. Fucking sometimes happened in different ways that he suddenly realized he missed but had no real compulsion to pursue again in that intimate way with another man. In his mind, he wanted to find out how he could touch and explore Rey’s body when she was ready for him to take the hurt away; there were always sensitive parts that he wanted to find and show her that sex wasn’t about power or hurt, but about being together in a warm and sensuous place of intimacy. But as long as she was struggling with these thoughts about his sexuality, he wasn’t going to touch her. He should have never touched her, to begin with. Kisses and hugs he could offer but until this was dealt with in its correct framework, rather than just him assuming it was something about the person he was with rather than his gender, there was no fairness in trying to show her that there was more to his hands than just instruments that had killed and had the power to kill again.

Because there were parts of being with a man that he didn’t enjoy to the extent he should have, from his own overly critical mind. It took him far too long to be able to touch Poe’s penis. It took him even longer to feel like he could blow him in a way that would show him that he was desired and loved in the way he felt when he went down on him. And never being able to let a partner fuck him from a mutual position of yearning had been an issue that he tended to lean hard on when it came to what he wanted to get out of being with a man.

So, Rey didn’t think of herself as desirable because she lacked the parts that she thought he wanted. And he’d been too wrapped up in trying to erase the past rather than deal with it.

She was beautiful and there were times that she’d turn her head to smile at her, that he felt the need
to do more than just hold her. Waking up to her almost every morning made it hard for him to balance both his sexual attraction to her and his panic about hurting or pressuring her before she was ready. And he’d already fucked that up by moving too fast to try to show her that he knew how to offer pleasure to someone female rather than just male. That was another part of the problem; he was busy trying to erase hurts and just created new ones by not telling her these things in softer and kinder ways that there was an attraction there. She should be able to touch him too without him panicking about what he was capable of.

Because he really had never hurt anyone in bed. There had been uncomfortable and awkward moments of backing off until things fit into place, but he’d come to learn that there was a certain patience when it came to sex. The dark thought of strangling Liza in that hotel bed had been the only time that he’d been really tempted to cause physical harm and that had come from being out of his mind.

Snoke had used the girls so harshly. And he’d never helped them. But he couldn’t change that; that’s what he’d always heard when it came to letting go of guilt. If anything, he’d helped them by trying to take care of them as best he could when they were alone.

*There’s your kindness, Ky. You’re not a monster. He was. Let him be dead again and keep going.*

Sighing again, he nodded. So Rey also thought a lot about what Liza had said. She had internalized it and probably touched on those feelings in connection with how she viewed him. In high school, they’d been called fag and homo even before they were together. He just dealt with it like he did everything back then and got into fights. But then, Poe had calmed him down and he didn’t have so much of that visceral anger any longer until he exploded and tied them together out of rage and misunderstanding.

He existed in a very macho field and part of that also brought him back to high school, also connected to the perennial heavy memories about being assaulted. Even if he liked to grind his thoughts into dust about whether or not he’d be straight if he hadn’t been raped, he’d been told many times that he was dealing with it in a healthier—albeit still toxic and often clueless—way than other victims of abuse. There were many people that they had to speak to who had lived through chronic abuse and never escaped the cycle of molesting and raping others in order to deal with their trauma in the only fraught way their poor minds could compute. And many of those individuals never found gratifying release through other avenues than just committing perpetual violence. There were many roads out there and recovering took time and energy and help; people without the love he’d had around him were the ones who were truly alone. He was just selfish.

He had to tell himself *again* that he didn’t fall into that category. There had only been one true moment in his life since he murdered Snoke when he wanted to kill someone and that had been fuelled purely by revenge. He sometimes wanted to harm suspects but always talked through those emotions with Maz, Owen, or George, trying to put that energy into more useful thoughts than just to counter violence with the same in turn. The cycle had to stop through justice for the victims rather than revenge on the accused.

The wealth of rage he felt towards the man who’d stalked and killed someone he loved would be dealt with when he reached that point. *If* he ever reached that point. What he was doing secretly would get uncovered eventually and he hoped to be ready to present his thoughts from a professional headspace rather than just distant conjecture stemming from vengeance. Maybe Hux was right and he had really just pursued this path for revenge. But he’d done a good job so far not letting that manifest in any form other than thoughts. The world was dark enough without him emerging with a head filled with the depth of his blackness to strike out at it because at the end of the day it felt so much better to be happy than to be angry all of the time.
So, Rey thought his most internal desires were meant only for males and he was never going to change. He had hoped that he’d shown her that he could improve himself but his fumbling and carelessness over the course of the last period of time had probably reset some of those thoughts in her head. But the most important thing he had to show her was that there was a longing in his heart for a deeper physical relationship with her that would be equal to them both. The pain she had felt in the past shouldn’t be there forever nor should the fear that he wanted something different from her than what she had to offer. It was the Liza problem again. Vaginal sex was different but so was anal sex with the two men he’d slept with. But the physical parts mattered less than him reconciling with himself that he had really been more than just queer in the past. Sleeping with one woman out of a place of hurt and then feeling desire for another woman from a place of just wanting to be loved didn’t exactly qualify him as bisexual either. Fuck, why had he just hated his courses on gender and argued so much about labels? Sometimes that’s how people saw the world, despite the fluidity of it.

Rey regretted falling in love with him because of his previous liaisons. Most likely because she thought he’d act on those tendencies again, given the next three things that she said.

She liked Grey and talked with him about a number of things not related to work. She had reached out to him for protection and he was forever thankful for his kindness that night. But he was also dumbfoundingly candid to a point of frustration. He couldn’t control what his friend said about him when they were alone. And now that she knew they had both come together in a heated moment that could have led somewhere different put a weight on her shoulders that she shouldn’t have to carry.

And he shouldn’t have said that he still thought about how hurt he felt about the first time that they came together. And he shouldn’t have allowed himself to drag Grey to work things because he had so many problems with the gender dynamics in his field. Getting under the skin of his more macho coworkers and avoiding the advances of their sexually frustrated wives was a stupid game that they had both enjoyed far too much. But he knew from the odd looks that Grey would throw him or the occasional touch that lasted for far too long, he cared about him in a different way. He took down the pictures and that sent him into a world of his own loss and feelings of abandonment. Not having a partner and feeling like he missed out on someone he thought was worthwhile were two of Grey’s biggest hurts, even if only dared to talk about the first one openly with him.

But when he said those words to Rey, they had come from when he had been younger and seeking affection, a what-if world that didn’t exist because he’d come back to it again out of a place of hurt and despair.

Rey had seen them together having easy conversations while he saved the complicated and overwhelming ones for her.

*Yeah, Ky, you fucked up there but honesty gets the ball rolling. Just don’t let it fall into the pit that you’re creating right now.*

It was probably why he’d confessed so quickly to George about what happened. He valued George’s guidance and understanding but now that he had an almost fully repaired relationship with his son, he would have more than likely began to have serious problems regarding how they would have treated one another. Even in the brief fights that they had had that weekend and the occasional argument that they had now over minor details of a friendship that Kylo leaned too heavily on, it would have probably been the same pattern again. He would have wanted to possess him. He wouldn’t have been able to have many of the conversations with him that had occurred over the years. It would have been falling into a comfortable rut that would have hurt another loving person and put his relationship with his mentor in serious jeopardy.
And at the end of it all, Grey knew that Kylo cared deeply about Rey.

If Rey left him, like she should, and he lost himself again, his friend would punch him in the face for, first, hurting her and, second, for treating him like some consolation prize that he just kept around at the first hint of trouble. He’s already done that once. That would put a permanent end to his bond with Rey and also the end to one of his most reliable friendships in a sea of superficial collegial affiliations.

That road didn’t lead to happiness. And he knew that Rey would care.

Her caring, her heart. Her genuine desire to be with him even as he kept putting her through hell after hell was true devotion. It wasn’t about possession but about finding a balance in someone else who lifted her heart. He had tried to find love elsewhere and in the end, he always came back to her. And now that he had a chance to explore a mutual, new type of love with her, he had complicated it by throwing so many unwoven thought threads at her the second he felt threatened by his own ability to cause harm in any way.

What did he want for the future? There were many parts of that and he decided to show himself some kindness and deal with the first aspect before dipping into the more difficult ones. He wanted to be successful in his career and not always be clouded by intrusive thoughts. His grip on that was slipping, making his ego even more fragile. But that career meant travelling and the constant possibility of danger in many forms. George’s marriages had never survived them and he was an infinitely more caring and kinder person than he could ever be. He had the patience to deal with him for the last fourteen years without ever truly snapping at him when he deserved it.

He wanted to keep his good relationship with his parents. They still frustrated him but as they got older, they would need him to take care of him in the same ways that they had shown him when he popped back from the dead, back into their lives with an unending world of hurt inside of him, along with a little girl who had her own demons trailing after her. Sure, George had talked him out of his plan for relocating them to Virginia, but he’d have to find more time to visit them in the time that they had left. Did he want a better relationship with Luke? He’d deal with that the next time he saw him. As far as he was concerned, he could go fuck himself. His nephew completed the FBI academy and he couldn’t even be bothered to reply with more than a card with dismissive words. Fine, whatever. Family was important but some members of his family didn’t exactly choose to be part of it anymore.

He needed to see Benji, Paige, and Hux more. He missed talking just to Paige. He really wanted just the two of them to come next month so he could spend time with his godson. Time was also running out there as well. He only spoke with Paige about children things rather than about their childhood. She had been his backbone for so many years before fading into being Hux’s girlfriend and then his wife. She had a good and deep relationship with Rey. She needed her friendship too. Hux would continue to be his outlet but he had to be better there too. He needed to make more time for that entire family.

And then there was the thing he cared the most about and had for the last eighteen years: Rey. She still looked pained in their bed, breathing deeply but still lingering in negative thoughts about herself because of the words that he’d said out of selfishness and floundering. They needed to be said but he could have found a more delicate and equal approach. He couldn’t take them back, but he had to give her a way to talk to him in the same way.

She cared about things in a different way than he did. When she was small and didn’t want to go on stage at her dance concerts because she was afraid of messing up, but also because someone else was sad that she couldn’t get her picture taken. Animals liked her more than they did him. He
should have told her that he already knew where to put the litter boxes (and that they were in the garage). She was artistic out of a real place. He needed to support her more there rather than hoping that she find a career as he did. The world needed artists more than it needed men trying to make up for their own failings by taking positions of authority. She loved children; he’d seen it and Grey had told him.

He used to think that he knew her well but there had been years that they’d drifted apart at times, coming together only briefly for holidays or celebrations, even though those could often be clouded by the baggage that he reluctantly kept carrying because he couldn’t fucking let things go. And her feelings for him grew in his absence.

She liked wearing dresses but felt more comfortable in jeans and a t-shirt, or one of his old sweaters. She just wanted to be close to him. And he wanted to be close to her too. She had a room in his house. Now, it was space for someone else.

She kept changing her interests because she still had so much of the world left out there for her. He worried for her but she should be able to pick what she wanted to be. She didn’t need him, George, or Grey telling her what to do.

She wanted to travel and see her friends. She should be able to go anywhere in the world and experience it without guilt. He’d seen more of the country than she had. He’d be holding her back if his fears for her travelling alone took over.

She missed the family that didn’t want her and didn’t want the family that did to change. He never understood why her grandparents didn’t want her. It was a nagging ache that he’d touch on when he’d speak with families who’d lost children, or just reviewed missing children’s reports. They’d do anything to get them back. The relationship with his own parents didn’t have to change, it just had to transform into a greater world of love.

But she had been so busy trying to keep him on track and stable that her dreams and goals were kept behind closed doors because he didn’t pay attention to what mattered most.

He had earned whatever happened that morning. Whatever she had to say to him would mean he’d really, fully succeeded in pushing away his first chance at real and true happiness.

Biting his lip, he wrapped himself around the lightening thought.

This unconditional devotion had always been there and he’d tried to push it away, not understanding what it was or would turn into. He’d been blinded by his ego, goals, and pursuits at happiness. He’d let them be torn apart for her own sake and coming back to her life had only put her in danger.

And still, when she was hurting, betrayed, and broken, she turned to him.

The shining like that had gotten him through over half of his time in hell had never lost faith in him even when he’d so many times lost that belief in himself.

Maybe this was Snoke’s ultimate torture, tying them together only because he knew he was weak and would tear them apart.

Staring up at the ceiling, he felt tears slip down his cheeks and quickly wiped them away. Why was he feeling sorry for himself? He’d fucking done this to himself.

He deserved the torment of hearing his work phone buzz to life. He snatched it up before it could wake her, stalking off and only catch a glimpse of the clock. 4 a.m.
“Yeah,” he whispered, silently shutting the door.

“Hey it’s me,” it was Owen. And he could hear him moving around in an instant. “I’m sorry for waking you.”

He cleared his throat. “It’s fine. What’s going on?”

“I know you’ve been following it, but those missing kids in Maryland, there’s been a third one taken. The local police are finally waking up to it not being domestic kidnappings.” Owen took a long and deep breath. “We need to come in and take a fresh look at this. And just because you poke around in things in what little spare time we have, this one is ours. Can I pick you up in an hour? We’re not letting the locals talk to the parents until we get there. Our guys are heading out to the scene.”

Leaning against the wall, he shrugged into nothingness. Faking it would have to do. “Of course. I’ll be ready.”

“See you in an hour then.”

Glancing at the door, he tentatively opened it again but he couldn’t step inside for a moment. He was just leaving her again.

But after what he’d said last night, he deserved to have the last of himself ripped away. If it was all gone, he’d be better at his job and that would be all he had left. He’d be less worried about how others saw him because the person who mattered most would finally hate him. He’d be dead again but at least he could help others instead of always hurting them.

Sucking in a breath, he rubbed the bridge of his awkward nose and moved into the room. Leaning over, he kissed her forehead, stirring her awake. She blinked up at him but didn’t pull away.

“Kylo? Are we leaving?”

He let his mouth go slack at the old, buried response, formed out of instinct. Again, he was rocked back to fourteen years ago when he’d been willing to give up his life for her but now he couldn’t get rid of the tatters of former relationships. “No, angel. I got called into work. I have to go and I know we promised we’d talk…”

Rey seemed to shake herself awake to where she was. Limply, she laid back down on the pillow. “It’s okay. I want to be alone today anyway.”

He sat on the bed and with a shaking hand, he touched her shoulder. “Rey…”

“I said it’s fine Kylo.” She glared at him sharply before turning over. “Can you tell Grey I don’t want to go in today? Can you do that for me?”

Pulling away he stood. He should fight for this. He should pour his heart out to her but it would only come out just as wrong as yesterday. Just as wrong as their entire time together. “I’ll do that. Rey, I don’t want to go.”

She was still. “I know. And I don’t want you to go. But I also need to be alone to think about what you said last night.”

“I don’t know when I’ll be back. But I’ll text or call you when I know.” *Will you be here when I get back?* 

“Okay.”
“I love you.” He tried to say the words clearly, the meaning thundering in his chest.

He earned the silence he got.

Staring for a few more stolen seconds, he finally turned to gather up what he needed from the room. He had a go-bag and grabbed it too. There was a chance he wouldn’t be coming home tonight. And he also was reminded how he used to want to keep his life in just one bag so it would be easier to move on. When did that stop mattering? He’d shower down the hall in the spare washroom. Five bedrooms. Two and a half baths. He had wanted a big fucking house after all.

He was good at showering and dressing quickly. The few mornings when he’d accidentally fall asleep after being up all night chasing worries had nearly made him late on many occasions.

He only stole a few seconds to drive his teeth into his arm.

By the time he was downstairs and turned the coffee pot on, he had half an hour left.

The first thing he did was go to the office, scanning through the hundreds of journals that lined the shelves on one side. He turned, looking at Rey’s half of the room. He never told her how much he thrived on watching her create art. He could get this part right. Even if he wouldn’t be able to do it with spoken words, what he’d written about her would be able to at least let her know she was cherished in ways that he was too inept to say to her face.

There was the one. The one from the last few months. He snatched it up and returned to the kitchen. He forced himself to eat a protein bar only because he’d need to get through the morning. Drinking his coffee, he picked up his personal phone and had to stare at her face for a long moment before he dialled his mother. As it rang he picked up the notepad from the counter and quickly started writing a note to Rey.

“Ben? Is something wrong? It’s very, very early.” Her voice was instantly panicked. Of course, it would be. Phones ringing in the middle of the night rarely meant good things.

“No, I just need to leave for work early.” He cradled the phone against his shoulder as he started scrawling the careful words on the piece of paper. The summer twilight still hadn’t dawned into the sun yet. “But Rey and I had an argument last night and I know that you talk to her every day but can you…check on how she’s doing for me?” He paused to inhale. “Mom, I fucked up.”

“Sweetheart, it’s early and you’re not thinking clearly yet. I’m sure it will be okay, but I’ll make sure she tells me the truth without really asking,” she answered, and he heard her settle back in bed. “Why were you arguing? About her staying? She’s been very set on it.”

He exhaled, pausing his pen for a moment. “It’s more than that…we wanted to wait to tell you when you got here but we’ve…we’ve been trying to have a relationship. A real one. And you know me. When don’t I fuck everything up?”

“Sweetheart, it’s early and you’re not thinking clearly yet. I’m sure it will be okay, but I’ll make sure she tells me the truth without really asking,” she answered, and he heard her settle back in bed. “Why were you arguing? About her staying? She’s been very set on it.”

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“Ben…” His mother was quiet for long enough that he was able to finish most of what he wanted to say. “Sweetie. We love you both. And I don’t want to ask…”

“Since June.” He sucked in a new wave of hurt. “She kissed me.”

“Oh, my poor loves. Ben, I hope you know that I never thought of you that way. But…I guess you get ‘fucking up’ from me because I sure blew that one.” She sounded flustered and he managed a small smirk. “We still love you both deeply. And if things are complicated right now, it’s because of how much you both have been through. Starting a new relationship, especially with someone you’ve known for so long, isn’t easy.”
“But I thought…I never wanted to hurt her, mom, and I did. I put all of myself out there and it’s just too much. I love her, mom. And if I don’t have her love anymore, who am I?” He numbly stared at the page, daring one of his tears to fall to smudge the ink.

“I think that you’ll always have that love. And you’ll still be our son and honey, you have so many good memories with her. Those won’t go away. You got her out of that house and gave her a home. She is still young and she can take on too much too quickly. And you can be very impulsive. I think you need to be patient with where you both want this to go.” His mother’s voice made him long for home. But she was so far away. Why did he do this to himself? “I won’t ask her about it unless she brings it up, okay?”

Biting his lip, he nodded. “Mom, how did you do it? How did you keep living for those seven years when I was dead?”

The deep exhale made him close his eyes. “We kept moving forward. But we gave ourselves time to mourn too. I’m so sorry that we got you back and you’ll never have him back. But don’t let yourself get caught up in missing him. He wouldn’t want you to be sad and alone for the rest of your life. And he loved her so much too. She needs you now, Ben. And you’re both dealing with everything that’s happened. It’s not your fault, honey.”

That last part was a giant lie, but he let her have it. “Okay. I love you, mom.”

“I love you too, Ben.”

He hung up and looked at his watch. He had five minutes to breathe. Leaving the note and the journal on the table, he moved out onto the deck to take in the fresh air. The rain from last night had left the world smelling fresh and new, a dawn that was taunting him with its possibilities.

But when he finished his coffee and was about to turn, he finally recognized where the cup was from. It was an old IKEA one, one from their old apartment.

Glaring hard at the mug, he turned and with all of his strength he shattered it against the edge of the deck. Stalking inside, he grabbed the four remaining mugs that had followed him over the last seven years and left them in pieces in the corner. Each one shattered into dozens of pieces, piling up into the remnants of broken promises.

He would have screamed but he saved it all into a ball inside of him.

*I hate you.* He mouthed, staring at the mess through his tears. *I hate you so much right now.*

Wiping his nose on his sleeve, he turned and locked the door from the inside. When he moved to add that he’d clean up the deck when he got home, he quirked at head at what he’d written. He wrote ‘Love always, Ben’ rather than Kylo.

It was too late to change it and he quickly scrawled the postscript at the bottom.

He grabbed his things by the door and took one last minute to take in the silence of his house before turning and deactivating the alarm, setting it to return to life when he was outside. He could keep her safe that way.

At least the case would give him something to turn to rather than what his thoughts had cost him.

Owen was waiting and only briefly raised his eyebrows at him when he got in the car. “I expected you to look exhausted. But not this agitated.”
He licked the front of his teeth. “I don’t like missing kids cases. That’s why I pay too much attention to them.”

A concerned look crossed his partner’s face but he hid it away in an instant. “I think we all are. There’s coffee for you here. We can discuss the particulars as we drive. It’ll take about two hours but we’ll at least be there when things are still remotely fresh. Get centred on this one and leave whatever you’re thinking at home, okay?”

He already had. “Thanks.” He took a long sip and then sighed. “What made this one different? I read those Missing Persons and they read like it was domestic, like most kidnappings.”

Owen put the car in motion and they were on their way, driving into the breaching dawn. He had enough to do at work, and enough to think about at home, but he still put his fingers into a few extra searchers and double checks. It was like everything; he really was obsessed with his own personal hurts. They should fire him too.

“Well, that’s how the sheriffs read it. Two homeschool kids with no real connections go missing? The families look a little shifty? Stranger coincidences have happened.”

Like Rey running away the same night Poe was murdered. “But what about the new child?”

He was already scrolling through his phone, trying to catch up. There was the report, in his email. He could follow at the same time Owen drove and filled him in with what he knew. “He’s not homeschooled. He goes to the local elementary school. He has tons of activities but his disappearance matches what the other two families said. He was just gone from the bed and the backdoor was wide open. But this time dad got up in the middle of the night to take a piss and saw that he was gone. We were on this one earlier because his father has prostate issues.”

He narrowed his eyes at the word and then scrolled down. “Please don’t tell me that they’re thinking cult. I haven’t been sleeping well and I…if I hear the word ‘Satanists’ it might make it hard to be professional.”

Pursing his lips, Owen shrugged. “Small town cops still get those ideas from time to time, but this one is ours so we can hopefully find this boy alive in the first forty-eight. Find them all.” A long pause followed and he knew what was coming and braced himself for it. “That’s two nights in a row.”

“I…” he sucked in a long breath. “Can I take a few minutes to talk about a problem? I already know the details of the first two boys.”

“I’m here for you, Kylo. And we have the drive.” Owen briefly glanced at him before snatching up his own travel mug. “I know it’s about Rey, but you can pretend that I might not already have a clue what you’re going to talk about. You were distant yesterday and came in looking exhausted and not your normal ‘I stayed up all night working overtime I won’t get asked to be paid for’ exhausted. Talk to me.”

He left his phone in his lap and took a long drink of coffee, willing himself to be really awake rather than just being driven by obsessive thoughts. “We’ve been trying to make this work. Or more like, she’s been trying to make it work. She wants to move here and just…her feelings for me, Owen, they could implode a star. She’s had eighteen years of me and now I think I’ve bent her too far.”

“I know that she knew a great deal about you and understood you from a very unique position the first time I met her,” his partner answered. “And I still owe her so many apologies for not keeping
you safe. I should have done the pat down.”

“And I should have double checked, it doesn’t matter.” He shrugged off the last part. “She used to know everything about me and then I…I just tried to follow a plan for my life that I wanted her to be a part of every step of the way. But so many things happened in between then and now. Fourteen years is a long time. And it never really felt so…long before.”

Owen nodded. “There’s a decade between you. That’s not an impossible age difference to overcome. You should talk more with George about this. But I guess, not if you want to figure out how to make it work.”

He sipped on his coffee before sighing. “I’ve been…I know. I think I’ve been avoiding him without really thinking about it. Maybe I thought for once in my life I could solve a problem without him having to hold my hand.”

“You’re doing it again, Kylo. There are many, many things that you have accomplished in your life that George had nothing to do with. I know all of this. I was one of your reviewers, if you pull your head out of your ass and remember. You can’t measure your life in all of the times that you asked for help rather than struggling.” Owen paused to glare at him. “But I’m assuming the age difference isn’t the main problem.”

He snorted. “You know my profile. I had to work hard in grad school to overcome many of my inabilities to work as a team, but I know I’m not a loner. I just prefer to be in control. And I’m still working on how to be wrong and accepting it, but I’m…now I’m not so confident I’ll get there, at least in my personal life. I basically interrogated her last night, Owen. I got only the answers I wanted or expected. I was exhausted and just kept hammering her with honesty and I want to believe that she’s stronger than this but I’m…stuck on why she would want to keep loving me after everything I said.”

Sighing, Owen turned towards the road. “You have a hard time being easy on yourself and other people. It works in an interrogation room, but not always in the bedroom. Give me the short version. We can’t walk in there and look unprepared.”

“I know.” He quickly sat up straighter. “The main problem is that I have a hard time letting go of things. I’m still worried that I’m capable of harming someone and I work on that every time I’m in therapy, especially after a hard case. But in a more intimate setting, it’s not about anger, it’s about being physically…overpowering. I need to let go and there’s a lot of fear attached to that for me.”

Owen nodded, telling him to keep going with a quirk of his head.

“And then there’s the hornets nest of my sexuality.” He sucked in a long breath. “I guess I never thought that anyone really cared about that but me.”

“We tend to get obsessed with ourselves. But at least your sort of obsessing doesn’t lead you to believe that everyone is always thinking about you.” Owen managed to quirk a smile.

The sun was finally starting to rise as they crossed into the next state. “My family accepted me as I was and I never really said anything about it. My mother was just worried that we would hurt one another and…we were always careful. I found other ways to hurt him. But that’s…I think that’s the part that Rey is hurting about, maybe more than everything else I’ve put out there. I was planning on asking her about it over breakfast or dinner, but it will have to wait. I’m almost half expecting to come home and she’ll have asked my parents to book her a ticket home and the ‘Keep out Kylo’ sign will be back up on the door. But the other half of me, the one that I think knows how truly strong she is, knows that she can think through this and will still be there. And it’s very hard for me
to have a positive thought at this moment, but she’s the only good thing in my life right now that involves someone who isn’t a murderer.”

“How would you label yourself? Pretend I’m Maz and trying to ask you a trick question just so I can get mad at you to feel superior.”

Smirking, Kylo turned his head at the joke before shaking his head. “I need to read more about this, to find an answer that fits. I argued all of the time in my gender studies classes about how labels only create barriers but that’s probably why I ended up with only A-minuses in those classes.” He closed his eyes for a moment, finally hitting the point of exhaustion that made his eyes hurt. “I have…romantic and sexual attraction to both men and women but only certain ones. I think this is what always bothered me about labels because it all boils people down to definitions and…”

“Please, I don’t want to have this argument again. I also know that Snoke did not fit cleanly into one of the four categories of serial killers. He crosses them all so that’s why he was impossible to profile.” Owen put his hand up briefly. “So I do understand where you are coming from. You’re also struggling if this is a nature or nurture response. Like if Carl Panzram hadn’t been gang-raped by hobos when he was a teenager, he wouldn’t have turned into an unimaginable predator. We broke that down in your psychological profile. Those things are hard to know, Kylo. You and I know that but maybe there are people out there with fewer degrees than we have and even less training who put things into terms that are easier for them to understand. All sexuality is complex. And you’re not a sexual deviant because you find attraction in different ways. You don’t need me telling you this. Everyone has porn that they’ve watched that they wouldn’t want their parents to find out about.”

He stared at the dashboard for a long moment. “Is it weird that I’ve watched more disturbing videos at work related to a case than I have pornography?”

Owen just blinked. “It’s only weird if you haven’t brought this up with your therapist.”

“I have.” He shrugged for a moment. “And she also thinks I need to expand my viewing horizons.”

Owen managed a light chuckle and then it fell into a frown. “Sometimes I forget that you never got a normal childhood or adolescence. If I didn’t know who Ben Solo was then you would have been just another recruit with potential and talent who George was touting for a bright future.”

He’d never say that George was wrong about something, but he was about to snap back at the response but kept it inside. “Sometimes I wish I was just Ben Solo. He wouldn’t have led a life like this.”

Sighing, his partner shook his head. “We’re made of our experiences. And just because you’ve experienced more than other people doesn’t make you wrong. And I don’t think that Rey thinks you’re a terrible person because you’re bisexual. She might be worried that being female might not fill some need that you have but that will come down to you talking about it like we’re talking about it now. It’s like in some of your reports. You go into too much detail about something that only you think is important that no one will read but George or me. You’ve had past relationships with the same gender. Fine. Do you maybe think about them too often? I think that’s the bigger problem. But, Kylo, for fuck’s sake, this is a new relationship. You both can’t walk around being miserable because you’re both waiting for the other shoe to drop and the next secret to be revealed. You’re not sleeping and probably putting all of the pressure on Gregor to take care of her while you’re at work. It’s not very good.”

Oh shit Grey. “It’s…it’s something that I want to work. I need this to work before I lose myself. I think I started a conversation last night that came off wrong, but it’s one that I want to continue.” If
I get the chance. “Thank you. I just remembered I need to make a phone call and then…then we’re talking about the case.”

“Do what you need to do.”

Kylo stared at him for a moment before pulling his personal phone from his jacket pocket. Grey was still asleep, probably. But it was worth a shot. He should apologize in advance to him for bringing him into the ranting he’d done from last night. Hitting dial, he waited.

“Fuck you for waking me up. I just got back to sleep after dad was stomping around.”

Fuck you right back was his natural response, but he held it back. “I’m sorry. Rey can’t come in today. She told me to tell you she’s sick.”

“You guys argued again. Shit, Ky, I’m sorry. I know you must be already on the road. I heard dad take about a dozen calls…whenever…too early ago. He fucking paces by my room and…” Grey took a deep breath and sighed. “Sorry, I’ve been a shitty mood since, yeah. You know. Want me to go check on her anyway? See if there’s anything I can talk to her about?”

He winced. “Maybe not. Your name might have come up last night. I’d…I’d appreciate it if you could…”

“Pretend like she’s actually sick. Kay, Ky. Couldn’t be clearer.” Gregor’s voice sounded like he’d clenched his teeth for the last part, but it was hard to tell. “Look, just stay safe, man. We can catch up soon and you can spill your guts.”

“Thanks, Grey. Bye.”

“Yeah, bye.”

He hung up and tucked his phone away. Turning back to his lap, he started scanning through the bulletin and turned his mind back onto the fact that there were three lives in danger and he’d been tasked with finding who might be responsible. And he had a partner with him who had managed to balance out some of his more difficult thoughts in a way that he might be able to handle the morning from the perspective of someone who had a grasp on his job rather than someone who constantly floundered in his private life.

Even as they began talking about the case, and the possible connections between the three boys, he found that he could change his focus more towards the prospect of finding who might have taken them rather than struggling with something he ultimately couldn’t change at that moment. He’d said what he said and he couldn’t take it back. The only hope was that Rey would read the journal and follow what he’d written in the note. There were so many more of his thoughts written down than his head could manage to contain and manifest in words in any rational way.

He also told her that he’d understand if she decided that she didn’t want to hear more of his thoughts, especially if he wasn’t giving her the right space to let her air her own. But he also knew how strong she was and he tried to remind her of that.

Pulling up to the sheriff’s station, he fixed the badge on his belt outside of the car before smoothing his hair.

“Good, now just stop clenching your jaw and you might come off as somewhat presentable.” Owen looked at him with raised eyebrows.

He managed to soften his face to at least a neutral look and met his partner’s expression with one of
his own. “Do you want me to crawl in on my knees so you’re taller for once too?”

Owen openly grinned at him before shaking off the look. “At least you’re with me now. I really can’t do this without you. We have the parents, and then we check in at the scene. And then we have the next two families. This will be a very long day, Kylo. And I don’t want to remind you to eat at lunch.”

Lifting himself up to his full height, he looked down at his partner and nodded. “You won’t have to. Today is today. Yesterday is what it is and tomorrow can wait for now.”

“For now,” Owen said.

Both of their heads snapped when they heard approaching footsteps. The deputy quickly introduced himself and thanked them for coming. Even as he presented himself, it felt a little less fraudulent to show himself as Ben Solo. These cops had no idea who he was. They were more focused on the core of solving three disappearances that hadn’t turned into homicides. And all of them hoped that it wouldn’t take that turn with the discovery of a body.

But even the brief drive through the town had told Kylo a lot about where they were. It was a town with many churches. It was large enough that the families, at least on the surface, had no connections. The fact that the first two boys were homeschooled wasn’t a surprise. In one of his spare moments on Monday, mostly in the morning when he was trying not to stare out into space and needed to appear busy, he’d found the two reports in his usual list of common recent missing or murdered persons’ reports. His ViCAP searches weren’t unusual for his department, but some of the older ones were probably going to get him attention.

He had thought it was weird to see two abductions so close together, the week they’d been away. He was almost daring himself to fall into the trap he set for himself but he tried to listen to the information the deputy was giving them as they entered the station, being led towards a back room. Fuck, it had been unfair to make the family wait so long for them to be there. They had been forced out of their home the second FBI procedure had taken hold. Being so close to the headquarters had both its advantages and disadvantages. Pushing down his negative thoughts about himself into a box he could deal with later, he had to believe that he was there for a reason.

They were a young couple and their son was only six. Graham.

“Mr. and Mrs. Stevenson, we appreciate you willing to wait so long for us to get here.” Owen took the lead. It was his role. “I’m SSA Kenobi. This is my partner, Special Agent Solo. How are you doing?”

Owen gestured at the chairs the couple had risen from and they nervously took them again. The rings under their eyes matched how he felt inside and again he had to punch down his evil inner voices. Instead, he met the couples’ eyes and took in how they were feeling with only a simple study of their faces.

And slowly, the story of Graham was brought to life by Seth and Kennedy. But there were details there that made his ears perk up as he wrote them down. Graham had been withdrawn the last few weeks. The normally bubbly and happy boy was nervous and worried, blinking more and giving away something that they hadn’t gotten around to asking about. And then Seth got up in the middle of the night and the boy who they had tucked into bed was suddenly gone.

“He’s…he doesn’t run away. He’s never done that.” Seth looked at his hands, brown eyes focused on his jeans. The silver in his beard was strange to Kylo; they were the same age and he looked so much older. The fact that he could be a father at that point too rolled through Kylo and he had to
shake it off. It lingered for a shuddering moment: going to the park, like he did with Benji, laughing and teaching him to climb a tree while someone who he loved took pictures of the special moment. When he turned, in his mind the usual person pictured there shimmered into Rey and he had to cough into his sleeve to cover up the urge to cry.

“We need to know where he likes to go or where he usually go. If there was no sign of something bad happening, he might have known who he was leaving with. There are two other families we need to talk to, but finding those places and understanding how the people there might overlap is part of what we’re going to do. This is part of what we call building a profile. Getting to know your son will help us find who took him.” Owen had his hands clasped together, with his shoulders relaxed. Compassion surrounded the man, a type of caring that he lacked. It was better that he talked.

And, like he was reading his mind, Owen turned to him. He briefly narrowed his eyes, warning him not to make promises.

“We’re very familiar with these types of cases. When we know how it happened, we’ll be able to work out why it happened.” Kylo’s voice was steadier than he expected it to be. “We’re going to go through your house next. Can you tell us if there’s anything there we need to worry about?”

Seth looked at Kennedy then back at him. He knew how he came off to people. The intensity in his eyes, framed by the constant scar, wasn’t the same gentle face from Owen and his sandy beard.

“You mean, like, stuff that would make us look like suspects?”

“I mean exactly the stuff that you’re thinking about.” Too severe again. But that’s who he was. Might as well accept it, along with the dark look from Owen.

“There’s…” Kennedy started before blushing. “There are some videos on the computer of us. Graham wasn’t even born yet when we made them. We used to watch them but he came along and…it’s like watching other people now.”

“What does his computer access look like?” Owen took over, making her turn.

“He has his own, whatever, profile. We log him in and he can’t get onto the Internet without us helping him. He plays games with his friends. He watches kids’ stuff. Are you going to look at all this?” Seth asked as they both nodded. That part made him sigh. “I was looking up some stuff for work recently. I’m in construction and we were working on a renovation and there was this strange smell. Maybe I had a little too much to drink, but I looked up what a dead body smelled like. It turns out it was just a dead cat in the walls. You...you guys can look that up.”

Owen turned for a moment to look at him, but Kylo still nodded. “We believe you. But we will have to check on this. We need to tear apart your lives in order to show that someone else took your son. We...we are sorry for that.”

Kylo almost felt like correcting his partner. Maybe he was wearing off on him, saying the things that they shouldn’t. Or maybe he was trying to see the cracks there. How they reacted might reflect hidden guilt. They both did look devastated, scared and shaken. Wrenched back to the past again, he imagined his parents sitting there, telling the police that someone took their son. He hadn’t just run off. They hadn’t done anything to him. He was just gone. Biting the inside of his mouth, he had to stop seeing Han and Leia sitting there. How his father probably hadn’t shaved at all at that point and missed work for the first time in his life. How his mother’s hair would be loose on her shoulders, like Kennedy’s auburn hair was. Unshowered, grimy pain.

These people had nothing to do with their son’s disappearance. But their answers could help lead
them to who did.

They went through more of who Graham’s friends were and what activities he had. They’d have to cross-reference everything with the other two families. There might be some spot that they hadn’t thought about when there were only two disappearances. Third time’s the charm, he thought bitterly.

They shook hands and then had to leave for the crime scene, guided by a patrol car. Scratching his throat, Kylo sighed when they were alone again.

“I believe them. Fully,” he said before turning to his notepad again. “But there are too many places to check.”

Nodding, Owen turned, following the cop car head of them. “We can narrow it down once we get to our next interviews and spread them out to the cops and volunteers looking for them. I’m hoping that the other boys haven’t been to too many of the same places. It’s still summer. Boys play baseball and go swimming. There might be common friends that we haven’t found yet even if they don’t know the others.”

Glancing out the window, Kylo licked his lips. “Kids don’t care about who’s who. You’re just another kid and you want someone to play with.”

Flicking pebbles at Hux. Reading under a tree with him, flipping through comic books. Riding their bikes too fast down a hill.

And then there were no more of those soft memories. That summer ended before it began.

Standing at the edge of the yard, Kylo caught the outline of the same playground set he’d just ordered in their backyard and grit his teeth. He had to stop reading things into the case that weren’t there.

“Get the gloves.” Owen gestured with his head. “I don’t think we need to go in there with full coverings, but they’ll have it if we need it.”

Opening the compartment, Kylo handed his partner the plastic hand coverings. “I don’t think he came into the house. I don’t know why I think that. But I think he said something to him and got him to come outside.”

The words made Owen shake his head. “Then what we have to do just got a lot harder.”

Stepping into a crime scene should never feel routine. They were always unique with hidden meanings and even more obscured pasts that were only there to be deconstructed and reconstructed. With their feet and hands covered, they stepped across the police tape and entered into understanding another world. It was a small home. Two bedrooms, one bathroom. No basement. The living room still had the family computer in it. Graham would probably get a computer of his own when he was older. But right now, he was only six.

The living room didn’t seem to tell him more than they were just a normal family. The boy’s bedroom would tell them more.

A tech was going over the unmade bed when they stepped into the room. It was a boy’s room and he saw himself in every echo.

Pyjamas on the floor. Figures on the dresser. Scribbled drawings on the walls: *mommy, daddy, and me.* And the tiniest figure wasn’t smiling like the others.
Swallowing, he tried to get to know this boy rather than the boy he’d been.

He was a kid who got distracted. They’d heard that much this morning. His trouble focusing at school meant that they needed to approach it in a new way. There was an appointment made to get him the help that he needed. But it was a change that had only recently happened over the summer.

“Busy kid,” Owen said, stepping around to look at the various trophies on the shelves. “Soccer and baseball. Swimming too.”

Kylo wanted to reply about how much he had sucked at soccer but just nodded. Tilting his head, he studied the bed. It had been stripped and taken into the lab. He still noticed the stain.

“They didn’t say anything about bedwetting.” He didn’t smell anything. They’d tried to clean it. And probably were thinking about a new mattress. “We need to talk to them again if it was a change in behaviour.”

Kneeling, he looked under the bed. He used to put his backpack there when he’d had a bad day. Now, he was mostly teaching Benji how to hide under a bed and not make a sound. Like with Rey and the cupboard game, he needed to be prepared for the worst even if it never came.

There were mostly balls of dust, but there was also something else. A stone. Smooth and flat. He called the tech over and asked if it had been photographed. Everything had. He could take it now.

Rising to his feet, he lifted the stone in Owen’s direction before it went into an evidence bag. “This is something.”

“It could also just be a rock.” Owen nodded, but still kept them open for other possibilities.

“If he’s starting a rock collection, there would be more.” He let the tech take the bag and took in the room again, trying to keep his eyes fresh. “Let’s go through the rest of the house and see if we find more rocks.”

There were no other rocks or stones. There was just a home. They’d know more by the end of the day and how to move forward. Ruling out the parents was important at this point. The other parents had been looked at too harshly. And it was almost time to go and try to undo some of that damage. He managed to take a moment too look at a family picture and truly take in how Graham looked. He had his mother’s hair and his father’s eyes. He was just a kid. What would make him want to get out of bed in the middle of the night and go with someone?

One family down, two more to go.

He needed more coffee.

And they were offered some at the next house. But also presented with new problems to put into the bigger picture.

The Applehoffs were a different family. And Callum wasn’t their only child. They had six other kids, all older. And Callum’s brothers had made it hard to get answers now almost a week later from his room when it came to forensics. Part of what stood out for him when he scanned the missing person’s report was how dismissive it was. Now, he and Owen had to look deeper. The cops had just scratched the surface.

Talking to the assembled family, it was an identical story. Cal got up in the middle of the night, his older brother said, and left. The cops initially thought it was the parents and didn’t think twice that they were making the other kids lie. The way they were dressed, flowing dresses and neat
sweaters, made it hard to look into how much they cared about their missing family member. It was still a family on edge, worried and only barely holding things together. Cal didn’t have sports; he was a smaller boy who enjoyed colouring. He had church groups and playgroups, but at that point, none of the names matched. He hated not finding the connections early on.

He didn’t ask Owen ahead of time, but he kept driving at the idea in his head. “This might sound strange, but has he been going around with a stone lately? Maybe you found it somewhere?”

Mrs. Applehoff sat back, looking for a long moment at her husband. “He came home with it from the park. He said it was special.”

He could finally look at Owen again, almost daring to raise his eyebrows. “Do you have it?”

Nodding, the woman’s husband stood. “I can show you where it is.”

So now they had another stone in another evidence bag.

And what were they going to do with it?

Sitting in the car, Owen pressed his hand against his eyes. “Are you going to ask about the stone the moment we step into the next family’s door?”

He smirked, a moment of levity. “I was thinking about it.”

Looking up the next address, Owen still shook his head. “We’re getting lunch after this. It will be worth taking half an hour to sort out these thoughts. Silla has book club tonight and hasn’t read the book. I’ll need to talk her into actually going. And then we’ll get back into this.”

He wanted it. He needed to call Rey and see if she’d answer. It’s been almost seven hours since he left her. He knew his parents must have called her at that point. And Grey would have found a way to talk to her too. He’d probably ruined the hopes of friendship between them too. Like with Poe, she would probably explode at him for just existing in his thoughts and it would again be his fault. Maybe part of his friendship with Grey was an extended apology to Poe: I’m sorry I couldn’t let you go and stay your friend and that’s what got you killed. But he’d proven to himself he could sit in the same room as someone that he’d felt a hard and fast flame of attraction for and not crumble inside and beg him to take him back. And if Grey hadn’t been Grey, he’d be in a different world of hurt right now. He’d never cheat on Rey. But would he have cheated on Grey, if her feelings had taken this route too? No. He wouldn’t have been able to. And that would have been just as big of a disaster as his life was now. Rey needed someone who loved her with clarity and all of that had only hit him fully that morning. If she left him, he knew he’d flail and force Grey to turn him down again and…

He was doing it again. Repeating his thoughts into infinity.

Everything good? He texted him, wanting to wait until they had their break to call Rey.

its all good. i talked to rey. shes pretty pissed at u. but shes still there.

Thank God. Thank you Grey. You are a good friend.

;) hows things with the cse? U bust any heads yet?

No. But things are moving forward. I will talk to you later.

;) B safe.
Sighing to Owen, he took in the new neighbourhood and frowned. “There must be something at the centre of town that connects all of this. There don’t shop at the same stores, but everyone in towns like this eventually do cross paths.”

His partner rubbed his beard. “We can work through the geographic profile in the afternoon. My main hope right now is that we haven’t found a body. And he’s still close by. He could just be coming into town but we need to narrow down how he found them all. There’s planning here. It’s frustrating but easier than if we had nothing. Are you doing okay?”

He shrugged. It was useless to try to hide it. “I’m tired. But it’s fine. Gregor is looking out for her. I owe him several bottles of bourbon after this.”

“Let’s hope we can wrap this up quickly.” Owen turned to him, sighing before looking beyond him at the next house. “I’ll call her tonight too. We haven’t talked in a while. It will only look slightly suspicious. But I’m so…I’ve known Gregor for most of his adult life and it amazes me how he’s turned things around. If he can talk to Rey then he’ll give her good advice. And I wouldn’t have said that four years ago.”

“If he could stop logging into my account when he’s at my house, I’d think he had everything figured out.” Even as he spoke, he pushed slightly into the what-if world. But trying to picture himself with Grey now felt rotten and wrong. He’d rather spend time with him building a friendship that would last the rest of their lives. His parents weren’t going to live forever. Neither was George. One day in the future, it would all be left to just them. And if Rey was leaving, he’d need his friend even more. And he had a hard time knowing what he wanted, let alone how Grey would react. He’d probably punch him. That what-if world was truly gone now. How was he going to tell Rey that it was just that?

He could live with never having sex again. He was twenty-eight but also endlessly obstinate. Sex had only ruined his life and he didn’t want to touch it again at that point with anyone but her. He had learned so much about himself when he was younger as he tried to break so many fears. He wanted to be that caring partner. Even if he never found out who really killed him, he could use what he’d taught him if he ever got the chance. But that world was almost becoming a what-if and he was in another state, far enough away to remind himself that the world was too big to ever really understand fully.

“Let’s go talk to them,” Owen finally said, breaking his sudden rush of thoughts.

And then they were in another house, having milk instead of coffee or tea. He really was going to fall asleep on his feet if he didn’t do something about this soon. Even in the car, he’d already started chewing on his cuticle again. He had to stop that when sitting with the family but he knew that people looked at his hands; he was always looking at theirs.

But the Halls told them about Porter and how he was just a normal six year old. But their religion was even more apparent there than at the previous home. There was no television. There were no books. There was a computer but it was only there because of Alan Hall’s work; it was a laptop that, according to them, no one else touched accept him. Jenny Hall didn’t work. She just took care of their five children. It was a loving home, Kylo recognized. But again, the local police had almost classified them as being in a cult. And cults meant abuse. And abuse meant…

He pulled himself out of the chain of thinking and took in what they were saying before he fell fully into his conclusions. He also needed to talk to Owen about all of this. Comparing notes. They were always good at that. He almost didn’t mind Owen’s complaints about how overly detailed his reports were; he was just being honest.
In college, he trusted Hux to read his papers. But he never let Poe look at them. Instead, he’d ask to look over his work.

Not now. Not right now, please.

Back to the case.

So two of the taken children had been the youngest of bigger families. And the third had been an only child. In the studies he’d read in school and in his spare time, he knew that there were many similarities between children in those groups. Only children could act both as the baby of the family, but also bearing the trying nature of the oldest child. He’d been an only child and so had Hux; when they were small, they called one another brothers and at this point, he was. Before his mother remarried, so had Poe; with how their parents marriage worked, he was glad that he didn’t have someone younger to worry about but wished there had been someone older to protect him. Liza was also an only child, getting everything she wanted from her father. Paige was the only one in their group who had to share her space with a little sister. And she had always been kind and open, only complaining a few times about having someone else take up her parents’ time. He remembered Rose and Paige during the wedding and wished he had more pictures on his phone. He knew he had many pictures with just them. When was the last time he said more than two words to Rose and that other girl? He really was only obsessed with himself.

And then there was Rey.

She had always hated when someone called him her brother when she was younger. And he’d never blamed her. He’d never thought of her that way but he’d acted like it anyway, at least to those around them. Like with his sexuality, people had their opinions and beliefs based on initial meetings. No one had ever asked her if she wanted their last name. He knew her last name; in his other spare-time searches, he would check if anything came up about them. They had been quiet. If that idiot journalist wanted a real story, he should go to them. They would have to go back one day. George paid for those graves. Someone should visit them. Rey needed to understand her past but in a healthy way. She should never blame herself for how her parents died. They never meant to give her into a world of hell; he was the one who’d kept it alive even when they thought that they’d escaped from it.

But what about his house? It was still another question for his parents: why not have another child to fill their ache with him being gone? He’d never thought about that when he was in captivity. To him at that time, his parents remained static in his head, in their world. They weren’t looking for him and were only glad that he was gone. But he’d been so wrong about that.

Don’t be triggered. Focus on the case. Get back to reality.

This boy had his own room. It had really only been less than a week since he vanished and their team would be there to pick things over but Kylo really did think that they wouldn’t get much out of the shared space. Others had been in there. He’d seen it in the mother’s eyes. It made him think about his own mother, imagining her in his room the day he disappeared. Her hair would be down and all she had to hug was a pillow. At least this boy slept with stuffed animals, a tiny tiger that was still sitting there, waiting for him. He’d never made that connection; he had toys but never wanted something he’d probably end up losing or forgetting. He was already a weird kid before he was taken, he thought as he took in the room.

When he lifted the pillow, he turned to Owen. “Can I show you something without bragging?”

Turning from looking at the dresser, Owen’s face fell for a moment before reluctant acceptance occupied the empty space. “I guess we’re looking for a geologist at this point.”
Taking the new stone into an evidence bag, Kylo wanted to feel good about being right. He wanted to laugh at the joke to break the awkward tension of finding someone hunting and likely hurting children with equal humour to stop the darkness. But at that point, the world was just static and dark. The only thing good was that he’d made a good deduction.

A call to the station. A call in to George. Further calls to the forensics team. There were fingerprints on the other stones. They were checking them now from what they had on record. Even as they got the news, it was an obvious fact that the person doing this had probably not been stopped for anything before. Because that would be their afternoon—going down the list of registered sex offenders.

The few minutes he spent telling George what they’d found had been too quick. The older man did remind him that the job wasn’t done, but he’d found something that had been overlooked. He guessed that George would wait to say he’d done a good job when he’d actually completed the task. There was no winning; it was more about not losing.

After sitting at a small diner with Owen to at least make his order, he finally excused himself to call Rey.

He just got endless ringing.

He stood outside and yearned for a cigarette but settled for biting his arm through his clothes.

If he didn’t eat, he’d be scolded like the child he was. But his stomach was a rock. It felt empty and full at the same time. He poked at what he’d ordered and didn’t want it anymore. But he still ate as Owen talked about everything but the case. They had a break. They could use it to be humans for a short time.

Eyeing the people around them, Kylo kept cutting into his pasta and narrowed his eyes. “I don’t understand why people aren’t more worried here.”

None of the conversations around them were about the missing children. It was a chilling realization and he saw the same reaction in his partner’s eyes.

“They’re dealing with shock,” Owen said before he sighed. “If we went somewhere else, we might see a different reaction. It’s not that strange but I don’t like it either. But where is your mind going? We have the stones and we will get fingerprints.”

He was starting to doubt himself even as he partner told him otherwise. It was good to hear. At least he was doing something right. “We need to sit down and work out how their lives overlap. And go back and talk to them again. The bedwetting thing bothered me.”

Owen took a deep breath, finished with his lunch but still playing with his water glass. “It could be unrelated. But we need to rule it out. Kylo, this case is already getting to you. I can see it. There’s no shame in stepping back. If your personal life is…”

Kylo wanted to slam the table but settled for gripping it instead. “I’m just tired, Owen. After we’ve gone through everything this afternoon, I’ll be back to myself.”

Had he been thinking about how both he and Rey had never wet the bed? Was he thinking about how he still liked animals and never imagined hurting them? How he never started fires but had secretly enjoyed watching Poe burn those envelopes when he was younger but now regretted how almost all of them were ash because he couldn’t help himself from trying to take over every aspect of Poe’s life. He was a monster in a different way even if he didn’t fit nicely into the so-called
serial killer triangle.

Getting back to the station, the panic that he felt lacking from the diner was there in full force by those sworn to protect the most vulnerable members of society.

And even if he’d had years of it, it was still strange to be addressed with respect for his ideas and suspicions. He’d be staring at the map of the town when an officer would come up to him with a question or a theory. Owen was the one in control but he stood out in a different way from his more-controlled and confident partner. No one in that room, aside from Owen, knew what was going on in his head. Having a permanent frown made him look focused but he was far from it.

Did they want to stir up more media attention was one question that kept coming up. People needed to watch out for their children. Do it. It’s what they’d decided. They didn’t need to loom over their children’s beds but at least know what went on at night when they went to bed.

He had another cup of bad coffee and the day kept going. Even as he was answering questions, he was drifting into doubting himself. But answering questions about the case was easier than looking inside of himself again. Are you still gay? Well, he never had been. So what.

More interviews with the families. More coffee. More writing everything down so it would be documented. Looking at his handwriting, neatly written lines with careful loops, he silently hoped that Rey was okay and had at least thought about his note. He had put so much of his heart into it he’d actually written Ben without thinking about it. Breaking down what that meant would take up much of his next therapy session. She had every right to be angry and upset with him. She needed to take the time she needed. If he was away for long enough maybe it would make it easier for her to leave.

By the time evening settled around them, he wasn’t really tired anymore. If he stopped moving and thinking, it would catch up with him but he didn’t deserve to sleep at that point.

It would be nice to go home, but the travel time meant that they’d lose more than they’d gain.

They got a room at a motel and brought most of the case with them. It was still an ongoing and changing situation, but the list of sex offenders was in their hands and would be on their list for Wednesday. Because it was still Tuesday, right? He didn’t even know anymore.

Sitting on his bed, he rubbed his eyes. Dingy motel rooms always rattled his heart. He should have never said he hated him. He shouldn’t have broken all of those mugs. They had been his too and he’d destroyed them. It was a confusing and annoying thought. Rey missed him too, but she had never really let him go either. What was he supposed to do to prove to her that he could love her but still be able to mourn him? That was another problem for another time, which he would probably never get to. “It’s a long list of people to talk to tomorrow.”

Nodding, Owen sighed. “It’s always a long list. But we can narrow it down by profiling. There are people we can rule out instantly, but we still need to talk to them. And all of the boys were acting strange leading up to vanishing. There’s the possibility for grooming behaviour, as if he’s been in their lives and gaining their trust to get them to leave like they did.” He folded his arms, looking as tired as he felt. “I’m going to go pick up something for dinner. Sandwiches or something. Do you want your usual?”

He smirked, even if it felt hollow. “Dark bread with just a little mustard.”

Owen was also leaving so he’d have time alone. They both wanted it. He’d often see his partner taking walks during breaks at the office or in the field. He also had problems and thoughts that he
kept to himself at times. Like with everyone, he never listened when his partner needed him.

Alone, he tried calling Rey again. She didn’t answer so he had to text her that they were staying there that night. She could call Grey or George if she needed anything. She wasn’t alone. He missed her. He loved her.

But not getting a response made the length of the day settle even heavier around him.

So he called his parents.

“How are you doing son?” His father must be sitting in the living room. He could almost hear his chair. “The cat says hello.”

“He can’t talk, dad. And he probably just wants more treats.” He undressed as he spoke, planning on showering once he was done. It was late but time had stopped making sense. Minutes seemed to drag on but hours skipped by. He hated losing time. It meant he wasn’t centred. “I’ve been better. We’re not even close to finding out who did this. We left the nightshift to work on it so we can… rest.”

“You’ve got to get some sleep. You sound worn out.” Han sighed and Kylo winced to himself. “But I get what’s going on. We’re going to have to talk about this as a family, but we just want the two of you to be happy, Ben. We talked to her today. She’s…I don’t think angry is really the right word. She didn’t say anything about your relationship, just that she’s tired of you hurting her.”

Squeezing his eyes shut, he willed time to stop so he could reverse it.

“I put a lot of things out there. I forget sometimes that she’s only eighteen. I was a moron when I was eighteen and that still hasn’t changed.” Instead of resting on the bed, he kept moving, laying out his suit so it wasn’t wrinkled the next morning. He couldn’t get it laundered in time but he might have to iron it the next morning. He really was a pretentious fucking asshole, thinking about how he looked right then. Sucking in air through his nose, he gripped the chair he’d just used to hold his suit. “But please keep checking on her for me. I can’t…I can’t do anything that feels right now, dad. She’s not answering my calls or texts. So I’m worried and there’s nothing I can do to change that fear. I need to work and I feel so bad about all of the times that I hated you for working when I just wanted to be with you.”

The words had seemed to come out of nowhere. He’d been thinking too much lately.

“Ben. Son. We both know we can’t change what we’ve done. I lost you for seven years and I’ve almost lost you so many times since then. But it is hard. I worked hard so I could give you a future. And then you were gone. Now that you’re not living here anymore, I think about this, you know? I go into your room and just think ‘what if you never came back?’ Your mother and I would have survived but it wouldn’t have…I don’t know. See? You get your rambling from me.” He could hear his father smiling but he still sighed, picking at a scratch he didn’t remember getting on his thigh.

“If I lose her, dad, all I’ll have is my job. And even with what I’m doing, I don’t really feel like I’m good enough. Owen’s doing everything right now and I’m just…there.” He drew blood and kept scratching.

“You are good at what you do. Don’t stop believing that and don’t put yourself down. And with Rey…she’s mature and then she’s not. She’s happy and then she’s not. And we love her every second of it. Kylo, we’re not going to stop loving either of you. I don’t even remember what it’s like to be in a new relationship but your mother and I argued all of the time when we got together. I
thought she was a spoiled princess and she thought I had everything figured out. We’re just people. Give her some time. We’ll keep talking to her. That Finn kid hurt her in a way you’d never do. And we can’t wait to see you both again at the end of the month. Try to get some sleep tonight. I know you have a long day ahead of you tomorrow.” It was a long talk and he finally stopped scratching.

He tried to believe his father’s words and wanted to promise that he was going to sleep that night. Looking at himself in the mirror, he realized he was in the washroom. He could only meet his own eyes for a few seconds before he had to turn away. So he said goodbye and took a quick shower. He mostly did it so he could attack his bicep. Every hurtful word from almost twenty-four hours ago pressed on him and he turned it into a rage against himself.

But he still surprised himself that he broke the skin.

Staring at the small droplets of blood as they faded in the rush of water, he knew he was going too far again. It had to stop but he knew it wouldn’t until he could walk back into his house again.

So he had to push it away again. He had to stop thinking like himself and think like someone who had a goal of luring children out of their homes in the middle of the night. What would he promise them? They were six and seven-year-old boys so that didn’t narrow it down. Two of them were sheltered with too many siblings and the third was used to getting attention. When he was seven, the promise had been to get away from parents who he thought hated him. Remembering the pain in his father’s voice made him bite harshly again. He finally pulled back, huffed to himself and turned off the shower. The case. The case. It could be something as simple as that: pressing on their fears rather than offering presents or treats.

But where would he meet them all? He dried off and put on a loose pair of sweat pants and a long-sleeved shirt. He was so deeply thankful that his past self had packed something concealing. But his current self finally starting rolling back into the details he’d received in the hours he’d been there. They had some spots narrowed down. Divide the tasks of interviewing the local paedophiles and then survey the possible overlapping sites. Parks. Playgrounds. All of it was outdoors in the open. Those were places that were supposed to be safe. Parking lots were also supposed to be that way too…

He did keep his promise and ate that night. His partner returned and he managed to smile twice as they both sat on their beds and ate sandwiches. His meal tasted like nothing, but he still gave his body what it needed. He tried to make conversation with Owen, remembering that they had other mutual interests. But he could see the look in his partner’s eyes that he knew something was still bothering him. At least he was trying. Trying was one step closer to being better.

But he didn’t sleep that night.

The lights were out. The room was quiet.

And he just couldn’t.

His body was resting, but the intensity of his thoughts kept building as the hours slipped by. They’d ebb and flow from the past to the present, blocking any plans he could make for the future. He wanted to write out those thoughts but if the lamp was on then Owen would know that he was struggling.

Maybe he was just one of those people that always looked exhausted. He could come off that way around the other officers working with them. As long as he didn’t let his tiredness bleed into anger, he’d pull it off.
But where would these boys have gotten the stones from?

His eyes drifted to a park in the centre of town. It was a large green space that he guessed was used for large town celebrations. A big tent on July Fourth. A place to go ice skating in the winter...

Because there was a lake there. It was probably manmade but he couldn’t tell that only from a map. It just stood out because it looked somehow out of place.

“I want to go there,” he said when Owen moved to be beside him, his arms folded. At least he was also wearing the same suit as yesterday. He was suddenly unsure of how long he’d been standing there, not really hearing or seeing the motion around him until then. Someone could have been talking to him during that time and it hadn’t registered. He could have said anything during that time.

Following his eyes, Owen nodded, seemingly not noticing how distracted he was. “We can divide up most of the work. These people want to help us and we have the volunteers who need to know

Because morning found him again and they had a new day to tackle.

He ate a muffin at the station and it made him feel like he was going to throw up. Good. He needed to feel physically ill at that point. His body needed to feel that way; kindness didn’t work. Snoke’s breath warmed his neck as he pretended to be working but instead was just staring at the background on his phone.

She was never going to reply. There was no forgiveness this time.

Not letting his irritation show would be his goal for that day. He could manage looking mildly annoyed because it was a difficult situation to be in. He saw that in the faces of everyone around him. And as long as Owen was driving wherever they went, he really wasn’t a danger to anyone but himself. If he had to draw his weapon, then there would be other problems. But he practiced enough that he was sure he could return fire without thinking twice even now, if it came down to it.

The stones. He could focus on them. He looked at the pictures again and tried to untangle where they might have come from. Tilting his head at the map again, hearing his neck crack, he thought about what type of stones they were. Smooth and flat. Worn down by time and weather. Broken off from a larger piece hundreds of thousands of years ago and turned into something new and beautiful in someone’s eyes.

When they were there at Snoke’s, sometimes all they had to play with were pieces of rocks or rotten wood. Some children still had their imaginations. And until Rey came, he resented the ones who could manage to do something to take their minds off of where they were. They were able to escape into their minds and he struggled deeply with it. But when he had her, he wanted her to feel that sense of wonder that was making up a new world that couldn’t hurt them. Making her the doll. Giving her the cleanest clothing he could steal from dead bodies, even if it felt truly disgusting when he really thought about it. He was always stealing from the dead, even if it was just in not acting when he could have. Keeping her as clean as possible had been important from the beginning. When Snoke was done with letting them have space to themselves, when he took the diapers away and screamed at him to be better, he needed to change how he was thinking and he was only eleven without ever knowing it. Every time Snoke hurt her, he needed to make sure it was clean even though they were never clean. Wiping her face when they had water eased so many of his fears. He didn’t know what an infection was until he was on the outside, but he did know that his mother would always keep the scratches and scrapes of boyhood clean. He had to do that for her.

But where would these boys have gotten the stones from?
where to look. We need help and we’re in charge here. There are too many people to check in on
and parole officers to contact, but we’ll go there after lunch.” He narrowed his eyes and got a hand
on his arm in response. “Hunches are good, Kylo. But so is following how we do this job.”

Biting his lip, he nodded. He liked rules and needed structure. But sometimes he just wanted to do
something because his mind was screaming at him to do it.

But that’s what got him into this endless mess of hurt with Rey. So Owen was right. But one day in
the future, he would honestly tell him to take all of his rules and fuck right off with them. Maybe
the day before he retired.

He couldn’t let himself drift as they visited the not-quite suspects on their list of names. It was a
smaller team of police than he was used to dealing with, but they could divide up some of the
legwork. They were this close to calling in help from the city. If they didn’t get anywhere, back up
was just a phone call away.

Throughout the short interviews, he managed to get some looks of approval with his line of
questioning. Once they had the reports about the stones back, they’d have more to work with. But
he tried to find a way to ask about them without directly approaching the subject. Most of the men
they spoke with seemed to be generally clueless about the boys. They’d heard about it and knew
that their doors would be knocked on. None of the men they talked to had broken any of the harsh
rules set up for them. They weren’t living near schools or parks. They’d disclosed their statuses.
Some of them had girlfriends, but none of them appeared to have children in their homes.

It felt like a dead end.

Standing at the edge of the water, finally freed from their morning of wheel spinning, he could
breathe.

The stones on the shore looked identical to the ones that they’d found, but that didn’t prove
anything. They were put there as an illusion, like the rest of the place. Crafted beauty meant to look
like nature. But he was right about this. The thought had been building all morning as they worked
their way down the list and came up with nothing.

“They met him here,” he said. “We can ask them again about coming here but it seems like
everyone in town has been here at some point.”

Owen sometimes let his annoyance show. George had many more years of practice. And Kylo
sometimes didn’t even bother caring about who saw how agitated some of his thoughts made him.
“There are enough trees. We’ll direct the search here and keep moving forward. I don’t want to
remind you of it again, but this could also be nothing. Don’t get stuck on it.”

He took the criticism with a nod and forced himself to accept other lines of thinking when they
returned to the station to set up the next steps. He still pocketed a stone of his own and kept turning
it in his hand, thinking about both the bigger picture and yet coming back to only one conclusion.

Back around other people, he knew that his exasperation was starting to show. He’d get small
glares here and there and try to look less like he wanted to put his gun in his mouth. They got the
fingerprinting back. None of the men on their list matched the results; and there were no matches
in the database. So at least that part could be ruled out. Another waste of time and energy that he so
badly needed.

And now they had more media attention. Watching Owen give the press conference, he lurked in
the back, stopping to text Rey to ask again if she was okay. Still no response. But his parents told
him that she was doing better. Doing better how? That part they couldn’t answer.

Wednesday turned into Thursday and he had to ask to borrow a new shirt from one of the other officers, finding someone who was his size. At least investing in good suits meant they weren’t really showing how he was in the same clothes again, still wearing the same hurt inside as well.

He still hadn’t slept since Tuesday morning. And it was an oddly freeing feeling to stretch his legs and feel his mind slipping away from him.

So they focused their search on the man-made lake. He had argued hard to do this and now, standing there, he couldn’t remember what he’d said. The families had been there. The boys had the rocks. There were groves of trees to explore that might disclose the unimaginable. They needed help and giving people a place to focus on would be better than worrying too much or not worrying at all.

Owen was on the other side of the park, giving orders in a sharper but still kinder way. He just followed where his eyes guided him, looking at the grass and the trees and trying to think like the man who’d taken the boys. Could it be a woman? He thought about that for a moment and kept moving. It didn’t profile like a female criminal. They were rarely committing crimes against people who they didn’t know.

Outside, in the sunshine, he almost forgot he hadn’t slept yet.

At least near the water, following the edges and looking for evidence with other officers and volunteers, he could let his eyes focus on what mattered even as his mind was starting to drift off…

Hearing distant shouting, his head snapped towards it. The officer beside him turned too, pointing at a group of people yelling at a man near the edge of the water, not far from them.

“This can’t be good,” the young man said.

“It’s missing kids. People are starting to get upset. And I don’t blame them.” He had needed to take a breath before speaking and hoped that his words had come off as genuine rather than harsh.

He didn’t even need to identify himself when he approached the group. They all looked like scared and worried parents but the look on his face must have come off as thunderous. They instantly stepped back and he was thrust again into taking control. “Can someone explain to me why you’re yelling at this man?”

The oldest man in the group, a gray-haired man in his sixties or seventies, took over for the group and dared to speak to him as the others stood in stunned silence. “Ivan is always looking at our children. And he’s always here by the lake. If those boys were taken by anyone, it’s him. He’s the one who took them.”

Ivan shrunk down smaller and Kylo stepped in between him and the group. He was probably in his thirties or forties. But his body language gave him an idea that he might have some sort of disability. And the hurt in his eyes at being shouted at made it clear that he was used to being looked at differently by the people in town. Owen didn’t like him making quick judgements and he could change his mind later. But his first impression was the opposite of the small mob. And now they were going to have another distraction because of other people’s judgemental thoughts.

Sighing, he looked at the officers and civilians gradually starting to join the people already gathered near him. “There’s a tip line. We need help from the public but we don’t need people
taking the law into their own hands.” He had to clamp down on the instant rage he felt rising inside of him. He turned those feelings into constructive actions and took charge. He split up the group, telling them to give their thoughts to the officers who were there to search but now had to deal with this.

And then he could finally talk to Ivan when they were alone. He’d stuck behind him the entire time and Kylo had to turn and offer him a real and truly sympathetic look. “They weren’t really being that nice to you. I hope it’s okay that I got rid of them.”

“They were…” Ivan’s eyes swept around the park. It was a sunny, warm day. The hint of a breeze made it possible to enjoy it, as if he’d been there for any other reason. “I was just coming here to help. I heard on the news that the police needed help.”

Inserting himself into the investigation. That was one negative against him. Be aware of all possibilities and don’t get stuck on a single idea. “We do need help. I think it’s good that you’re here. I’m,” he paused slightly. He had a given name but the tiredness scratching at his eyes made it hard to pretend to be Ben at that moment. “My name is Kylo and I’m with the FBI. Can I ask you some questions while you’re here?”

Ivan studied him for a moment before Kylo took out his ID. His eyes got wide in an instant. “It looks just like it does on television,” the other man said. “Is it hard work?”

He wanted to laugh but it stuck in his throat. “Cases like this are hard. But I like helping people.” He stuck his hand in his pocket, feeling the weight of the rock there. Blinking slightly, he realized he was mirroring the other man. Slowly, he took out the stone and turned towards the water. “I was never good at skipping stones.”

That made Ivan grin. “I love doing it. This is my favourite place. No one usually bothers me here.”

Winding up, as his father had taught him when he was small, Kylo launched his stone towards the water. It managed three skips before sinking in a string of ripples. At least he got more than one skip. “It’s a nice place. I like hiking when I have time for it. I was stuck inside for a long time when I was younger. Being outside feels…nice.”

“Why were you stuck inside?” Ivan asked the question even as he sent his stone across the surface of the water. Eight skips. He couldn’t get competitive about this but it did bother him.

“Someone was hurting me and other children. I was stuck there for a very long time.” And I still feel like I’m trapped there some days. “That’s what we’re worried about for these children. I’m wondering, Ivan, if you knew them.”

He picked up another stone and set it racing towards the water. This time he managed to get four skips and felt a little better about himself.

“I know what that man said. I don’t come here to watch the children but sometimes they talk to me. And I show them how to skip stones. And I also keep them from falling into the water. I guess some of them are my friends.” He picked up another flat rock and this time got only six skips.

But what he was saying was making Kylo’s heart sink. He didn’t want the mob to be right. However, it was starting to look like he was their suspect. He could only steal a few more minutes of informal questioning before he’d have to take him in. And in that situation, he was sure he’d stop talking. He’d seen it by how he’d fallen silent when others were shouting at him. If any of the other cops were there, they’d treat him with instant aggression. He couldn’t do that. He’d messed up so much lately by going too hard and too fast to solve a problem.
“When I was a kid, there was this one spot where I’d go with my friend. We’d climb up this giant, rocky hill and stay there all day.” He had to look out at the water. “I miss him and wish I could go there with him again. Do you have a place like that with your friends?”

Ivan stopped to think about the question. Please don’t lie to me, Kylo thought. “Not really. We talk for a bit and then their moms come and they have to leave.”

But he’d blinked rapidly as he spoke. It wasn’t the entire truth.

He had to bring him in. This had gone as far as it could go without common sense rattling to the top of his wearied mind. “Ivan…”

Ivan turned. “But I saw the other man talking to them.”

It could be another lie. Or it could be the truth he’d been holding back on. “Can you tell me about the man? Did you know him?”

“I told the kids to watch out. He was a stranger. I haven’t seen him around before when he started coming here and that was a few weeks ago. That’s why I gave them the stones. To keep them safe.” Ivan frowned deeply. “It didn’t work. Kids like puppies more than rocks.”

None of the children had house pets. There had been no water bowls or scratching posts in those homes. If they were feeling lonely, either smothered by having too many siblings or the pressure of playing alone, the promise of an animal would bring out curiosity.

And it was time he took their witness to the station to continue this conversation. “I like both. But I’m not like everyone else. Ivan, I think you know a lot about this man and I could really use your help. Do you think you could come with me to the police station? I’ll be with you so no one is mean to you.”

But Ivan stopped moving, brown eyes creasing with sudden anxiety. “Do you think I took the kids?”

“Absolutely not. But I need your help to find them. Please.” He would normally establish a connection through a touch, but held back. Trust could also be built through space as well. “And my partner isn’t as…scary as I am. Maybe you’d like talking to him more.”

“You’re not that scary.” The other man seemed to relax. “I think I’d like to help you. For the kids.”

A phone call. A short drive. But when he’d guided Ivan to their car, he caught the continued whispers and glares from the people gathered both at the park and the station. He wasn’t under arrest, he wanted to scream at them. He had information that maybe they missed because they couldn’t look beyond what was happening on the surface. He didn’t have to listen or look hard to get the impression that he was the town weirdo, a loner and only part-time janitor who still lived with his mother. They dispatched officers there just to be sure, but he knew they’d find nothing there but an elderly woman who would be worried why her son wasn’t home yet.

It was a long conversation, but in the end, they had leads. Owen took over the questioning but he was still there, meeting Ivan’s eyes whenever he seemed to turn inward. Witnesses questioned as suspects always bothered him and it seemed like this entire case was based on poor judgement.

All three of their boys had spent most of the summer near the water. Ivan saw them every few days but started to get worried when the strange man started showing up too. He was always with a dog: a German shepherd puppy. He was tall with wavy, blond hair. He wore a blue jacket with a star on it, even if it was hot out. He was older. No facial hair. But something was off in the shiftiness of
his eyes.

And Ivan saw the kids start to change the next time he’d talk to him. He gave them the stones that Kylo had found to keep them safe.

If the children were acting differently, there must have been other interactions that went unseen. It wasn’t hard to follow their families to their homes. The bigger families had many kids to gather up and they probably didn’t notice a man with a dog, talking for too long with one of them because it was just a man with a dog. He imagined walking into the park on a normal day, when parents weren’t keeping their kids indoors, and knew that there would be so many of the town’s children there. He would bring Benji there if they lived there.

They had a description that they could now present to the families at least.

But word travelled fast. Before they could make the calls, the parents were at the station, demanding to know if they’d arrested Ivan for taking their children.

The heaviness of the accusation nearly made him snap.

The world blurred into a red rage and Kylo had to force himself to walk away. He was just so tired and the days had eaten away at him. Again and again, his brain kept clawing at him, stopping anything positive from getting through.

Kindness and patience were meaningless. All everyone did was hurt one another. He was stupid for trying to help anyone. If all that was out there was blackness and emptiness, then what was he really trying to do with his life? He could only push himself so hard for so long before it was all ground down into dust.

“There you are.”

He was waiting for Owen to find him in his hiding place in a storeroom. He wasn’t sure how long he’d been there but it had felt good to just stare at a wall rather than punching someone.

“I couldn’t deal with them. I’m sorry.” Honesty. At the end of the day, at least he could be honest with his partner when he was verging on a breakdown. “I think we’re…”

“We are.” Owen cut him off and but his hand on his arm. “We talked them down. You’ve been in here for an hour. But I covered for you. It’s really fine, Kylo. You got us this far and I could carry some of the weight for a while.”

“Do they know him?” he asked. It had really just felt like he’d been there for five minutes. Losing time. Not good. “Are we close?”

His partner narrowed his eyes. “We are. But if you’ve lost your focus, then I’m sending you home. You did really well today so falling apart at the finish line means you’re not going to be able to keep up that level of work.”

Absently, he thought about asking what day it was but let the stray thought go. Taking a deep breath, he reached for his centre. He didn’t even want to go home at that point. Maybe he’d just give Rey the house and never go back there again.

“I’d like to get back out there. I’d like to look for more witnesses.” He kept his voice level, finding the last of his strength. “I don’t want to find them dead, Owen.”

The hand on his arm squeezed lightly. “None of us do. So why don’t you go to the motel and rest
and we’ll pick up things early tomorrow morning. I think we’re close, Kylo. And you’ll be sharper after you’ve slept.”

_I haven’t been sleeping._ The admission almost left his mouth but he hid it away instead. He managed to nod.

So he left the work to others and was sent to bed. After leaving Rey another message, he quietly stared at the pale pink motel room walls until the colour started changing. He could find every different shade there, pulsing underneath the surface paint. He wasn’t even sad anymore. He just wasn’t really there. He was breathing, but he was vanishing.

Home wouldn’t be home when he went back.

The thought kept him awake again, even as he pretended to sleep. He didn’t even deserve to sleep at that point. Sleeping pills were for people who had their shit together.

Getting to the morning meeting and breaking down what the night shift had managed to figure out, he was at least feeling more focused and helpful. It was funny how the taste of hope could change a mood. He hadn’t bothered looking at himself in the mirror, though. If Owen hadn’t been there, he wouldn’t have bothered showering at all. His arm ached and there was a bloodstain on the borrowed shirt.

But the description was out there.

They had that part.

Forcing himself to eat lunch, he checked through local dog kennels and shelters. Phoning them and asking about the blond man and the German shepherd puppy was more stimulating than another sandwich. No one matching that description. Move on to the next one and keep going. People weren’t useless just because they didn’t have the answers that he wanted.

Evening was about to roll in. And he was fairly sure he was going to die from exhaustion. He kept finding bottles of water in his hand and wondered how they got there as he drank them. He found himself staring at the walls more, feeling himself fading away. Rey wasn’t answering his phone calls. So maybe he was already dead.

“Someone saw him.” An officer at the next desk to him suddenly stood up to shout. And Kylo surprised himself by jumping to his feet and feeling his heart beat again.

Still not dead.

He met Owen’s look across the bullpen and felt the mutual relief there in his green-grey eyes.

“How we have a location?” Owen was the one to speak, thankfully. Kylo was sure that if he opened his mouth, only random syllables would come out.

Even if they had rules and procedures, getting a sighting and vehicle description made their search more focused, more _real_. They had a partial license plate, but it was out of state—from North Dakota. It was frustrating to have to sit and wait through another search but then, oh then, they had a name. He could look at the man’s picture and know who he was searching for. Why was he still in town? Didn’t he know they were looking for him? The arrogance made him itch. He was overconfident and cruel and _that’s_ how they would catch him.

And the entire thing shifted into controlled chaos when patrol spotted the vehicle outside of a house on the edge of town. It was a rundown place that everyone thought was abandoned.
But that’s where he was.

He wanted to go. He wanted to leave the second they got the call. But there was a chance he was armed, or would harm the children if they acted too quickly. Slow down. Get an idea of how he’s thinking. In the back of his mind, he was sure the children were alive. They had to be. He was projecting outside of his body and it was like he could feel their fear. There was no way the universe could be this cruel to him in one week. But then again, all of the viciousness had been well earned on his part.

He was just getting back what he put out there.

So they planned and prepared. Calls were made. He knew he talked to George at some point but wasn’t exactly sure what he said.

And then they were finally ready.

Time blurred again and he was suddenly sitting outside of the house, speaking with Owen. His mind was really becoming unhinged but he was at least still there somehow. He had a vest on and his hands didn’t shake as he checked his weapon.

It was after sundown, but night hadn’t fallen fully yet. “I have a good feeling about this.”

Owen quirked an eyebrow. “I’m glad you’re optimistic.”

They’d set up a blockade. Even if he tried to run, they’d stop him.

Approach the house. Identify yourselves. Follow the checklist so the conviction, if it happens, wouldn’t be torn apart. Draw your weapon but use words instead of firing. The local cops were milling around, nervous and unreliable. If they had done their jobs from the start then a third child wouldn’t have gone missing and he would have been able to have the second half of the conversation that had been haunting him since Tuesday morning.

Surrounded by backup, Kylo really didn’t feel like he was truly there. Someone else was controlling his body as they knocked on the door. Glancing from Owen to the other cops, he set his shoulders straighter.

They didn’t hear an answer.

But what did catch his ear was a distant cry. He was fourteen again and remembering when that was all he ever heard, other than his screaming mind and Snoke's harsh words. Even over the distracting rustling of too many cops outside of a house in a lonely neighbourhood, his sharp ears did catch it. Gesturing to Owen, he moved away from the front door, cautiously taking the corner towards the back of the house, weapon drawn and ready with steadier hands than he had any right to have.

There.

The shed.

*Please,* he thought to himself. *Please let them all be alive.*

Nodding at the officer at his side, they approached the wooden structure. He called out who he was, then spotted the lock.

It wasn’t going to stop him when three scared voices shouted that they were inside and needed
It had been too long since he’d broken down a door to freedom.

And there they were, three small, scared faces looking at him with fright as he took the door down in one swift and violent kick.

Alive. They were alive.

Falling to his knees, he gasped at them. “It’s okay. You’re safe now.”

He heard Owen behind him as the three boys lunged into his arms.

Tears rattled in his chest as he heard each boy sob against him. He would have passed out right there if his stubborn head hadn’t kept him upright.

The ambulance they’d brought with them would be for a hopeful task rather than a sorrowful one.

And then he quietly just went to sit in the car, breaking away from the others. The suspect was in someone’s car, somewhere. They’d have to speak to him. They’d have to get a confession; that would be cleaner and easier for the parents now being reunited with their children. He didn’t even have the energy to watch the tearful reunions.

All of them were alive.

He’d smile if he remembered how.

Because if it was over then he’d have to go home.

Closing his eyes, he found only a blank space inside of him when he reached for the pain that was usually there.

He’d be ready now to meet what was coming.

The lying clock was telling him that it was 1 a.m. on Saturday by the time they reached his house. It was still their case and there would be work to do, but that could wait for tomorrow. After they’d slept in their own beds.

He knew that Owen told him he should be proud of himself but he didn’t think he deserved to feel that way. He’d spent the entire time only think about himself and how sorry and sad his life was. He wasn’t sleeping and was putting others in danger. Managing to give his partner a small smile, he faked feeling good about the outcome. And did agree to have dinner at his house that weekend, either tomorrow or Sunday when things were more wrapped up. Even though Owen assured him that Rey would be coming with him, he was already resigned to coming alone.

There was a light on upstairs, in his office.

Maybe she just forgot it before she left. He hadn’t spoken with his parents in…however long. It was a jumble of too many words and faces at that point that he couldn’t keep up with it all.

His entire body was shaking when he reached his door.

Leaving his bag there, he took off his shoes. Had he remembered to change his socks this entire time? But Rey’s shoes were still by the door. And he could hear the steady turning of pages as he climbed the stairs. They seemed to get faster with every creak of his stride.
Each step seemed to take hours. If he didn’t know his own house, he’d swear he was somewhere else, maybe a distant and destroyed house in California.

The room seemed to be glowing when he stepped in the open doorway.

And there she was. Still there.

Hope. Don’t feel it. Kill it all.

“I…” I didn’t expect you’d still be here. What was he supposed to say now? All he’d planned for was coming inside, seeing her gone, and weeping until he finally passed out. “I’m sorry I was away for so long.”

Looking up from the piles of journals around her, Rey shrugged. The delicate raising of her shoulders was only there for a fraction of a movement but it was still her there, alive and frowning at him. “I got your texts. I could take care of myself.”

“You…you shouldn’t need to.” He took in all of the books, spread out over his office floor. “I never realized there were so many.”

He was starting to think he was hallucinating and she wasn’t really there.

She smirked. So maybe he hadn’t gone insane. “They look smaller on the shelves.”

“Can I come in?” he asked, dumbly. But she nodded. Stepping over the various stacks and piles, he made his way into the centre of the room. He needed to sit down. His heart was beating too quickly and his head was so light that he knew he was going to faint if he didn’t do something. Shoving the stacks aside, he knelt across from her. He was far enough away, but close enough to catch every slight change in her face. In his state, he just saw how she glowed. Wearing one of his old sweaters and a pair of shorts, she should be relaxed but how her shoulders sat told the real story. Taking a deep breath, he made himself speak. “Have you been reading them the entire time?”

Sighing, she tilted her head and closed the book on her lap. “I started with the one you left me. And your note. But I still remembered to eat and sleep and to talk to my friends. Grey said it was okay that I took some days off, but he’s worried about me being really ill. So I told him I wasn’t really sick and that I just needed some time by myself.”

“We all do.” He should have changed before coming in, but he shifted so he was sitting cross-legged across from her, mirroring her posture. But he didn’t possess years of dance flexibility and would have to deal with the various forms of discomfort pulsing around him. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d stayed awake for so long. He needed to force himself to stay awake a little while longer. He had to do this. Dropping his head, he let some of his fatigue press him into speaking. “I thought you would have gone home.”

Lifting her eyes, Rey shook her head. He caught that from the corners of his guilty eyes. She took him in and for a moment, he caught the flash of concern but it quickly faded. “I’m not going to run from you, Kylo. I wanted…I wanted to get to know you in a real way. Not just with what you said to me, but with what you’ve written about me. Your note made sense.”

He took a long deep breath, fighting to stay awake but not willing to make the same mistakes again. “I feel like we’re doing this whole thing backwards.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re supposed to fight at the ending of a relationship, not the beginning.” He openly wore his
sorrow, too tired to disguise it. “Was the note enough of an apology? Would you like another one from me now, after I’ve had more time to think?”

“I think…” She started then paused, picking up a random blue journal to flip through the filled pages. He knew exactly which year it corresponded to. He’d been eighteen on those pages too. “I think I’d like to just talk for a while.”

Sitting back, he nodded.

Rey looked at him again and her look was a soft mixture of anger and sadness. The way her forehead was creased and the redness of her eyes made him swallow. “What you told me, the last time you were here, was…some of it made me angry. You’ve had time to make these mistakes and have your imagined futures with other people. I haven’t. I’ve only really, truly, had you. You didn’t need to say those things because I’ve already thought about them.”

She narrowed her eyes briefly, waiting for him to argue back but he just nodded for her to continue.

“It also hurt me when you said I’d be better off with someone else. For me, there is no one else. I don’t think anyone else could ever compare to you in my mind.” She sighed. “So it hurt me to read all of these pages. It hurt to read how much you’ve hated yourself for everything you’ve done. Even…even times when we were happy as a family, you just go back to what you did wrong and who you hurt. Kylo, you’re not always hurting people. And you’re not unlovable because I love you. I’ve always loved you. You keep writing how you’re manipulative and just using people, how you wear them out and should just be alone.”

Pausing to wipe her eyes, she set the blue book down and picked up a gray one. Then she laughed lightly and he sighed at himself. “But I do think you’re not normal. Normal people don’t go back and index their journals.”

He managed a light smile in return. He’d had the time. Why not make it easier to find what he was looking for when he needed it? With only one book missing, he had the last fourteen years from his perspective laid out around them. Even if she’d managed to read only less than half of them, she would have got the true picture of who he was. That had been his intention.

He wanted her to see what she really meant to him.

Taking a deep breath, Rey flipped to the added pages to the back of the book on her lap. She ran her hand along the outstretched piece of paper. The colour of the book meant twenty-five.

“Kylo, in every book I’ve looked at over the last couple of days, my name always has the most references. I can find myself on almost every page. Even when you were with Poe, there’s still more thoughts about me than there are him. That wasn’t…that wasn’t really fair to him.” She looked up from the book and frowned again. “He always told me how he loved just you Kylo. He loved me too but it was more like, he wanted to take care of me and help me grow up. I used to…before I read all of this, I used to think that he got in the way of what we had. But your thoughts about me kept you from really being with him.”

He could only look down, letting silent tears fall. Poe had been the more loving one in their relationship. And he had spent the last seven years trying to apologize to a ghost who had just wanted someone to love him as he was. He had, but like with everything, he did it on his own terms. That guilt was about to cost him another person in a similar situation. Soon all he’d have left would be ghosts and guilt. And the third G of Grey, who he’d have to push away and disappoint by never wanting to try to love anyone ever again or however that would work out. Grey would be the stronger one, he already was. He’d go to work for the next thirty-five years and then retire and die.
or, more mercifully, he’d get shot on the job and die that way. One more mistake and he’d be gone. The flames could finally take him but he’d at least try to wait for that until his parents had passed away. The snaking, dark thought of taking his own life arched to life again and he forced it away. Even if his personal life meant an empty house, he could at least give back in some way. Those three boys had needed him; their small and dirty arms had hugged him so tightly. And if Rey would just let him see her every now and again when he went home, then he’d limp forward in life as he watched her create one of her own with someone else.

“Kylo, I never thought you knew this much about me. Even when we lived apart, you put in your thoughts after conversations that we had, or what you heard from Han and Leia…all you wanted for me was to be happy. Sometimes it’s like that’s all you cared about. I know…I see how sad you were about grandpa and then Hux not wanting to be your friend. I see how confused you were about Poe but then how much you really cared about him. You didn’t want to leave without me. And I went with you without thinking twice.” She paused for a long moment and his head fell lower, wanting to collapse on the floor and weep. But he still stayed upright, staring at her hands on the journal as they started to blur.

Rey bit her lip then continued. “And then you…you change as you grow up, Kylo. I thought you were just exaggerating, but some of the things you write about him, while also worrying about me…I think I understand now why you thought I’d be better off with someone else. How many times did you follow him? You write how you’re watching him, making sure no one comes near him, but that includes his friends. And then you fight, and you apologize and feel bad and then you write about having sex with him so he wouldn’t be mad at you. You’d talk about this, Kylo, but I never realized how…messed up some of your thoughts about him are. And then, on the next page, you’d wonder how I was feeling about a dance recital and how you were worried about me being upset with only being able to stay the weekend and that we wouldn’t have enough time together. I think I understand better now why you tried to push me away. My grades were bad and I was angry all of the time. You knew that you were the problem and wanted me to be happy. You’ve always, always thought more about making me happy when you just did things you thought made yourself less sad.”

She finally picked up the colour for the most recent year: dark green. She ran her hand down the page and licked her lips. “Rey deserves to love a person who would never hurt her; is that really me? He should show her a safe and warm life and prove that he was deserving of her kindness, her heart, and her caring. Even when she has been angry, it has been warranted because life has been unfair to her since the moment she was born and I caused that. I am left overwhelmed and unsure of how I cannot ruin this special moment for her. I have known that I have loved her for her entire life. I know that she is not completely fragile but still deserves so much care and I want to give it to her. But what if I do it all again? What if I become consumed by my selfish thoughts about not letting anyone hurt her, like I did him? That I am the only one allowed to hurt her and that I am the only thing allowed in her life even as my own thoughts drift? I cannot allow myself to fail at this. I am only an instrument of ruin, one who has never truly earned her caring in this way. I cannot let her not know who I am. But when she knows me, she will not want to love the person I am. How do I be honest with her without hurting her?” And then,” she stopped to wipe her eyes and then smirked, “And then you talk about the case for fifty pages. Reading these was like reading books in English class. You never use contractions.”

He dared to speak now. “You should read the reports I send George.”

Rey smiled, sending his heart fluttering at the slightest sign of hope. “You should let him read these too. I can…I look at the index and I’ll know it’s a George Year if there are at least twenty pages dedicated to him instead of the few here and there. And you know, Kylo, George wouldn’t love you if you were as horrible as you sometimes describe yourself.” She paused to bite her lip
and he was cast back down into dread. “Kylo, I’m sorry I thought you were showing off when you showed your badge at the bed and breakfast. Sometimes it’s like you don’t see what you’ve really done. And sometimes I’ve missed that too. I get caught up in my own thoughts too.”

Reaching out, he dared to put his hand on hers, staying quiet as he rubbed a slow circle on her wrist. She looked at it for a second. But didn’t pull away.

“Kylo, I’ve had so many ideas about how you’ve acted and what you’ve done. I didn’t have time to read everything but I want to. But I kissed you and fell in love with you because I already loved you. I knew your heart, just not how dark you think it is. I knew how much I cared about you. Even though you put me through so much, I already knew that you cared about me.” She took a deep breath and he dared to squeeze her arm. “Kylo, the last few days, you’ve put so much out there and I didn’t know what to think.”

“I’m not perfect, Rey. And even when I’m happy, I always focus on what I’ve done wrong. I miss…I want…Rey, I know it’s been a long week, but I hope you feel better.” He was about to collapse in on himself but still gave her a small smile, trying to be there for her. “I didn’t mean to put you through all of this.”

She shook her head. “I’m better today, Kylo. I really do care about you. And I think I understand why you’ve been this way. You really don’t see yourself how I see you.”

“I want to be better. I’ve always wanted not to have these thoughts. I thought they’d go away if I wrote them down. And I do see progress, but I also see everything wrong with me.” Sighing, he rubbed his eyes again. “I really thought I’d lose you because of all of that. You don’t know how much it means to me that you’re still here.”

He was losing it, tears spilling warm against his cheeks. His eyes ached and his body was so stiff and sore.

“I’m not leaving, Kylo. I’m not giving up on you.” He felt the urge to start listing all of the things wrong with him again. But she reached out and took his hand. “Stop thinking about the last few days. I know that you want me.”

He looked at her hand, softly tracing his thumb against her skin. She was really there. This couldn’t be a dream. “Maybe we’ve been arguing about this so much because we both want each other to be perfect when we’re not. You’re allowed to be angry with me still, but now I know why. I want it to just be us like we are now. You know my past and I need to stop being afraid of it.” They sat in silence for a long moment before he sighed and met her eyes. “If I don’t go into a coma tonight.”

Shaking her head, Rey quirked her mouth slightly. “You really do hate sleeping.”

Snorting, he finally stood, pulling her into a hug. “I’ve always slept better next to you. I’m sorry that I…”

“Kylo,” she said, pulling back. “Please stop. You didn’t ruin anything. You just made it hard for a while. I’m not going anywhere.” Turning to their language, she reached up to trace the scar on his face, the one that reminded him that he had the capacity for so many mistakes in every area of his life. I know you want to be with me. You can stop being afraid.

He leaned into the touch. I will. I promise.

Gently, he leaned down to kiss her. He’d shattered himself for her and was putting the pieces back together but they were falling together in random places. The hurt in her heart for all of the things
that he’d said still lingered, he knew, but he wanted to rebuild himself for her. Hopefully it made some of that pain recede. She wouldn’t be there if she didn’t believe in him.

But kissing her made him start to really crumble. It wasn’t entirely ash yet, his mind screamed at him and he whined as he pulled away. He looked from the shocked look on her face to the endless scribbles he’d made her read in piles on the floor. Why had he done that? Clenching his teeth, he let go and fell to his knees again. There were too many words, too many thoughts. Everything was overlapping and he wanted to focus on her but it was all growing too large. He couldn’t stop it.

He sobbed into his sleeve. And when she reached for him, he clung to her. He grasped her to him, needing to know she was really there. But somehow, sweetly and tenderly, she was kissing him and he clung to her. He let himself fall back onto the mess on the floor and she was pouring herself into him and he hadn’t done anything to deserve it. He was pathetic and useless but still kissing her back as his mind lost all of the edges that used to protect him. Maybe they had been standing in the way the entire time.

“I love you,” he broke the kiss to gasp. “And I really only want you, Rey. All of this just hurts too much sometimes. I’m never…the part of me that’s attracted to guys, you can hate that about me. But as long as I’m with you, you’re all I need.”

She looked down at him, straddling his waist with tears shining in her own eyes. “I’m good enough? Just me?”

Instead of answering, he gripped her to him and stood. Stumbling back against his desk, he guided her legs around him. They were still the same legs he couldn’t feel desire for when she had been younger. Maybe a true monster would have felt more sooner. But if he had her, had this, she had to know through words and actions.

She squirmed out of his arms but didn’t break the kisses. Their tears mixed as he pulled off his suit coat and leaving it in the ruins of his past in his office.

When she stepped back, she instantly saw the muted brown stain in the shape of teeth on his bicep. “Oh, Kylo.”

More honesty. As long as he didn’t fuck it up this time.

“Rey, I haven’t slept since Tuesday morning. I was afraid to come home.” The confession made him want to fall to his knees again. “Please believe me when I say I only want you. I can tell you more but I’m just so tired.”

She lifted her chin to swallow, but she nodded. Leaning forward, she gently started to unbutton his ruined shirt. Slowly, his skin was revealed to her, every inch at a time. He felt cold and warm all in the same breath. The old scars were still there, just in new places. And his mess of an arm only showed her how weak he was.

“I’m sorry I didn’t answer you calls,” she said, her voice dropping to a whisper. “I wanted to hate you. But I couldn’t.”

He shrugged out of his shirt and tossed it aside. “I wanted to believe you’d still be here but a part of me is always telling me that I don’t deserve you.”

He didn’t want to see his insecurities reflected in her eyes, but there they were. “You’ve loved me my entire life. Who am I without you?”

Brushing a strand of hair behind her ear, he could only shake his head. “I’d be a half a person
without you.”

And like time had played with him in the last few hours and days, they were in their bed suddenly. And he needed to stop it. Or maybe he didn’t. Giving up hurt but giving in meant getting to a point where everything could stop hurting.

What had she gone through these last few days? His hands were caressing up her sides as she kept kissing him. She was lightly gasping with each gentle touch. And he had to sob again. The world without her really wasn’t the world.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he croaked out. “I don’t know what to do right now, Rey.”

He’d spent the last four days being able to turn to someone but only giving half-truths and near lies. And now that the person was her, he couldn't keep it all inside any longer.

Sniffling, she sat back and nodded. “I don’t know either.” His hand was against her warm and flat stomach, realizing that he didn’t even know when she’d shed her clothes. But his exhaustion made desire hard to draw to the surface.

If he rushed this, it would burn out. His eyes, his legs, his arm…everything hurt. But his heart had hope again. She loved him despite who he was.

“I’m not hard because I don’t want you,” he said, quickly with more than an annoyance. His body had been abused so often the last few days and he’d been the one to do it. Of course, it would do this and make her worry. “It’s just been a very, very long day.” He reached out to touch her face again, letting his hand drift down to her neck, feeling the soft hair on the back. Touching was always more real, made it better. Maybe this was really happening. “I still have problems, Rey, but I want to solve them with you. I don’t want to fight all of the time.”

She hugged him, pulling him into a tight embrace as she nuzzled against him. “Then let me take care of you. I know you now. And I still love you. Please just love me back.”

“I do. I really do.” The tears returned and he wanted to argue again instantly. What had he really done to earn this kindness? Spiralling, losing himself, he wept against her skin.

And somehow he fell asleep.

And the day could finally end.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading and for so much understanding the last few days. I've been in a weird place, to say the least. I wanted to tell an emotional story so I should have expected emotional responses; the only thing I didn't intend was to get overly emotional myself. I'm just trying my best here with what the story is telling me. This was meant to include Rey's part as well (along with a form of resolution) but that will be in the next chapter because this got too long.
I also include a depiction of a character with an intellectual disability in this chapter. I fully and completely apologize if it all comes out wrong and will change it if it's not fitting here.
Chapter 53

Chapter Summary

Rey tries to understand Kylo and then has to deal with a new case that he's been out after for far too long.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rey’s first thought had really been whether or not they were escaping again. Her churning thoughts about his words had transported her back to being small and vulnerable and only having him to protect her, preparing her to run the second she had the chance.

But seeing him, the adult version of that boy he’d been, reminded Rey that they weren’t there. They were older and he’d been changed by the world he used to hate and she was just in the shadows of his experiences.

It had hurt not to say ‘I love you’ back. But she just didn’t have the energy.

Finally hearing him leave, the familiar beeping of the alarm system reactivating once he was finally gone, made her curl up and let the words and memories from last night roll over her. Kylo had always been like this, she told herself. Even when she was small and he’d disappear into a bad day, he’d put thoughts and feelings out there that she used to be able to handle. But the illusion of childhood had really been stripped away now.

And he’d left again.

Who was the man she was in love with?

He used to be a boy who kept her safe in hell. Those distant memories had been compacted into a ball in her memory. Some things never faded: kids were hurting, Snoke was molesting and brutalising them all, and Kylo had kept her safe. His face had aged but his eyes were still the same. Sometimes they were harsher now, hidden behind whatever thought was occupying his mind. Then, he was a teenager who struggled with keeping a secret and understanding himself in a new way. She’d been there but all of those innocent moments didn’t make sense anymore. When he was a man, she’d accepted her attraction to him and her ultimate feelings of never wanting to be without him.

But what did all of that mean if he didn’t really want to be with her?

The old phone sat at the bedside table now. He never put it away. What was he expecting? That he’d call him again? It made the knot in her stomach tighten.

He thought about him all of the time. It was like he enjoyed thinking about things that hurt him in one way or another. It was like every mention of him was Kylo’s way of telling her that he was a terrible boyfriend and she shouldn’t want him.
But he thought about so many other people and aspects of himself. Did he still think she was a child? Is that why he pulled away when they got closer to sex? Or was it really about how she wasn’t a boy? When she was fifteen, his body had wanted her but did he?

Did Snoke make him this way with what happened? That he’s ‘not entirely straight’?

Every complicated thing he put out there made her feel stupid and immature, like her mind was too dumb to wrap around it all. She used to think she understood; speaking with other kids with Ransolm had made her feel important and like she could really help people who had been hurt. There were many sides of sexuality but she’d never felt that way about another girl. And even if her attraction to Finn felt cloudy now, it had been there at the time; there had been excitement, but also constant nerves about what would happen. And then when it happened, she realized she didn’t want it anymore because it brought out too many pains. That hadn’t happened when Kylo had touched her. His hands had been loving and his kisses and words had been sweet. But he had stopped touching her that way, pulling back to just kisses and hugs, like he didn’t want her there anymore in that way. He was already taking steps back into how they used to be. Sleeping in his bed could mean so many things.

All of his words of love and hope for the future seemed not to be real. He’d said them like he always did when he meant truth, but it all seemed to be weighed down by how he still clung to his regrets about his past relationships.

None of it was fair. Kylo used to only care about what was fair or not. The tears came again and she tried to wipe them away as her hands shook in the process.

Rey always thought she would be strong enough to know all of the sides of Kylo.

But there was so much to wade through that her stomach and head hurt to a point at which she thought it would consume her.

Everything he said was about to overwhelm her and she turned to scream into the pillow.

Tears came heavily from the bottom of her chest, heavier this time. The bitter thoughts about her own body raced back into her head. She’d tried hard to be fit but it would never be enough for him. Kylo wanted someone more like himself. Finn had wanted her too much and Kylo didn’t want her enough because a monster had made him afraid of hurting girls. He didn’t mean to hurt her but he was always doing that.

She ignored her phone most of the morning, tossing and turning as she tried to get back to sleep. But she couldn’t. She’d look at his texts, or the texts from Grey, and ignore them. Couldn’t he just go away too? He was perfect for Kylo. He was tall and charming and connected to George. Kylo would probably want to marry him too, giving him part of his big house to live in. And she’d have to deal with it because Kylo always got what he wanted.

Leia called when she went downstairs, frowning into a bowl of cereal.

She saw the note from Kylo but didn’t want to read it. It was sitting on top of one of his journals. It was probably going to be just like that page she got when she was younger. Maybe he hadn’t found anything out about that page because he really was the one to send it.

“Hi,” Rey said when she answered the phone, not bothering to hide the sadness in her voice.

“Hello sweetheart. How are you doing?”

She didn’t know how to answer that. “I think I want to come home. All Kylo and I have done is
argue. I don’t think he wants me here anymore.”

Leia sighed and she wished she could be there to pull her into a hug. “Rey, he wants you there. He loves you very much. You knew he’d be on edge because of his job, but he doesn’t mean to be hard on you. He’s hard on us too when he’s stressed and we keep loving him anyway. I don’t like it if you’re arguing, but this is also part of what we talked about when you wanted to move there. He can forget how difficult he can be. But I talked to him this morning and I’m sorry he had to go on a case. We don’t want you to feel alone. But if you want to come home, we can fix it for you. But you need to tell him you’re going, honey. We get worried about him when he’s alone and if you leave without telling him, he’d feel very hurt.”

*You also think he should be with Grey so he’s not alone*, Rey wanted to say but sighed away the thought. “I don’t want…I don’t want to hurt him but I think being here is making him remember so many terrible things. He’s always talked to me about what we went through but it’s…it hurt a lot, mom. And it was like he wasn’t even listening to me. He always listened to me before.”

“I know. I know, Rey. He’s kept some things inside for a long time. But you just have to remember that it’s not your fault if some of it was hard to hear. We have a hard time too when he talks about what happened.” Leia let out a long breath. “And if it’s brought back some things for you too, you can always call us.”

She was about to call her mom again but ended up biting her lip again. But if they weren’t together, they could still be her mom and dad. They still wanted her. “I will. I know you’ll listen. I’m just tired today. I’m going to go back to bed. I need to think more and figure out what I want to do.”

Saying goodbye, she looked at the note again and frowned. Did she really want to know what Kylo was thinking her entire life? Standing, she took her bowl to the sink and decided against washing it right away.

Her phone rang again and it was Grey. "I'm sick. And I don't want to talk to you or Kylo. Leave me alone.”

Her answer was curt and fast and she didn't give him a chance to reply. She put her phone on silent and glared at the tiling behind the sink.

She left the kitchen as it was and went back to bed, curling up on her side. His side was cold now and it would just remind her that he was gone.

Sleeping just felt empty. Her mind kept going back to what he said and she tried to figure out why it hurt the way it did. Kylo kept thinking about other people when they were together, like she wasn’t enough for him. She tried to say the right things, but they came out all wrong. And he had just kept talking.

She woke up when the sun was setting, hearing the door open and close and someone turn off the alarm. Hugging herself, she tried to gather the strength to see Kylo again.

“Hey Rey! Are you okay?”

Not Kylo. Grey. Rolling over, she put a pillow over her head. He really was just like Poe; he wouldn’t leave her alone.

She decided not to swallow her anger like she’d done last night. She had to get rid of him so she could be alone to actually think about what she wanted. Kylo said that she should be with someone else so he could have what he wanted; maybe that's what he meant when he said that.
Coming down to the kitchen, she was forced to look at him: his stupid dark hair and annoying blue eyes; another random band shirt that she didn’t know but Kylo *probably* did; his dumb broad shoulders and firm calves in khaki shorts. Kylo was worried about hurting her but Grey could fight him if he wanted to; he’d be able to handle a nightmare and hold him down until he was calm again. Of course they’d be perfect together.

“What are you doing here?” She didn’t want anyone to see her after she’d spent most of the day either crying or feeling numb as she slept. She hadn’t showered and her pyjamas itched. She couldn’t remember the last time she felt this confused and alone.

Grey picked up an apple from the bowl on the counter and bit into it, shrugging at her as he chewed. “I’m here to make sure you’re okay. It’s what friends do. You were kind of short when I called earlier today.”

Setting her jaw, Rey just focused on how he was leaning against the counter. It was like he already thought he was living there. He had lived there for longer than she had, off and on helping out but also acting like everything was for him. He knew how the house worked and what needed to be done. She was still learning from Kylo’s examples, but was too young to really understand them. It all came down to the things she wasn’t rather than how she really was inside. The thought made it easier to be angry with him. “Friends don’t want to sleep with their friends.”

He took another bite. “I don’t know. Maybe some do.”

Biting her lip, she felt the tears about to return. She’d fought them off for a while now and it would be annoying to have them start to flow again in front of him. “You’re just here to remind me how he’d be better off with you. It’s what you both want so why not just do it.”

He moved slowly, still eyeing her as he tossed the core into the compost. “What the hell happened last night? Why are you guys still fighting about me and him? Do I actively have to suck another guy’s dick in front of you to show you that I’m just his friend?”

Sitting back, she felt warmth come to her face. She hadn’t expected the tone of his voice to change so quickly. He’d been in strange mood since Kylo made him take down the pictures, but he’d never been angry at her. Snapping her mouth shut, she scowled at him.

Grey’s eyes caught her look and he moved towards her. Taking a deep breath, he shook his head and he lost some of the sharpness in his gaze. “Look, Rey. I have an idea of what’s going on and that you’re not sick. And now he’s on another stupid case and he’s worked himself up into his head. I care about you both. So why don’t you tell me what you think happened.”

She didn’t want to say anything to him. But really, he was the only one she could talk to. There was still too much to think about to say it all to Leia. It was frustrating to look at him and realize that. All of her friends were back home, getting ready for college and the future. Bri hardly knew her and the situation. Running to Owen or George would just make them think less of Kylo. And now she had to look someone Kylo slept with in the eyes and try not to cry.

She hated thinking about them together. The idea of Kylo kissing someone else was hard to imagine but thinking about them sharing intimacy, having sex, after hearing so much over the last few days made it even more impossible to imagine giving Kylo what he wanted.

“Kylo said a bunch of stuff. And it hurt me. And now I feel stupid for feeling that way.” Dropping her head, she eyed the note and forgotten journal on the table. She pushed it away, ignoring it like his texts. “I don’t feel like I’m good enough for him.”
“So start from the top. What’s the biggest problem?”

Why did it have to be him standing there? “He still has Poe’s phone. It’s like he’s waiting for him to come back. This house was for him and Kylo would have married him if he hadn’t died. Even if he knew I hated it when I was younger, he still would have done it. It’s like he didn’t care that I wouldn’t have had space there.”

Grey exhaled and nodded. “Okay, yeah. I get it. But you know that’s just him still feeling guilty. And he’s got a lot there to feel bad about. I don’t think he said that to hurt you. It’s just him trying to be honest and it coming out all fucked up.”

“But Kylo still thinks about other people he’s been with. He…” She started and had to lift her head to look at him, forcing herself to keep going. “He wishes that you two had slept together again so he could have been with you. And that’s why I don’t want you here. I’m living in the house Kylo bought for him and having to look at someone he’d rather be with. And I’m just…I’m just too young and a girl.”

Blinking, Grey rubbed his face. “Yeah, I guess you’re young. And you haven’t really dated anybody but that kid who basically raped you. But Ky wouldn’t be putting all this stuff out there if he didn’t want to be with you. Sometimes he gets an idea in his head and can’t stop until it’s all out there. It’s annoying as fuck to have to try to pick out what he really means but he always comes back the next day and apologizes because he starts agonizing about it. I’m sure he’s been doing that the entire time because he really wants this to work.”

“It doesn’t seem that way.” She sighed and shook her head. “And he left again.”

Grey rolled his eyes and then let out a long sigh. “Rey, I felt that way about my dad for so much of my life. He fucking left me all the time. He hardly sees Grant and Grace and you should have seen them cry when they had to go home this summer. I know this feeling Rey. I don’t get why they love a job that hurts the people they love but you knew what you were signing up for when you put the moves on him. And maybe I can help you figure it out now rather than wasting years being a pissed-off fuck-up. They aren’t running from us; they’re out there finding a reason to make it better for everyone and then to come back to us in a world that’s a little bit safer. I only fucking got that a few years ago but I think that’s what they’re doing and it helps me sleep at night.”

Nodding, Rey let the thought sink in even though it didn’t seem to stick. It was still hard to understand why Kylo had always been driven by something so hard and dangerous. He had explained it so many times but it made even less sense now that she saw how tired he was and how it gave him nightmares. “It still hurts when he leaves. It’s hurt every time he’s left me.”

“Rey, have you asked Han and Leia how much it hurts to have the two of you here and far away?” Grey picked up an orange and started peeling it, eyeing her as he did. “What about that baby and your friends? Don’t you think they’re feeling the same thing right now?”

She swallowed. “I didn’t…when I left them I didn’t really think about that. I was more worried about telling them I’m with Kylo and how I don’t want to stop calling them mom and dad.”

He chewed on an orange segment, putting the remainder on the table. “So maybe he thinks that way too? Maybe he’s worried that things will change too while he’s gone.”

Sitting there silently, Rey took a shaky breath. Why was he telling her all this? Did he think she was stupid? Of course she missed Han and Leia and of course they missed her too. They were also worried about the future and knowing where she would live and what she was going to do. He was trying to hurt her too with how he was talking to her. All she’d tried to do last night was be
understanding, to try to get Kylo to know that she cared. She'd told him that he could put the pictures back up. She'd told him that she wasn’t a kid anymore. Kylo was the one that kept piling on so much pain that it was hard to weed through it all.

“He still wants you more than me,” she said, glancing up for a moment before having to look away again. “And all I’ve done is tried to love him. And I know you still want him too so maybe I should just go home.”

Grey kept looking at her; she had to keep watching him even if it was only out of the corner of her eyes. And kept eating the orange. He let the silence draw on as he chewed. By the end of it, when he turned and put the peels in the compost, she truly dreaded what was coming. It was starting to feel like the times Han and Leia quietly looked at one another before telling her what to do with so much calm that all she felt was anger.

“Rey. I don’t want you to hate me. But if I have to fucking be the only adult around here, I’ll do it. But don’t act like I don’t understand what you’ve been through. I’ve had years of it from Ky and dad. But right now, if you want to be treated like an adult, then I’m going to do it. It’s all up to you if you want to act like a kid and not listen to what I’m actually saying. And I’m not like Ky. I’m not going to leave here and care if you hate me for what I have to say. I want to be your friend but right now, I care more about him.” He leveled his eyes at her and she quickly looked away again. “Yeah, I still want him but there’s no fucking way I’d be with him if you break his fucking heart by not getting what he’s actually like inside. It's new and different from how you knew him but that's what happens in a relationship. Forget what he’s said and try to understand his heart and who he’s become. I’m trying to get you to not make the same mistakes I did and freak out about some of the heavy shit he’s put out there. So just get it through your head that he wasn’t trying to hurt you. He probably was just pushing you away because he’s afraid of being hurt again. And he wasn’t doing that on purpose. But I’m not just sitting here waiting for him to want me again. I’m my own fucking person. And it fucking hurts so much to hear what you’re saying to me. So maybe think about other people right now too, okay?”

Stunned, Rey slumped down in the kitchen chair and could only manage to stare at him. He carried his height differently than Kylo, but he stood up straighter as he spoke. Squaring his shoulders and losing his earlier ease really made her flash to George in that moment.

“But you’re still in love with him.”

“I can fucking love him and not be in love with him. He’s the reason I’m still trying to turn my life around so maybe he’ll let me hang out with him so I don’t start fucking around again. I have my relationship with my dad back. I have a job I’m good at. And so what if it means looking like a doormat?” He planted his hands on the table, glaring at her. “Do you know what he does all day? I used to hate my father for being away from me so often but I still saw how much it hurt to deal with the shit they have to deal with all of the time. Do you know how hard my dad hugged me after he found you? It fucking freaked me out to see my father cry about all the kids he couldn’t save and two little kids he was afraid to lose too. And my dad is fucking rock and this is Kylo with all of his internalized hatred we’re talking about here. Do you think it’s easy for him to look at dead bodies, thinking about kids getting raped and murdered, and not get emotional and think about everything you both have been through? His issues aren’t going to vanish over night and you both won’t work through your shit if you don’t accept that he’s got tons of shit going on in his head that he needs to get out before he burns himself out.”

Dropping her chin, she shook her head. “I still don’t understand why he wanted to do something so hard.”
Letting out a long exhale, Grey stood back and folded his arms. “He wants to be in control. And have someone else in control of him. Look, I’m not…I didn’t come here to lecture you. I just wanted to check on you and…this is hard for me too, Rey. I hate seeing him pretending not to be worried all of the time. He’s got enough shit to think about. It’s another missing kids’ case so I’m, like, mentally preparing for it to be the worst.”

Rey set her elbows on the table and swallowed. “Did your dad really cry about us?”

Exhaling, Grey sat down across from her. “I mean, I was like eleven or twelve but yeah. And I was a shithead when I was a kid and just wanted to talk about the tricks I could do on my bike. When I started to get my shit together, I finally apologized for not getting what was going on. But I was mad at Ky for a long time. Dad would be out of town and he’d say it’s for work and then I’m seeing these pictures of him with these two kids and it…pissed me off. I thought he had another family and didn’t want me because I sucked so hard. Then he got a new family and I just hated my fucking life.”

Staring at the shapes in the wood, Rey traced a large knot. “You shouldn’t have to feel that way.”

“Yeah, but I still did.” He tilted his head, watching her hands. “You have to believe him when he says he wasn’t trying to leave you behind when he went and did other things. And it took me a long time to learn that so maybe just start trying to get it. Like I said before, they aren’t leaving us to hurt us.”

“Would you…would you really say no to Kylo?” She looked up, catching the instant hurt cross his face.

“Yeah, I mean…” Squeezing his eyes shut, he exhaled. “I mean, this is where we feel kind of the same right now too. Did I like having sex with him? Yeah. A lot. Do I know he’d care about me? He already cares about me. But would I also know he’s in love with someone else the entire time? Maybe if I was still me from a few years ago, I’d be like ‘fuck yeah’, I don’t give two fucks, let’s just fuck and fight all of the time and go for brunch. But now I’m just…” He paused, briefly holding his hand to his eyes. “I don’t know. Tired of being alone. So I get his friendship and don’t have to worry about getting my stupid heart broken everyday because he’d be worried about you all of the time.” Looking at her again, he wiped his eyes. “So, you know, I don’t care if you don’t want to be my friend. What I do want is my best friend to be happy. Do you get it?”

Still holding onto her hurt, Rey tried not to feel his pain in return. Maybe they all felt too much. It was easier when she was younger and could just try to help people. She used to be so interested in seeing and experiencing so much of the world. Now the world just looked dark and angry all of the time. There were murderers and rapists and everyone was always hurting. What was the point of being happy?

She dropped her voice to a whisper. “He’s been so…different since I’ve been here.”

Licking his lips, Grey shrugged. “He wants it to work out. He’s obsessed with his mistakes. Read some of his dumb journals. He dwells on them. Having that scar on his face makes him constantly think he’s a fuck-up at his job too.” His eyes flicked to the note and the book on the table. “Have you even bothered to look at that?”

“No,” she answered, her voice feeling weak. “I haven’t even really looked at his texts.”

Inhaling, Grey’s large hand shot out and dragged the paper and journal towards him. He twisted it so he could read the note. He snorted then smirked. “His heart is really yours, Rey. And he already
knows that what he said hurt you. He’s got all of his thoughts upstairs in those books. And he wants you to read them. You know he’s only shown me a few and he never got the chance to show Poe. Take a look at them and get to know your boyfriend rather than just assuming what he’s thinking.”

Swallowing, Rey glanced at the note, then back down again. “What if all I read is how much he loved him? And how good it felt to sleep with you? How Liza was better in bed than I’ll ever be? I miss it when it was just us but it used to hurt so much there. It was so terrible for him and me and everyone else. What if he really has never thought about me since he was sixteen because he doesn’t want to think about it anymore?”

“Isn’t that the scariest thing about getting to know someone for real—that they have a past? That they have complicated shit going on that they’ve had a long time to think about?” Sitting back, Grey’s face softened. It almost soothed her and it made her turn away again. Why did he have to look so much like George? “Look, I remember being eighteen and having none of my shit figured out. I know I’ve been putting a lot of stuff out there because I’m an asshole. But I really don’t want you to think that Kylo is doing this to make you feel shitty. He’s doing this because he’s him and this is sometimes the only way he knows how to operate when he’s upset and trying too hard.”

Biting her lip, she swallowed even though her throat was dry. “Grey, nothing makes sense right now. Is it always this hard? I want to keep trying but it’s just so hard.”

“He’s a hard guy but it’s only because he makes it that way. Dad’s the same way. We’re all afraid of being hurt and we do stupid things to…to protect ourselves. I’d like you to listen to me but you don’t have to if you don’t want to. Because I really think we’re feeling a lot of the same things right now.” He sighed and she had to look down to avoid getting drawn into his feelings. “And maybe the hardest things are the ones worth doing the most.”

She thought she knew Grey by now but maybe they’d really only had spotty conversations that were only really about her looking for advice and him replying honestly, while also holding back. But he was there now, tracing his fingers along the grain of the wood, looking so solemn that she had to believe him.

“Why didn’t you want him at first?” she asked, lifting her head. Would the story change another time?

“I don’t like reliving this with you, but fine.” He crossed his arms again and his leg started to bounce under the table. “The first time we were together, it was great but I thought, I mean, I thought it would be rougher or something. He’s a big guy and I was…ready for something different. It wasn’t. It was…just good. Soft and slow and…” He paused to rub his face. “Anyway, yeah. You know we’ve fucked. It was this intense weekend and I keep going back too, thinking about how hard I fucked up. Because when we went at it again, after another time, he just started sobbing in the middle of it. And I was in total shock. Like, did I do something wrong? Did I hurt you? Nah, he was worried about hurting me. It just shook me up and I couldn’t think about anything other than getting the fuck out of there. But I stayed for as long as I could and it was just so fucking hard. He just starts talking about all of this shit and all I could do was hold him. He has seen some truly brutal shit and has had horrible stuff done to him. He’s always talking about how he’s a monster, like he’s going to snap one day and kill a bunch of people. Hearing someone you just had sex with tell you that they were raped when he were seven isn’t the best feeling in the world. He’s got the memories of the stuff done to you locked in his head too and he keeps picking at it until it hurts enough to lose his mind.”

He took a deep breath, shaking his head and frowning. “He was so worried about you being away
with that shitty boyfriend you had and how he couldn’t get to you if anything happened. And, shit, the Poe stuff is just so fucked up. Having your boyfriend murdered when you’re twenty-one? I was…it takes a lot to really rattle me and this is where I fucked up. I fucked up so hard. He’s putting his soul out there and I’m drying his tears, yeah, but I’m also planning my exit strategy. I didn’t know what to say so I just left early when he was asleep. I sat in this stupid coffee shop and I regretted everything. I was just…back then, I wanted to be able to have some ammo on my dad or some stupid shit and be like ‘Yeah, your golden boy is fucked in the head and we’ve fucked.’ So I went back up there and handled it by being an idiot. I said some shit that he should have never forgiven me for. And we had sex again, sure, but I was such a slut so it doesn’t even matter. The last time, he was looking right at me and I should have realized something was different. Like, he had his mind on something else and I fucked it all up because I was in my own head too. I left him alone that last night and went out and got trashed and fucked someone else because I couldn’t get it out of my mind how hard he was hurting and how I didn’t want to deal with that shit. If I could go back to one moment in my stupid fucking life, I wouldn’t have walked out of that door. I would have gone back in there and been like ‘hey, I like you too. Let’s figure you out so you’re not so sad all of the time.’ But I didn’t do that. And I hurt him hard. I didn’t want him to leave, but I needed to get out of there. Things would have been different if I’d just stayed. He’s got so much love to give and I…” He trailed off, finally stopping to wipe his eyes again.

He sat silently for a moment, his face still before he shook his head again. “Fuck, you got so much there. Not even my dumb shrink hears this much. But there it is, Rey. I can’t go back into that room. I can’t get that moment back because he loves you too deeply to ever be with me in a real way like that ever again. I said no to him that last time and I really don’t ever want to say no again.”

Sucking on her lip, Rey could only manage a small nod.

“We’re all just human, Rey. We all make mistakes. I just don’t want you to repeat mine and let him push you away because he doesn’t know what he’s doing or has some dumb plan that’s blowing up in his face.” Grey brushed his hair back and checked his watch. “I know that it sucks that he’s been with other people, especially guys. But I think that if you sat down with his thoughts, you’d get him a little better. He loves you as you are.”

She could only fold her arms. “I’d really like you to go now.”

Standing, he tapped the journal again. “Fine. But read his books. Read his note and just…return his texts. Or something. Or I’m going to keep coming back.”

He finally left, leaving her alone in the house. Forcing herself to her feet, she punched the alarm code back in and curled up by the door.

Love in movies always looked so easy. Love was supposed to be something beautiful. Instead, everyone just got hurt. Han and Leia argued, and so did Hux and Paige. Finn had tried to fall in love with her and it just made him aggressive and hurt her. And Kylo had been in love and it almost destroyed him.

It was all too much.

Dragging herself off of the floor, she flopped down on the couch and just wanted to sleep until Kylo got back—if he got back.

She woke up in the middle of the night and felt cold. It was raining again, the sound pounding on the glass in heavy drops.
And she was hungry. She forgot to eat dinner.

Forcing herself up, she went to the kitchen to make tea. She eyed the protein bars in the cupboard and decided she needed something more than just a meal replacement. She couldn’t go back to that. She couldn’t mistreat her body, even if her head ached from the constant stream of thoughts in her head.

There was cheese. There were crackers. Making herself a snack, she glanced at the journal again and shook her head. Looking out at the rain on the deck, she noticed the broken ceramic that littered the wood. Turning on the porch light, she recognized the colours. She’d sipped hot chocolate from those mugs back in Kylo and Poe’s apartment. Poe put too many marshmallows in his and it overflowed, making her laugh when he tried to sip it up before Kylo noticed. But Kylo saw everything. They’d gone to the park that day and they convinced Kylo to play hide and seek with them, taking over the playground equipment. It felt so silly, but she saw how he laughed and how he looked at him with a light in his eyes that she hadn’t seen again…

Until he looked at her the night she kissed him.

Turning off the light, she sipped at her tea and finally sat down and read the note.

Dear Rey,

I am sorry that you are waking up alone and that I had to wake you up to go to work. I woke up early and could not get back to sleep. I watched you sleeping and you looked so hurt. I know that you must feel like you did not say the right things, like I was not listening. I do not think I was really listening. I am sorry for that. I have a hard time reliving the past and I say the wrong things. I know you think I am strong but deep down I am weak and make many, many mistakes with love. You should not have had to hear all of that in one night or even over the last few days. And you should have been able to tell me all of your hurts too. There are so many things I said wrong last night but I really hope that you love me enough, even though I do not deserve it, to read this note and my journals. I have always meant for you to read them. My life is nothing without you and I think that if you read them, you will see that I truly do not have a future without you. And that I have loved you for a very long time and always will, even if you no longer love me this way. I have had you in my life for eighteen years. Even if I leave, I will always come back to you. You can feel hurt. I would have felt the same. But if you leave, I will understand but will never forgive myself for hurting you this deeply.

Love always,

Ben

She had to stare at the name for a long moment as her heart tried to untangle what it meant. Then he wrote that he would clean up the mugs when he got back.

Slowly, she opened the first journal.

And quickly forgot her tea.

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She still couldn’t reply to his texts or answer his calls, but she told Han and Leia that she was fine.
And she didn’t want to go home right then.

The next time Grey stopped by, he found her in the office, surrounded by Kylo’s books and an empty cup of tea. He asked if he should make her a pot and she reluctantly agreed.

He set it on the desk and left without saying anything else.

She was thankful for the silence.

She really only got up to refill her cup or go to the bathroom. She would eat cereal in the kitchen, letting what she just read digest.

He detested himself. Every page was outlining another mistake, another imagined or real hurt. There were so many times when he wrote that he thought no one would ever love him; his damage made him into something that no one would ever want to be with. When he did find love, she watched it twist in his mind. There would be neat little paragraphs that outlined how he was sure Poe was going to leave him and he couldn’t let him. How he hated himself for everything sexual he messed up with him, how he didn’t deserve him. Forcing herself to read through some of the things he described, she slowly realized that he did do so many things that he thought would push Poe away and only realized it after the fact. He followed him. He wrote about how he knew where he was when he skipped class. He’d be almost proud of himself when he didn’t notice him, and then crushed when he did. The more she read, the heavier her grief sat in her chest for Poe. Because even when Kylo wrote about how much he wanted to be with him, he always returned to his thoughts for her. He only realized he truly loved him a year before the murder and they’d been together for almost four years at that point. How often did Poe sit up late at night and just watch him writing in his journal, wondering what was going on in his head? How would he have felt if he read how often she showed up in his thoughts rather than him? Leading up to his death, Kylo’s sorrow over her silence seemed to keep him from really being with him. He tried to take him out of town for his birthday and it turned into only him being unable to really be with him because of how much he missed her. Kylo had gone back afterwards to circle certain words that made no sense when she read them all together. He missed and loved her and wanted to love him too; he wanted to keep him safe and couldn't do that.

And the last thing she’d ever said to him was that she wished he was dead.

The lost summer after he was gone was the emptiest and took up the fewest pages. Kylo would start each date writing desperate letters to him, begging him to come back: just one more day and he’d be able to fix everything. She had to see her own actions that summer through his eyes and it was another stab of regret on her part. He needed her but didn’t know how to talk to her. He needed someone to share his grief with and she wouldn’t talk to him. They had grown up together and he couldn’t understand why it seemed like she still hated him.

Reading about their year apart was almost a relief. He worked hard to get through his grief, but still blamed himself for pushing her away and letting Luke control her. He wrote about how thankful he was for having George. He could talk to him, but was so afraid of disappointing him. She managed to smile when he wrote about how another agent thought he was his son, but then looked at the teapot on the desk and shook her head.

There were just so many pages and so many words. Seeing her name and reading about almost everything that she’d ever done retold through his eyes was like reading about someone else. He wanted her to be happy, to grow up and never be afraid or hurt, but he often wrote about how he had too much evil inside of him to give her real happiness if she ever found out what he was really like inside.
His thoughts about his sexuality were also overwhelming. It seemed innocent when he was sixteen, but by the time she pulled out a book when he was twenty-five, it really showed how he was uncomfortable about so many things with the side of him that was attracted to men. He would often refer back to his time with Liza as his time with *her* and it would be underlined. He kept thinking that he would hurt her but none of those descriptions told Rey that he had. He liked breasts. He liked how they felt. But he also liked smooth firm chests. He had been thinking about this for so long and she’d just taken his hatred for Liza as hating being with girls.

But his memories of how all of the girls had been hurt by Snoke made her heart break for him. What he’d said before he left, and the parts he’d let leak over the years, paled next to the depth of his descriptions of what Snoke had done to them. He had gone back and added their real names to the names that Snoke had given them. He’d write in the margins: *remember her pain.* And his ultimate dread and fear was that Snoke would one day take her and press himself inside of her and take all of her innocence.

He hated himself for making her lie at first about being molested. He hated himself for never doing more to help them as they were screaming for him and he had to watch.

Hate.

Hate.

Hate.

Putting the book down, Rey sobbed.

The light in his life came from her. He’d had five years of turbulent happiness with someone else but his twisted sort of love there had made him permanently afraid that he would do it again. The pages about Grey retold the start of a similar sort of relationship. He had fought against himself to stay in his room that night and not follow him. And then he’d shattered his hopes for anything and now Grey regretted it too.

Looking at her phone, she saw more missed calls and texts from him. Swallowing, she still couldn’t talk to him.

So she slept. She got up and ate. He still wasn’t home so she went and read more.

And by the time he opened the door, early on Saturday morning, she finally knew what she was going to say to him.

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He was passed out on her chest, exhausted from the case and their conversation. His kisses had been overwhelming, but seeing the raw fatigue on his face when he got home had almost broke her heart again. The fear from the journals lined his face. He’d driven himself too hard to get back to her and now that he was there, she wasn’t going to let him go.

Seeing him collapse and having to drag him to bed made her understand the depths of his worry even further. He thought no one would ever love him again and was so afraid of losing her.

She couldn’t let him do that to himself again. *She* couldn’t do that to him again.
Even though it hurt, he depended on her strength to help him guide them through this so they could be happy. Maybe she was stronger than she thought.

She had to find it because she wanted to be happy with him forever. First, they had to find that happiness. Then, they had to keep it. But if his broken feelings from that brutal early morning meant anything, he wanted to be there and find that path. He was so tired of feeling alone. And she did too.

Feeling him sleeping against her, she ran her hand down his arm again. The dried blood flaked off in her nail and she winced.

There was still so much to talk about, but she finally fell asleep feeling like there was hope for them. He knew her heart and now she knew his soul. And she was determined to convince him it wasn’t as ugly as he thought it was.

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It was a hard morning in another way for Rey when she finally woke up.

Kylo was already awake, his brown eyes watching her as she slept.

“How are you feeling?” His voice was low and careful, still expecting her to be mad at him for something she just wanted to put behind them. But maybe it was worth dealing with so it didn't shake the foundation again.

She shook her head. “Tired, but you gave me a lot to think about. And I think I’m ready to be okay now.”

“It was unfair of me,” he sighed, rubbing his eyes and sitting up too. “I just threw everything out there and didn’t really stop to ask how you were thinking. What,” he paused, flicking his eyes to her and actually listening to what she said, “are you really okay?”

She wasn’t really sure yet, but had to nod and start to believe the thought. Kylo had peeled back the layers of the past and she still didn’t think of him in a different way. If anything, she loved him more now because she knew every part of him. Even though she hadn’t read everything, she knew almost all of his secrets and they almost all came down to his love for her. His darkness hurt but he’d tried to change before and could do it again. She’d known it was there all along, she realized. It had been there and he still got up out of bed and went about his day. Watching him do normal things, out in the world, was what she wanted to focus on. In his mind, he was constantly abnormal. That wasn’t what she knew and she had to make sure that he understood himself through her eyes too.

“I’m almost there. What I know is that you’re too hard on yourself. That you were having a bad day the last time we talked and went to a dark place.” She reached out, tracing her hand down the length of his scar. “But I want to help you through your darker sides. I still have mine, and I know
you’ll be there for me. Maybe I need to save you again.”

He leaned up into her hand. “And I need to save you too. And we also need to make one another happy and stop arguing all of the time. Rey, I know you’ve felt alone but I have too. I miss doing simple things without being worried about ruining them. I want this to work for us and I end up overthinking things and hurting you. I’ve always done that.”

“So another plan of yours isn’t working?” She quirked her lips, only slightly, but got a small smile from him in return. Reading about all of his plans made her realize that he really hadn’t gotten everything he wanted in life and getting into the FBI hadn’t been something he just walked into by having connections and being good at school. “Kylo, you’ll always be in my life. You don’t need to make a plan with me. I’m here. This is where I want to be. And I…” she took a deep breath, “I know that you don’t want to forget some things and that you should forget other things. It wasn’t your fault that he hurt all of us. I remember when I was fourteen and couldn’t imagine getting through everything you lived through. But you did.”

She didn’t want to see flashes of weeping children in her mind but it shook through her. All of those times someone would arrive pretty, but scared, only to be turned into a sobbing heap. But Kylo had to do things that he shouldn’t be blaming himself for; they both knew that. He just forgot sometimes.

“And about the other things…My friends helped me figure out what I wanted to remember or forget with Finn. When I think about my family not wanting me, I talk to them and you. I know you talk to your friends and your therapists about these things but I get why you thought you could never tell me about a lot of it with how I acted sometimes. Grey told me that I have to figure some stuff out and not make the same mistakes as he did. But your past…it’s all so…personal. But I feel better knowing it. You don’t have to always protect me from what you think you are. I love you and thank you for sharing it with me.” She kept watching his eyes, waiting for a reaction.

He nodded, lightly. Sighing, he straightened his shoulders to take her hands. She still kept eyeing his arm and the rings under his eyes, but his touch was still firm. “I like thinking about better things, happier things. I know that’s hard to believe, but I do like being happy when I can get there. Before I left, Maz told me to do something that would make me happy and proud of myself and all I could do was unload on you. That wasn’t fair.”

“No, you wanted to talk. And with the sex...stuff, it still hurts to imagine you with someone else but it’s something that happened. I'm trying to get better at not thinking it was something you did to hurt me. But I don’t want to find anyone else.” She looked away for a moment to blush. “And I don’t think you’re a monster for reacting when I was fifteen.”

“I don’t understand how you can still look at me. I kept putting words in your mouth and guessing how you were thinking. It wasn’t fair.” She noticed him following her eyes to the warm sun shining behind the drawn curtains. She remembered helping Han set up the curtain rods. How had he lived in that house for months without curtains? “But of everything I said, the part I meant most was that I do love you. I want to stop trying so hard. I want to relax. I want to show you that all of your thoughts about me aren’t wrong. Telling you all of that stuff, letting you read everything about me, was hard but if you still want to be with me, knowing all of that, then I can be better to you.”

She finally met his eyes again and sighed. Mornings like this were better than mornings like yesterday. “I make you want to be better?”

“Yes,” he answered quickly. “Because sometimes all I can see are the bad parts of me. Especially when I’m not sleeping.”
“Can I tell you some of the good parts?” She tilted her head, taking her chance to try to get him out of his head. He’d been there all this week and she spent her sleepless hours trying to untangle what it was like to be there all of the time too. “You have a nice house and you take care of it.”

He smirked, but still sighed. “I never realized that I’ve gotten used to having nice things. But Owen teases me about my suits and my haircut. But I like things a certain way. I can’t help it.”

Shaking her head, Rey lightly bit her lip. “It’s still weird that you’re grown up now. You can really go anywhere and do anything. It didn’t really feel real until you moved here. I liked your apartments but I really like it here. Benji is going to love your backyard and the swing set.”

“I was going to ask Grey but we can build it together when it gets delivered.” He looked at her for a long moment before glancing at the clock. “I have to get moving if I’m going to make it there on time. We have more questioning to do today but hopefully we can hand it off to the locals. I just want to forget about this case. But, Rey, I’m...I feel better now that you understand. I didn’t say all of those things to hurt you. Maybe I was trying to push you away because I don’t want to be hurt again. And I’m wrong to think that way.”

Nodding, Rey returned to looking at the curtain. “I know you don’t want to be hurt again. But I’m okay. I want to have a good day today. I’m glad we could start talking about some of these things. It hurt that it had to be that way but we...it’s like you said. We’re not normal. I know the bad things won’t go away right away, but now that I know more, I can figure some things out. And it would be nice if you stopped trying to plan everything and just be yourself.”

He leaned over, pressing a light kiss to her cheek. “I’ll try to do that.”

It was a soft kiss, one that had used to be the innocent type that he had given her when they were younger. But now, after she’d dug through parts of his past and tried to put it all together, she knew that this one was different.

Leaving her alone for the washroom, Rey played with the comforter on the bed. They’d only been together a short time in this different way. Kylo was trying to treat her like an equal, telling her all of these things that he saved more for his friends. She wanted to be able to handle it, but some of it did hurt and it hadn't all gone away by sleeping with him in her arms. Glancing at the phone, she frowned again. She did miss him too; she had her pictures of him saved back home. She sometimes missed her friendship with Liza too; she hoped that she was okay, doing whatever she wanted with her life in her unique and honest way. Grey was kind and caring, but also a bit of a mystery despite his openness and anger the other morning. He was hurting too, deeply, because of all of this. But Kylo didn’t want to be with him. Even Grey only pictured a relationship that was based on arguing and heartbreak.

Well, all they’d done was really argue since she arrived. And it was stressing them both out.

He was trying too hard to change himself, she thought. And it wasn’t working as fast as he wanted. It was like with studying; he was getting frustrated and lashing out. With all of the thoughts in his head, he was forgetting that she had feelings too. He had realized that he’d hurt her and went into himself. Now, they wouldn’t have time to talk about it until dinner, or maybe even later.

But that meant more than enough time to go through how she really felt, to finish off some of the thoughts she’d started building as she read. Did it hurt that he thought she deserved someone better, someone who wasn’t him? Did it hurt that he kept drifting back to how he thought he just hurt everyone? She’d have the day to find a way to talk to him that evening. He wanted her there; that
mattered the most.

The shower sprung to life and she shrugged to herself, leaving the bed to make breakfast. She still had plans to make dinner that night. Maybe it was her turn to make a plan for him.

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Rey watched him gather up his things and then take a long, deep breath by the door. He was changed and looked more focused, but still tired. He really shouldn’t be driving, she suddenly realized. He’d had only about nine hours of sleep since Tuesday, if he was telling the truth. And it was Saturday. After reading all of the times he’d stayed awake for days, just writing and remembering the hateful past, she didn’t doubt him. All of the little chores of last week would have to wait until she was more comfortable taking care of it herself. She’d also need to be able to drive to do that. The thought made her blush.

“Kylo…” she started as he fingered his key ring by the door. “I wish I could help you more with the stuff you won’t be able to get done today…”

“I know.” He sighed. “We can work on you getting your license here. And then we’ll figure out the car insurance.”

“Why would we have to do that?”

He blinked. “Technically, my car is government property when I use it for work. I never really thought more about it until now but there are probably issues with you driving it. I’ll ask someone about it today if there’s time. But Han will have no problem getting you your own car when you’re ready. He’d probably really like that too.”

He really was thinking clearer this morning, but there was still some lingering sadness in his eyes.

A strange idea crossed her mind as she watched him adjust the harness of his weapon. “Kylo, would you have to take a bullet for the president if someone shot at him?”

He grinned, a real smile, breaking away some of the distant sorrow that still must be rattling through his tired mind. “That sounds like a Benji question. I guess I’d have to. I wouldn’t want to but I guess I would. Probably the governor too. I don’t vote but I’ll try not to ever be in that situation.”

She knew she was keeping him, but he also looked like he really didn’t want to leave. “Why don’t you vote?”

Shrugging, Kylo leaned against the doorframe, still playing with his keys. “I thought it was pointless. We got all of that money from the government to make us go away. I know I work for them now, but I never wanted to be a part of that stupid process. Han asked me if I wanted to register to vote when I turned eighteen and I said no. He dropped the subject and I ignored politics since then. He’d still glare at me on Election Day and I’d just leave the room. I fake it whenever I have to talk about politics. If I didn’t have to look at a picture of him everyday, I wouldn’t even know what the president looks like.”

“I’d still like to see the White House,” she started, then thought about what he just said, “but maybe I’ll go with someone else.”
He smiled again. “Just in case someone tries to shoot him and I’d have to dive in front of him?”

“Yeah.” She returned the look. It felt so good to talk about silly things. But a sad thought still followed it and his handwriting from his earliest journal flashed in front of her eyes. “Kylo, I’m sorry you thought you would have to die for me.”

The passages that repeated the story of their escape brought back so many memories for her too. She couldn’t remember the words that were said now, but the memory of Kylo scrambling up the stairs alone, covered in blood with tears in his eyes still walked in her dreams.

He really did go downstairs with Snoke intending to die for her. And then he realized he needed to live for her—he killed to get her out. The words that underlined what he did were some of the few lines that showed that his hands were shaking as he wrote them. He’d strangled him. He’d beat his face in and thought he wouldn’t be able to stop. And he liked doing it. No wonder the fear of killing someone refused to die in his mind.

“I wanted to keep you alive.” He sighed, blinking as he dropped his head. “I thought it was the only thing I could do. But I couldn’t get your face out of my mind and I was finally able to stop him. You really did save me.”

“I’m…thank you.” There was so much more she could say. But she had to let him go at some point. She could sort out her thoughts and tell him later. “Have a good day, Kylo.”

He was also reluctant to go but finally reached for the doorknob. “I’ll see you tonight. But I’ll text if I’m stuck there again.”

He left after one last look and Rey had a morning to herself. Folding her arms across her chest, she left the entrance for the office, surveying the mess they’d left last night. The piles of journals were still spread out everywhere. The sensation of him clinging to her flashed back into her mind, reminding her of the strength of his hands but also the pain in his heart. The sounds of him breaking down still remained in the room, prompting her to remember that there were still hurts out there to deal with but maybe it was finally time to accept who they were to one another.

He was so driven, but also thought so much about what he did wrong. And it didn’t feel good to walk through his memories through his eyes at times. Even he knew that. He had small markers in certain places, written in a different pen colour. Like his indexing, she knew he reread the journals, probably on nights when he couldn’t sleep. He’d write small notes to himself: You were happy here. Rey was happy this week. You didn’t think about Poe this week. George said you did a good job, stop worrying about it. Rey was happy here. Rey liked this. Rey loves you…

Still looking at the books, she felt her phone buzz in her sweatshirt pocket. I can clean up the office. I trust you to organize them, but I still want to do it. I owe you that. Kylo must be sitting in the car, knowing where she’d go. Looking at the mess, she shrugged and closed the door. He would always have trouble with control, but so did she.

After shedding her clothes, she started the shower. It was warm and she took in the gentle rhythm of the stream. Her body was still sensitive from last night. The feeling of his shaking hands and soft mouth reminded her that Kylo wanted to be with her, no matter what her body looked like. He wanted pleasure and wanted her to share in it. Would it have felt good to have him lose himself fully in her body last night? She replayed the events and sighed. There had been too many emotions last night and she had gotten lost in them. He was too exhausted to do more than collapse. But remembering him breaking down reminded her that going further was sacred to him. He couldn’t just pour more hurt into her without creating new regrets. It was okay to stop. And he
didn’t pull away because he didn’t desire her. He was broken and wanted to give himself over to her, but he was also drained, emotionally and physically. He pushed himself so hard for her. She couldn’t blame him for that, other than he was putting his body through hell.

He’d been hard on her but he was afraid, afraid that he’d lose her. And he reacted to fear like he always did. He lashed out and tried to control the situation. Last night, that cracked inside of him.

And he still got up and went to work.

Drying off, she sighed at herself in the mirror. He’d be exhausted when he got home. She could feel her own fatigue settle around her and sighed. Whatever tonight turned into, it should show him that she still cared about him.

Her phone vibrated on the counter. *U comin in today?*

*Yes. I’ll be there. I don’t need a ride.*

*Kk.*

Grey always texted like he didn’t care or like he couldn’t read. God, the mean thoughts she’d had about him. He’d been kind to her, letting her talk about things that must hurt him. His firm words that morning had been more than fair. She still wasn’t sure how she’d talk to him about all of this, but just seeing him again might make it easier to figure things out. Kylo wanted her to have friends. He should have his own. And deep down, she trusted Kylo’s real thoughts about him: they wouldn’t have worked out and it would have destroyed his relationship with George. Even if he had thought about the idea in the last three years, he didn’t know that she was going to kiss him. That brutal sort of honesty had to be out there so she would understand how he thought he’d be alone for the rest of his life and the most important in his life in that time would still be her. Now that they had something more and neither of them were alone, he had to change his plans. And Kylo was bad at letting go of how he pictured the future.

Slipping on a change of clothes, she grabbed her phone again. *Do you have time to get lunch today?*

Brianna took a few minutes to respond. *Sure. That place across from the library?*

The few texts they’d shared weren’t enough; now Rey really wanted to get to know her friend. It would be nice to talk to someone else about all of this. She should call Leia again to let her know that things were on their way to being better. She’d end up saying the wrong things if she called her now so she put off the idea.

So she started her day. She drank tea. When she tossed out the teabag and saw the broken mug shards in the trash and sighed again. That sadness could wait for a while. She missed him and his light too. Maybe it would get easier if they missed him together rather than apart from different places. Kylo was right; the hurt would never really go away until he found out who did it. He’d threatened her too. Part of him solving that murder was also about keeping her safe. He couldn’t lose her in that way too. There had been so much fear in his writing about that. And it was always in the back of her mind too.

She grabbed her bag, her jacket and set the alarm. Getting her bike out of the garage, she put on her headphones and started the ride to the library. Not leaving the house for days hadn’t been good for her. It took a few minutes to get the stiffness out of her legs. Kylo must be unbelievably sore right now. He was going to force himself into thinking about complicated things and discussing hard things in meetings. All she had to do was read to children, help the seniors, and do simple tasks.
Shaking her head at herself, she switched to the next song and tried again not to compare their days. He had is and she had hers. That’s all it was. Han and Leia never thought that one or the other had a harder or easier day.

But it was nice to be outside and alone with her thoughts.

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Grey was balancing a book on his head, his feet up in the break room. Saturdays meant he was in charge and that also meant he’d find different ways to goof off out of boredom, while still keeping things going. It wouldn’t be a long day but it would still feel that way until she saw Kylo again.

“Hey, how are you doing?” He quirked his head, flipping the book in his hands. “Still pissed at me?”

Instead of saying anything, she just walked up and hugged him, gripping him hard from behind. She put her arm around his shoulders and tried to figure out what she wanted to say.

“Hey are you okay?” he asked as she pulled away, moving to sit beside him. His eyes were wide and searching her face for an answer.

Looking at Grey, Rey clenched her jaw. “Can you just…sit there? And let me say some things like you’re…Poe?”

“I can’t pretend to have better hair but…” he caught the look in her eyes and snapped his mouth shut. “Yeah. Okay.”

She inhaled through her nose, biting her lip as she looked at her hands. “I’m sorry for what I said to you. I never thought you’d die. I miss you so much and wish you were here. I miss how you used to hug me. I miss how much fun we used to have and how you were always so nice to me and you didn’t have to be. You loved me so much when you didn’t have to. You were always so real and I miss you and wish that Kylo had treated you better. But he loved you and I’m so sorry he loved you the wrong way. He’s not very good at knowing what to do and he did so many things wrong but he was trying with you like he’s trying with me now. And I see that now. If you…if you were still here, I think everything would be more okay. He wouldn’t have hurt for so long. Maybe I wouldn’t have wanted to be with him but now that I do I see how hard it must have been for you just to stay with him. I never wanted Kylo to feel sad so maybe I was angry at him for feeling too much. I just want to talk to you one more time and hear that you were really happy with him. I miss you. I miss you so much. Can’t you just come back? For us?”

The tears started to slip down her face and Grey was already in motion, pulling her into his arms and holding her tightly. “It’s okay, sweet pea. You’re taking care of him. It’s okay. I love you and wish I could be here but I’m not. Keep going. You’re doing okay.”

Pressing her head against his chest, she sighed from her toes to her head. “How did you know he called me that?”

“Ky told me, when we were talking about him.” He still held her. “It’s also his password for his gaming account. He hates it when I log in as him but I do it anyway because he really should change it for his own good.”
Sniffling, she finally stepped back. “What do you think that means, Grey?”

“It means…” Grey bit his lip and then shrugged. “I think, when we’re screwing around with our stupid games, he really misses how things used to be. Like, if he could get back some of those good days, the bad ones would suck less.”

Rey nodded. “He was the first person he told about being…being raped. I never knew that for so many years. And when I read it again, it hurt so much. I can talk about what he did to me but hearing it from him…I just can’t believe he’s been so hurt and I was there for a lot of it.”

Taking a deep breath, the blue-eyed man guided her to a chair again. He sat down beside her, taking her hand. “It took him a while to really tell me everything that happened to him and even then, I don’t think it’s everything. But I’ve been trying to make it up to him by being a good friend. And with what he works with now, he gets really intense and keeps going back to how he couldn’t stop him from hurting him or everyone else. He bounces back after a couple of days. He’s a strong guy but he still needs our help. And I think Poe would have loved that apology. And Ky would be proud of you too. So I think you read what he wrote and you’ve figured some stuff out, right?”

Rey dropped her head. Having to read about how Kylo felt about all of his abuse had settled hard in her chest and she still just kept blaming Kylo for hurting her. Would he ever want to talk about this again? He might want to be with her but she’d ignored some of the depths of his hurt. He might be too afraid to bring it up again. Now that she’d read all about it, would he be able to be that open with her again without worrying how she’d react?

“I think I messed up.” She sighed, looking at her hands. “He needs to talk about this with me to keep getting better. I want to keep getting better too but I didn’t understand everything until I read them. And I might have said the wrong things too and I don’t think I’ve apologized enough.”

Grey leaned forward, trying to catch her eyes. “Then you need to be a little like him and apologize after thinking about it. Just avoid overthinking it. Maybe take it slowly. He gets squirrely eyed and defensive when he doesn’t want to talk. And, hell, maybe give him a chance to feel good about himself tonight first then apologize.”

“Did he…” Now her mind was really spinning and she realized she was acting just like Kylo. “He didn’t talk about the case. He just kept…apologizing.”

Smirking, Grey sat back. “Dad said he figured out a lot of it. Owen was a little worried here and there that was going to lose it but he saved three kids. I heard dad on the phone this morning. He’s really proud of him because it was one of those ‘too close’ cases that they’re always worried about him touching. Because they’re a bunch of fascists.”

“He just said how he didn’t sleep the entire time. I thought…I was only thinking about myself.” Biting her lip, a small ball of shame joined her wealth of hurt for Kylo. Grey rubbed her back, his face seeming to understand what she was thinking about. “He’s so hard on himself and he just…listened to me talk.”

Sighing, Grey frowned slightly at her. “I have to say this to him all of the time, but don’t be so hard on yourself. You’ve had a lot of stuff to think about since you got here. And Ky isn’t easy to be around all of the time. Let him relax tonight. Let yourself relax. I can’t smoke weed in dad’s house and they’d fire Ky if he did, but I can get you some if you want.”

She wasn’t sure he was being serious or not and she didn’t want to either way. “No thanks, Grey. It would…I’d feel good doing something for him. Something nice. I can’t pick up his clothes but I don’t think he wants me to. I feel…horrible for ignoring him all week now that I understand how
he feels.”

Grey smacked his lips and finally stood. “Yeah, I mean, Rey…you’re still young but I know the feeling. He’s been worried about you and kind of forgetting about himself some of the time, then obsessing about himself the rest of the time and he’s going to pull himself apart. I don’t think you have to question that he wants to be with you but maybe cut him some slack. I’m swinging by after work to cut the grass, but you can help me out there too. Clean up the house. Make him some dinner, let him drink a bottle of wine then regret it later, and get him to laugh about the stupid shit he likes.”

“Is that…is that what dates are like?” she asked.

His grin nearly consumed his face. “Yeah. That’s an at-home Ky date. I know you don’t like drinking but if he’s still on the same meds, he should let go a little for a night.”

The front desk clerk interrupted their conversation and Grey had to finally leave her, rolling his eyes the entire time, pretending he didn’t like being in charge.

Maybe there were more people around her she could talk to about this.

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“What’s a nice thing I could do for Kylo?”

Brianna looked up from her menu and shrugged. “Well, what does he like? I’ve been around him but I don’t really know him. When he’s been to my house, he’s mostly just quiet. He asks questions but doesn’t say anything about himself.”

“He likes…” she started, not having to really think hard. “He likes being outside. He likes video games but totally different ones from me. He likes watching movies when he’s relaxed enough. He likes reading and writing. He really likes working out when he has time. I guess he likes really nice things too. He likes it when I make him things. He’s always liked that.”

Nodding, Brianna quirked her head at her. “Did you guys have a fight or something?”

Rey had to hold her tongue for a moment as they ordered. Inside, she was happy for the interruption. But when the waitress left, she had to get back to her new friend’s question.

“It wasn’t really a fight. We were just talking about the past before he had to go out of town on a case.” She sipped at her iced tea and then sighed. “He’s dated other people before me and he gets obsessed with how those relationships ended. My only other boyfriend…hurt me before we broke up. I think maybe we’re both afraid of hurting one another. So we’ve argued. A bit. But it’s better now that he’s home and I want to keep making it better for both of us.”

“The first part sucks but it’s good that he’s back. My dad is in Texas or something.” Brianna sat up straighter, showing her she was listening. “I broke up with my boyfriend when I went to college. I don’t really miss him, but we wanted different things. So now I can just have fun at school and try to find someone I really like. Boys aren’t really different at college but some of them are really nice. Others are just awful. It’s like the world, I guess.”

“Yeah, I guess it is. Kylo…he was engaged once like seven years ago and that person was
murdered. He thinks about it a lot and he feels terrible about not being able to protect him. I thought for a while, he’d moved on. Like, he, um, he tried to date Grey but that didn’t work out either. I got mad at him about that. I just remember how he looked when he was with his first boyfriend. He seems so much more tense around me. He also has an easier time talking to Grey. Before I figured it out, I thought he just liked guys and I wasn’t good enough.”

She was opening up too quickly, but she wasn’t sure who else to talk to. Her friends back home didn’t know Grey and she couldn’t talk to Han and Leia about this yet. Brianna was really her only connecting point.

Brianna was still thinking when their food arrived. They both ordered salads. But they were big salads so Rey knew she wouldn’t be hungry in the afternoon. Kylo telling her that she was beautiful as she was kept her from falling into the hole of hating her body, but like him harming himself, she was still scared of the wrong paths that her brain could lead her down.

“I think I get it,” Bri said. “You just moved here, right? To be with him? He’s probably used to being alone with his thoughts. Now that you’re around, he’s trying to figure everything out. And I’ve never dated anyone bi before, but that might be bothering him too. But, I mean, you have to have your own space in the relationship. I know how stressed out my dad is because of work but you can’t let him walk all over you. That’s totally not fair.”

She nodded. “I know that. But I know he’s trying. He’s probably trying just a little too hard.”

“He’s an FBI agent. All they know how to do is try too hard. But if you want to do something nice for him, maybe just make him dinner and find something fun to do after. It finally stopped raining. Maybe have a picnic.” Brianna smiled. “Maybe it will make you feel better too.”

And Rey was even more thankful that she left the house.

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Grey offered to give her a ride home and she declined, saying she had her bike.

“Everything still okay?” he asked, looking at her with questions in his eyes.

She hadn’t been actively avoiding him all day, but had kept more to herself since they talked. The other students didn’t really notice, but Grey had been giving her suspicious looks most of the day. She deserved the question.

“I didn’t really apologize to you too this morning. I’m sorry if…I’m sorry you also love him too and can’t be with him.” She swallowed and met his eyes.

Wincing, Grey fiddled with the pocket of his hoodie and then shrugged. “Yeah it…it’s something I need to work on myself. But I’m not here to steal him from you or some shit. But I know you guys can be happy when you let some of this stuff go. If you want, I can back off a little more. I can just lie and say that I’ve found some great boyfriend in the city and brush him off.”

Was that what she wanted? She never got mad when Hux and Kylo spent time together. They ate lunch all of the time when she was in school and it never bothered her. But Grey was still different. “You don’t have to do that. If you want to hang out, I know that it’s just because you’re friends. I don’t want to give him another reason to be worried.”

“Yeah, he’s been doing that a lot lately. But I’m glad, you know, that you guys have worked some
Grey sucked in his bottom lip for a second before shrugging again. “But hey, if you ever need to talk, I’m here for you too. Don’t forget that. I’ll be by soon to cut the grass. The neighbours are going to complain if it gets any worse.”

She managed to smile at him. “I haven’t forgotten. I’ll see you at home later.”

“Sure thing. I’ve got my key.”

In the late afternoon sunlight, she took the long bike ride home. Following the map on her phone, she found the grocery store that Kylo had mentioned, tucked away and far from the main grocery store. It wasn’t hard to find, but the small strip-mall was almost easier to get to on her new bike. It was further than she wanted to go so wearing jeans had been a good idea. Still, she looked forward to finding the edges of the neighbourhood in a bright, flowing dress. It would be like a movie, one of the older movies that Rose loved. She could be alone with her thoughts and still in motion.

Focusing on what to make for dinner also helped take her mind off of some of the harder things that Kylo still thought about at times. He didn’t want to be with Grey, he wanted to be with her. He wanted to let go of parts of Poe, but wouldn’t be fully free of his pain over losing him until he figured out who really killed him. She also wanted him to find the murderer. He’d found her once and, in the back of her mind, the fear never went away. Kylo had a schedule again; he had routines on weeks that weren’t devoted to a case. If anyone had found him, he knew exactly when he left for work. She was actually surprised that he let her have a bike.

The air was still warm when she put her shopping into her bike’s basket. She unzipped her coat, letting the sun warm her. He let her have a bike because he trusted her to watch out for anyone who looked like he might hurt her. Teaching Benji the hiding game was also about paying attention to danger.

She started riding and tried to push away the darker thoughts.

Grey was already there when she got home. She started cooking the rice and mixing the filling for sushi, occasionally drifting to the window to watch him. He did look focused on doing something right. She had a hard time being in the same room with Finn and couldn’t imagine ever cutting his parents’ grass if someone asked her. But her feelings for Finn were different than Grey’s for Kylo.

After rolling the sushi, she quickly went upstairs to the office. Stepping into the office and edging around the books she grabbed her pens and sketchbook.

Kylo texted when he was on his way home. And it would still mostly be sunny out by the time he got home.

Things weren’t perfect yet but she felt lighter. Her thoughts throughout most of the day had been easier and she didn’t dread him getting home.

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She texted him that she was in the backyard. And she had to smile when he came out onto the deck with a bouquet of flowers in his hands, clenching his hands for a moment as he looked at her. He had shed his tie and gun holster and still wore a lot of tiredness on his face, but he didn’t look like he was dreading to talk to her again. He actually looked more nervous, shifting his weight as he studied her from where he stood.
She’d found an old quilt in the garage when Grey was putting the lawn mower away. It looked vaguely familiar and she couldn’t place where it was from, but it looked like it might work.

And then she set up a small picnic for them. They had chopsticks but decided it would be easier to eat with their hands. The air was still warm even as the sun was setting. August wouldn’t last forever but they could have a soft moment together with clear skies above them.

“Did you buy me flowers because you think I’m still mad at you?” Rey asked, tilting her head to smile at him. She stood up and straitened her dress, watching him take the steps down to the lawn.

He bit his lip and then finally nodded. “Did you set this up because you think I’m still mad at you?”

She answered him by hugging him. The brush of the flowers against her back as he held her made her sigh even as they scratched her skin. He had always been thinking of her: his light in the darkness.

“I’m not mad at you. I wanted you to come home to something nice.” She stepped back, taking the flowers and smiling. “How did it go today?”

He sat down on the quilt and sighed, deeply. “I need a few minutes to think of an answer. The vases are on the top shelf in the middle cupboard. I can get one…”

Shaking her head, she took in how he looked. With his legs stretched out, he looked less tired. But he also looked like he really didn’t want to get up. It was how he’d always spread out on the couch, demanding that no one bother him. He was resting on his elbows, looking at the food and the wine bottle. And just one glass.

“Grey helped me pick out the wine,” she said, blushing.

“I’m glad he could help you out.”

She turned and went to retrieve a vase. It was a mixed bouquet of many types of flowers. Soft, white baby’s-breath, a large white lily in the middle surrounded by green leaves and small pink sweet peas…

She left the flowers on the table and grabbed her sketchbook.

“I also made you something,” she said, flipping to the page. “It’s not finished yet.”

He looked at the drawing, reaching to take the book from her hands. She had also drawn a sweet pea, one that looked so similar to the flowers he’d bought. “It’s beautiful, Rey. I…I know you had to read some of the hard things I did to him but I really did care about him. And it still hurts that he’s gone.”

Sitting down, she fixed her dress around her knees. The flowing pale blue stood out against the dark charcoal of his trousers and the faded brown of the blanket. “I felt that. I…I don’t know if this will sound silly but I apologized to him today. I see so much of him in Grey and I just talked to him like he was there. And I feel…it hurts so much less now.”

Reaching for her, he hugged her again. He was so warm and she wanted to sit like that the rest of the night. How could he ever think that his hands could ever hurt her? He had to stop thinking that way. When he pulled back, she lightly brushed her lips to his, just to see him smile again.

“I’m starving,” he admitted. “And it would be nice to talk about this case. We got a confession and
I still have a report to write on Monday, but it still feels like one long day and I’m so fucking glad it’s over.”

They ate with their hands. And at first Kylo would pause to ask if he could have more wine but finally settled into accepting that she was okay with it. When shadows crossed into the yard, he gave her his suit coat. With it draped on her shoulders, she watched how he ate. He wasn’t just pushing the sushi around his plate. He liked it. She had to make more dinners for him like this. But telling her about the case made him frown and sip his wine more. He didn’t sound like he was proud of himself, but from what he was saying he had done a lot of hard work while pushing himself, running on fumes.

“You saved those kids,” she said, putting her hand on his leg to get him to stop going over some minor detail that had been bothering him. “Kylo, it sounds like you did everything right.”

He licked his lips. “I should have tried to sleep. It won’t be a very good report because I have some trouble remembering some things. But Owen can hopefully fill in some of that now that I’ve admitted to not really sleeping the entire time. He wasn’t happy but he still wants us to come over for dinner tomorrow.”

Nodding, she pulled away to eat another piece of sushi. She remembered not to make any with shrimp. Kylo hated them. “It would be nice. When you were away, I still talked to some people but didn’t really leave the house. I didn’t think about how different things look when you step away from them.”

He dropped his head for a moment and sighed. “I always have a hard time remembering that. But I’m glad… I’m glad you had a good day. It made it easier to talk to the suspect today. I wasn’t only worrying about you being okay.”

“I went to the library. I got to help people. I took my bike out. It was a nice day.” She pulled his jacket closer, watching him pour himself more wine. His posture was changing and he had finished half of the bottle. “Is it good?”

Smirking, Kylo sipped from his glass. “It’s not an expensive one, but it’s still good. Grey and I took a course together and he didn’t pay attention. He was just there to get drunk and I got mad at him. But I told him he’s free to take whatever. He did a good job on the lawn.”

He ran his hand on the grass, almost frowning. A line from his journal struck her in that moment. He wanted the responsibility of owning a house, of having nice things, but couldn’t do all of the tasks that it entailed. But at least he could prove to himself that he could ask for help. And Grey, despite how it hurt, did it for him.

“Kylo, maybe he should just live here.” Rey picked up a piece of sushi, popping it in her mouth as he thought about what she was saying. He narrowed his eyes for a moment, looking at her with a hint of surprise. She swallowed and still looked at him. “I think I’d like him around.”

“He’s getting his own place soon. It’s not far from here. I’ll help him move so I can pay him back a little at a time. It’s just a rental so he’ll probably leave most of his stuff at George’s. He thinks he’s going to screw it up and will just move back.” He set his glass down and moved some of the pieces around his place to sop up some soya sauce. “It’s so nice that you can make this. I don’t think I’d be patient enough.”

He was changing the subject, but she knew they’d get back to their friend. At least, she hoped that Grey was still her friend. With all of the things they’d said to one another, it felt like they’d never get as close as Kylo was to Grey. But did she even want that?
“It’s not hard. It just takes practice.” She waited to take another piece until he had eaten one. “I gave Grey the bad pieces.”

He smiled, a slow and easy one as he chewed. Wiping his mouth with a napkin, the smile remained. “So if he’d lived here, he’d be like our dog.”

“No, I…” She was about to defend herself until she saw how his eyes shifted. “You’re teasing me.”

“No. I’m being serious. He can sleep on the foot of the bed too. He’d probably like that.” Kylo focused on his plate for a moment before giving her another grin. It slowly slipped away and he took a long drink of wine. “I miss our dogs. You never knew Chewie. He was really dad’s dog but I used to call him mine. I’m so glad Hux could take care of him while I was…away.”

In his writing, he always dwelled on how time didn’t really exist when they were there. Getting taller and growing up didn’t really hit him until they were out. The pages and pages describing how he hated how he looked when he was younger made her return again to how much it hurt to read about how he constantly thought about those things. He called me cute again and I still do not believe him. How can someone like him still want to be with someone like me? Then, when he realized Grey was attracted to him: He is tall and infuriating but handsome. He could have anyone and he still pressed me hard enough to think that I am not horrible. The pages and pages that described how she made him feel when she looked at him made her heart flutter, pushing away the residual, receding hurt about the two men: I am something in her eyes. When I look in the mirror, I wish I saw what she sees. But maybe I am finally something when I am with her. If I lost her love, I deserve to be as ugly as I feel.

She had to bite her lip, shaking off the thought. “I saw the pictures. You loved him a lot.”

“Lumpy was really your dog,” Kylo said. “He liked you more. And the cat loves you more than he ever did me. And I was the one who rescued him and gave him a home too.”

“I miss him. He’s so happy all of the time.” It was nice to think about Bee. The lack of something warm and furry to hug and nuzzle was starting to get to her. He’d have so many beds to sleep on when he got there. And it would be another piece of Poe that they could share.

Kylo seemed to read her mind and reached for her hand. “I’m glad you took care of him. He loved that cat.”

“He loved him because you gave him to him.” She squeezed his hand lightly before he yawned. It was a deep sound that made her breath catch. How could he ever think that he’s ugly, that the things he did didn’t make him attractive?

He still couldn’t fight off another yawn. “I think I need to go inside. But I’m happy right now, Rey. I’m happy with you.”

Getting through the wealth of his thoughts had meant that they could have an evening like this. The grass still smelled freshly cut and the dusk was still lingering around them. They were themselves. And he’d made a joke.

He still insisted on helping her bring everything inside, even as he was finishing his final glass of wine. His cheeks were reddened and he smiled again when he noticed that she’d cleaned up the kitchen finally. But he did say that she didn’t have to clean everything up if she was having a bad day. There were still some times that he let dishes sit for too long before putting them in the dishwasher.
Sitting at the table, he rolled his shoulders. “I’m going to sleep in tomorrow. I need to go for a run or something after that, but we can go for brunch or something. We won’t have to worry about dinner but I’m…”

Moving behind him, she started rubbing some of the tension away. Her hands still felt small against him but he sighed instantly at the gesture. “Kylo, you don’t have to do everything. You need to sleep. I’m…I’m sorry again that I cost you so much sleep.”

“I need to remember how to control my emotions sometimes,” he answered as she kept working at the knots she felt beneath his shirt. He was so tense all of the time and it wasn’t good for him. “But thank you. For the apology.”

She kissed the back of his head as she let her hands fall away. “Kylo, I love you.”

Turning in his chair, he met her eyes. “I love you too. Rey, we’re not…we haven’t had normal lives and I chose to do something that will keep making our lives weird. But thank you for still loving me after all of my mistakes.”

Reaching out, she traced her hand down the scar again, her fear for him getting hurt in the future surfacing again. “I’m still…I’m still going to make mistakes too, Kylo. And I hope you’ll still want to be with me when I make them.”

Smirking, he took her hand and kissed her palm. Grey was right. Letting him get a little drunk was a good thing in that moment. “I’m still a decade older than you. You make your mistakes and I’ll try to understand them. You know that I might get angry, but I’ll always forgive you. As long as you forgive me too when I fuck up again.”

The way he was looking at her made her want him so much in that instant. He was tired but still open in a different way than he was last night. He had nothing left to hide from her. And even though she still had lingering worries, her body was being drawn to him.

“I’ll always try to understand,” she said, tilting her head. “But sometimes I might need a little time to get everything.”

He licked his lips and reached out, putting his hand on her waist. “It’s only fair.”

Standing, he pulled her closer. When he leaned down to kiss her, she threw her arms around his neck as he gripped her back. She poured herself into the kiss, still not knowing exactly what she was doing. How much tongue was too much? Why did she shiver when he gently opened his mouth to her? Why had almost all of their time together had been about forgetting how good moments like this felt?

He suddenly gripped her by the waist, making her gasp as he picked her up and set her on the table. Her heart thundered suddenly as he pressed her legs apart. He pulled her closer, his mouth not leaving hers as he pushed himself against her. And she could feel all of him again: the strength of his body and the hunger in his kiss.

But when she gasped, he pulled away in a moment.

He swallowed before blinking a rapid apology. *I went too fast.*

She had to shake her head, but felt herself quivering with it, both from what he’d done and how it hit her body. *It still felt good.*

Stepping closer, he cupped her face. His thumb traced her lips and he smiled softly. “I’m going to
clean up the office. I’m not…I’m not leaving because…”

She could finally finish his thoughts again. “You’re not leaving because you think you hurt me.”

“Yeah,” he said, nodding. “I want to get it done before I go upstairs and pass out.”

Still sitting on the table, she smiled at him. She was still torn for a moment about what she wanted. She could go upstairs right then and take off all of her clothes. And she imagined him doing the same. They’d shed so much pain that she wanted to be ready for the other side of what their relationship meant. But she had still tensed when he pressed too closely. They had gotten so close only a few times and then had let themselves be separated by a sea of hidden and hurtful thoughts.

It would take time to get there again. But the look in his eyes promised that he wanted the same thing.

After cleaning up the last of what was left in the kitchen and shaking out the quilt to hang on the deck, she went to see how he was doing in the office. The books were straightened into piles, but not on the shelves. And he wasn’t there.

Turning off the light, she found him asleep on the bed.

He hadn’t even changed out of his clothes.

Leaning against the doorway, Rey was so thankful she hadn’t left when the moments with him felt like they would crush her. Running would have just left them both alone and missing the other and not knowing how to fix the hurt.

After taking the time to change herself, she took on the challenge of trying to get him up and out of his clothes.

She had already decided that if he got up before 10 a.m., she was going to scream at him like he used to do when he was younger until he listened to her and went back to bed.

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She’d been studying the painting in Silla and Owen’s house for probably too long because someone came and found her.

“It’s my parents cabin in Norway,” Silla’s soft voice filled her ears. “You should come with us there to visit.”

Turning, she smiled at the older woman. She was taller than Owen with a warm face and trim body. She was beautiful with long blonde hair that flowed below her shoulders. “I guess you guys don’t get there that often.”

Silla grinned. “You’re right. But last summer, we went. Owen is terrible at fishing.”

Nodding, Rey turned back to the painting. “It looks beautiful there.”

“It’s home. I was about your age when I painted it. I tried to give it to my parents, but they wanted one of the city instead. ‘Cecilia, what are we going to do with a painting of the place at the place?’ So I gave them an ugly painting I did of Oslo.” She reached out to trace the frame. “People and
Rey had been holding since they got there. Kylo had slept until 11 a.m., but did get up and go for a long run after. When he came back, he surprised her in the office, dropping his arms around her in a sweaty hug. It had made her laugh, giggling despite how damp he felt. She had been trying to paint and had gotten stuck in her thoughts. Having him back again gave her a little inspiration to finish. After a long brunch, they went to the dry cleaners and dropped off both his suits and her dresses. And he held her hand as they walked back to the car.

He really could flip a switch in his head when he felt like it.

And she never wanted him to turn it back.

“I try to paint too,” she said. “I’m not as good as you but I’m trying.”

Silla’s face transformed into a broad grin. “Then we should paint together! Kylo said you liked art, but I didn’t quite understand what he meant. We can do our thing while they do theirs.”

Silla was old enough to be her mother but wasn’t treating her like a kid. She wanted to do something with her as a friend. She’d welcomed her into her house like another adult. There had been butterflies in her stomach the cab ride over. They lived far enough away that walking was impossible. She missed Owen but was nervous for Kylo; she was worried they’d just want to talk about what Kylo had done wrong on the case. She’d ducked away to go to the washroom and then found herself sucked in by the painting.

But now she had another person to talk to.

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Even with softness and understanding, Kylo could still get angry or be sad. He’d shout at someone on the phone and look like he wanted to throw it until he met her eyes, exhaled and set it down again, frowning at his computer instead. He’d sometimes hold her too tightly at night, remembering another painful memory that would hit him out of nowhere. She’d have bad days too, not wanting to leave the bed and feeling childish to keep asking him to do things for her. But they weren’t normal, she had to remind herself. The past got further away and healing and growing was a process that never ended.

August was marching on and Han and Leia were coming at the end of the month. The hotter the days, the more she worried. They went into DC on one of the hottest days with Grey and escaped into the air conditioning of the museums. The White House was still off limits. They were mostly looking at where to take their family when they arrived and it was still a growing ball of nerves in her stomach that wouldn’t ease until she saw them again. Kylo talked about it, assuring her that it would be fine even as he let his eyes dart around the room before focusing on her. They had come to understand him too, as far as he had let them, so they would be able to handle what they were.

He knew he worked too hard but with his energy back, didn’t like hearing that he did. She could make a small sound when he took a phone call during dinner that would earn a glare, but then an apology followed.

Slowly, she started to understand his world more. Talking with Silla or Brianna, she saw how they had to deal with people exactly like him everyday and still loved them. She’d call Rose or Kaydel
and tell them about a case and they looked shocked that Kylo could stand to work on something like that. He liked having a lot to do to keep his mind from drifting into sadness and it still went there when he didn’t want it to.

But at night, when he’d sit up for too long writing in a journal, he’d let her watch him write down his thoughts. One night, she dared to take the pen from his hand to doodle a heart in the corner of a page. He stared at it for a moment before leaning over to kiss her, the writing forgotten.

There were still times when she felt ready for more than a steadily deepening physical connection. His hand would trace down her body, letting her continue to release the fear she had against him. She knew he wanted more, but couldn’t work through how it all still might fall to pieces if she wasn’t good enough for him. That part had faded but came to the surface when she was at her most vulnerable.

He promised that she was all he needed. And that he could be patient.

There would be time for more.

It should have been easier, but her fears could always come crashing down around her. But when he kissed the nape of her neck, telling her that she was safe and loved, she knew that they were getting closer in so many newer ways than before. And if they hadn’t had those long, hard, and wounding conversations it might have turned out much worse. They both would have kept floundering and hurting one another with expectations and misunderstandings. The ground was almost solid now. There was only just one more part.

So maybe it was better to wait for something more until they’d spoken to Han and Leia together about what they were now.

Because without the arguments, without the constant throbbing of the past threatening to divide them, she felt like she could handle his good and bad days. He gave her strength, but she could do the same for him.

But the hardest part of the day was seeing him walk out the door.

And the best part was always watching him come home.

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The corner of their part of the office lit up, spreading the light to the other side in a cascade of control. Kylo smiled to himself and ran his hand through his hair. It turned out that not fighting all of the time made him not dread starting his day.

Han and Leia would be arriving on Friday. It was Wednesday today. Their time together alone was ending and they were finally in the right place to talk to them. He had made the decision not to tell Rey that they already knew; it was probably going to bite him hard at that point, but he knew his parents probably needed to prepare ahead of time. He was cruel but not that cruel anymore. As long as he kept telling Rey it would be okay, she might come to believe it. He was only a few minutes ahead of the rest of the unit but being there, seeing the day start like it did, made him settle in easier.

Rey still hadn’t wanted to visit his office. But he knew that his parents would want to see it. And
he wouldn’t allow himself to act embarrassed or childish when he brought them around. He hoped that she would want to be there with him. It was still hard for her to comprehend everything that he did, but she was learning. Every time he thought he was alone in his thoughts, she’d remind him that she was there and could listen to him. Even if she didn’t get all of the facts about the case, she’d know how he was feeling about it.

Turning on the coffee machine, he heard the elevator roll to life again as he moved to his desk. It would either be Owen or George.

Settling into his chair and opening his laptop, he felt himself smile as footfalls slowed beside his desk.

“I will beat you one day, Solo,” Owen said, gripping his shoulder. “The traffic always makes me lose.”

“Who said it was a competition?” He grinned, watching his partner take his spot across from him. The sandy-haired man eyed him and stroked his beard. “It might have been you.”

The tension after the Maryland case had also eased as he slipped into a much better mood the last short weeks. He knew what he’d done a lot of things wrong and came out with it rather than trying to say he’d been performing at his best and lying about it. He’d spoken with Maz. He had a long meeting with George and Owen about emotions from home bleeding into work. And he told them that he’d keep learning from his mistakes. But they both looked relieved when he started to be himself at work again. He really needed that.

Grinning, Owen shook his head. “It was probably me. I accept all culpability. But I also got some good news this morning that made me late…”

They had been waiting on both results and how the local police were managing with a major crimes case in New Mexico: a series of break-ins and stabbings. There were no deaths yet but it was still looking like it would escalate. It had started out as consulting but they were preparing to go down at any moment when someone died. The easiest part of the job had been sharing his mutual contempt for local police; and the hardest part had been winding up convincing them that they were on the same team when really, they weren’t. It was Maryland again.

“What’s the good news?” Kylo sat up, noticing the rest of the office start to fill up. Their unit was still small but George managed who and what they had well. But it was strange that he was late. The shoes and the faces that had streamed in lacked his large form. It set off a distant alarm bell in the back of his head. He could put it on hold until he caught his eye when he showed up. It could just be locking into the wrong gut feeling again. “Do I get to go undercover?”

Owen snorted a laugh and folded his arms behind his head. “You won’t let that go, will you? Being big and with a scar won’t always work, Kylo.”

Smiling, stealing away the look from his partner to keep for harsher moments when he was alone, Kylo tilted his head. “I’m still waiting for the good news. And for you to grow five inches.”

“You’re giving yourself too much credit right now.” Owen took the jab and kept it rolling. “It’s more like two or three inches. Or are we measuring something else?”

Kylo didn’t lose the grin on his face even as he raised an eyebrow. And then Owen realized what he’d just said and tossed up his hands. “Fine. Fine! You win all of the measuring contests. Back to the good news; we don’t have to go anywhere. It was a serial and that lab down there connected it without our help to a previous arrest. He didn’t have time to escalate and they tracked him down.
“We’re fine for Saturday.”

Saturday, Saturday. Han and Leia’s anniversary. He licked his lips, nodded and stood. “Gerd?”

His call across the floor got him a sleepy response. “Yeah?”

He only had to look at the other agent to get him to come across the floor to their space. Gerd still shifted nervously around them both.

Kylo absorbed the tension, letting it light up inside of him. “Do you have the tickets?”

The other agent, the one that had flirted so hard so many years ago, buckled under his look. “Oh yeah, sure. It’s a nothing game but it’s with the other season ticket holders…”

And there they were in his hand. He snatched them up before Gerd could finish his sentence. He was going to be a good son and give his parents a good anniversary for once. He’d either forgotten or hadn’t cared for years. Taking them to a baseball game on Sunday wouldn’t be the only thing, but he’d at least give them something to do other than complain about DC traffic. Hearing stammering from the other agent, he lifted his eyebrows. He could press on so many sore spots. Gerd had made an ass out of himself a couple of months ago, earning him the discomfort at that moment. Getting drunk and cornering him after work wouldn’t be so easily forgotten. The man was only a minor footnote in his journals.

“Thank you,” he finally said as he sat down. Gerd only lurked for a few minutes before he retreated back to his desk.

Looking down at the tickets, Kylo smirked again.

Had he really forgotten how good it was to feel happy? He’d been wallowing for so long, waiting to say or do the wrong thing with Rey that he really had just been grinding himself into dust. She helped him push so many of those terrible, hurtful thoughts away. The drawing of the sweet pea and her picture were on his desk now. They were the first personal things he dared to put up at work and he wasn’t planning on taking them down.

“You need to stop torturing him,” Owen said, glancing up. “But it’s so good to see you smile more, Kylo. Really and truly.”

“Owen, thank you.” He did drop his eyes for a moment. “I know it’s not perfect, but we’re happier now. I never thought I’d say that after that week. I was doubting that talking about problems was worth it but…but we’re figuring it out. I’m happy.”

“That’s a very, very good thing.”

But his good mood was slightly shaken by odd looks from George during the morning meeting. He had been on the phone most of the morning when he got there. Kylo was thankful to have Owen in between his line of sight into the office once the meeting was over and everyone had their tasks. Every time he wanted to lose focus on what he was writing or reading, he would get a glare or the other man would purposely dodge from side to side to block his view.

Still, he knew something was coming.

“Agent Solo.” George’s voice broke the random talking and walking around the office.

He stood, keeping his face neutral even as his stomach tightened. “Yes sir.”
“My office please.” He was standing in the doorway, his hand resting briefly on the frame before turning to go inside. He wasn’t waiting for him. He was going straight to his desk.

After sharing a quick glance at Owen, he crossed the office and closed the door behind him. The tone had rang clear, but he wished he could see his shoes in that moment.

“I got an interesting phone call from Assistant Director Tekka early this morning. And then several more as the morning continued.” George sat back, folding his hands on his desk as Kylo sat in the chair opposite. Straightening his shoulders, he stared at the other man. “Someone was bound to notice the ViCAP searches, Kylo. And using the lab to get fingerprint evidence? You may be doing this in your spare time, but it’s still too personal a case to try to solve on your own.”

Kylo slowly nodded, but licked his lips. Of course he would get found out before he was ready. He had a plan but hadn’t reached the conclusions. He should have told George from the start but it was personal. He’d tried to get him to focus on other things: remember him but don’t dwell on the crime. It was like with Rey: remember him but don’t dwell on how he’d hurt him. “I know. I wanted to wait until I found something to tell you.”

“The Assistant Director thinks you’ve already found something.” George looked slightly annoyed but that could mean anything. Finally, he shook his head. “So, what I want you to do is gather up what you have and be prepared to discuss it. All of it. Including the personal details. You have an hour. I’m not going to tell you how to do it so you’ve really got to prove yourself here to get what you want.”

Kylo sat stunned for a moment before he stood and left the room before George could see the panic in his eyes.

What had he really found?

Taking deep breaths and avoiding Owen’s curious eyes, he pulled up the file on his computer. All he’d been doing was sorting by victim type: young, Hispanic males aged 15–25. He’d started with long before the murder, finding a safe range of dates and noting cases that were unsolved and long cold in the minds of those tasked with working them. It seemed like the scene was too organized to be anyone’s first time. He mostly focused on their state, but branched out to neighbouring states. He didn’t have that many murders; those were all domestic or gang related. Some were suspicious, but most of those involved firearms or drowning. He had noted anything with stabbing, though.

Looking at his notes, he tilted his head.

He did have a lot of disappearances.

Nodding to himself, he hit print.

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He’d met the Assistant Director at his graduation, and then again after his injury. The other times he’d seen him it had been across the cafeteria or just in the halls. He’d sometimes come to George’s office and Kylo would stare at him until Owen would snap his fingers to get his attention.

Now, he was facing him down with only conjecture and assumptions based on obsession.
But George’s shoes were brown when he glanced over at the other man.

Okay.

“Special Agent Solo, it’s nice to see you again,” Tekka stood and extended his hand. “SAC Jinn. It’s always a pleasure when we don’t have something to argue related to your budget. Let’s sit down and see what you’ve uncovered and how we can help with your little…extracurricular activities.”

Kylo sat down and focused hard to keep his hands from shaking as he handed over the file folder. “It’s not a complete report, sir. I was…I wasn’t taking any time from my caseload. I just took shorter lunch breaks. And came in earlier or stayed later. When I could.”

Tekka nodded. His face was impossible to read. He was like George when he was on duty, or even when he didn’t realize it. Kylo knew that his emotions still trickled through but he worked hard to mirror the older men. He needed to perfect that, to always be in control or at least appear that he was. The Maryland case was another reminder that he constantly let other things get to him.

“And at the centre of this is the murder of your fiancé, correct?” Tekka flicked his eyes to George. “I believe we had a little meeting about this several years ago, George. You were quite displeased that we couldn’t take over a simple home invasion.”

“There was later, additional evidence, sir,” George answered. “Several years after the event, a letter was sent to Jane Doe in the Snoke case. Agent Solo confirmed it came from an item stolen in the robbery. No fingerprints were recovered and the handwriting analysis didn’t have anything for comparison.”

“Until I…” Kylo started then snapped his mouth shut. “Sorry sir.”

“Continue.” Tekka raised his eyebrows. “Until you what?”

“The handwriting is quite similar to writing on an envelope that we…that we received before the murder. I don’t presume that it’s the killer, but I found out earlier this year that the identity of the sender was not who we thought it was. So it got me thinking to check on earlier murders or attempted murders, or break-ins, of a similar victim type. It really was…I was mostly trying to get into the killer’s head by following this line of thinking. He needed to kill proxies to perfect the murder. He knew where we lived, he knew our routines, but he needed this murder to cause the most damage to me. I know at the heart of this is my involvement in the Snoke case. It had to be perfect so he needed to practice. So instead of murdering them in their homes, he needed to take them somewhere else to be in control. He needed to build up to it and…I might have overstepped.” He had tried to speak as clearly as possible but stumbled enough to make himself blush. Shit. “I’m not doing this for revenge. I just have a strong feeling that this man might harm others close to me or others in general as proxies for another target. This is really more about the public, sir.”

“That was quite impassioned, Ben.” Tekka sat back and looked from George to him. “We were initially worried that actions like this would mean we would have to take you off duty. Finding things to obsess about outside of your other cases is obviously…concerning. You understand that your work is watched much closer than others for obvious reasons.”

Kylo nodded. “Yes sir. And I agreed to it. I wasn’t trying to hide anything. I just hoped that, in my spare time…other people work on things that aren’t part of cases. I hoped I could…I don’t know.”

Tekka looked at George and then back to him. “So, why don’t you go through and tell me what you’ve found.”
Taking a deep breath, Kylo reached for his centre and launched into the information he had.

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“Rey.”

The sound of Kylo’s voice made her shiver when she answered the phone. It was a rush of excited and confident; he hadn’t sounded like that in so long. The tone of his voice made him sound so much younger, excited about something new or different that had gotten his attention. But it also made her blood rush to hear her name spoken that way.

But that could mean almost anything. “Are you okay?”

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” She heard him exhale before he kept going. “I got the case reopened. And I’m lead.”

Shaking her head, she tried to work through what he meant. “Do you mean his case? How did you do that?”

“I’ve been…okay, I’ve been working on this for years. I kept coming back to it. I knew that they’d know eventually, I mean, they’re the fucking FBI, but I thought I would have gotten further. Owen and George told me to stop without really telling me directly before, but the Assistant Director…he thinks I have something. I found a pattern. And now it’s mine.” Kylo was smiling as he spoke, and it sounded like he was in his car. “This feels…unbelievable. I’m coming to you. I need to see you.”

She hardly had time to process the information before he was just there.

Seeing Kylo walk into the library in the middle of the day, looking so determined to find her made her heart race harder. It was like she was the only person in the world in that moment. No one would have stopped him if they had dared to try.

Standing beside the empty story circle, he wrapped his arms around her, lifting her off the ground to hold her closer. “I love you so much.”

As he set her down, he was still smiling. She tilted her head, caught in his glow even though she hadn’t figured out what it all meant yet. It was another case but it was such a deeply private, emotional one. She was already worried for him, despite her smile. “This is such great news.”

“Grey wandered by, chewing on a pencil and locked eyes with Kylo. “Was there another Waco or something? What’s wrong with you?”

“Grey, it’s so much better.” Kylo moved to embrace the other man, seemingly ignoring the remark. “I got them to open the case. I got him a case with us.”

Looking at her for a moment, Grey finally grinned and gripped his arm as he stepped back. “Ky, I’m so…all of that shifty shit and you did it. I’m so proud of you.”

Kylo stepped back, his breathing still matching fiery eyes. “I’m lead on it too.”
“You’re fucking kidding me. You’re not even SSA!” Grey had the same enthusiasm he had at story circle, matching Kylo’s energy. “Holy shit!”

Of course, someone dared to turn to shush him and Grey just made a face.

Turning away from his friend, Kylo reached for her hand. She moved to take it, again being gathered into his arms. He rested his chin on her shoulder and sighed. It was a warm and happy exhale as he pulled her closer. “Owen and Silla are coming over for dinner on Saturday when Han and Leia are here. And your dad. I hope you can come too. I can’t wait to tell my parents.”

Grey nodded, ducking away after exchanging quick grin with her. “Course, Ky. Now leave me alone. I have cataloging to do. See you tomorrow, Rey, you should get him home before he explodes. Good job today.”

Kylo was still buzzing as they walked to his car. He stopped her for a moment, putting his hands on her hips. Finally, his face stilled after two deep breaths. But the motion still made her nervous.

“I’ll have to travel a lot. I need to do a lot of re-interviewing and a lot of these cases are cold and Owen can only be with me part of the time but…” He finally sighed, letting his head drop, like reality was finally coming back to him. “Rey, I don’t want to lose what we have but this is so important to me.”

Reaching out, she shook her head. If she had still been the girl in blue shoes, wandering through an airport from a month ago, she would have thought it was because he was still in love with him. She would have been angry and hurt and would have taken it all as rejection. Understanding Kylo’s heart hadn’t been easy; it had never been simple even when they were children but now there had been so many more hurts added to it. But it belonged to her. This was a part of fully closing that chapter of his life.

She had to keep growing, just like he was trying to do. And if Kylo found out who did it, she might not jump at every sound late at night thinking it was a new terror and could continue working on how she felt about the old ones.

“You won’t lose me,” she said, lifting her chin. “We’ll figure it out.”

He kissed her cheek before hugging her again.

And she had to believe that they would figure it out. Wrapped up in his arms, she tried to freeze the moment around her.

He really did work too hard. And it sometimes got him exactly what he wanted.

Chapter End Notes

I want to promise that the chapters will get shorter again but it would probably be a lie. It’s sometimes still hard for me to write Rey so if something feels off, let me know (and I know about the typos but I’ll fix them soon). Everyone commenting, even good or bad things, have really helped me continue to shape this narrative that I still remain passionate about.
Chapter 54

Chapter Summary

Rey and Kylo’s relationship deepens before he has to be on the road. When they come together again, another problem arises.

Read chapter notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kylo’s pessimism fell away after he called his parents. There would be things to worry about in the future, but after hanging up he tried to embrace the moment. He had a case that could lead to a task force; the idea of that was a rush he only realized on the way home. He’d put together something without knowing exactly what it was and had earned the right to explore the other side, with many more resources. The amount of work ahead of him would be exhausting, but he had to focus on feeling content.

More than content.

Dinner was over and Rey had her head in his lap. He stroked her hair, feeling warmth start to spread through his body. He was already ignoring the movie and focusing on her.

He had pushed her to several brinks and she had worked through so many tears. Had it been worth it to push himself into a near total breakdown to get them closer? If it hadn’t meant hard eyes at work over his emotional stability, he’d do it again in a heartbeat if she needed him to. Everyone had always told him that he shouldn’t be afraid of what he was inside because he was always moving forward, healing and progressing; now that he’d shared those thoughts with her, they could go forward together. There would be arguments in the future, especially if he had to be away for so long, but he had to be steadier. Now that he had so many potential lives in his hands, he really couldn’t fully give in to his raw desire for destroying himself. He already had a growing list of families who he had to both get to know, but also remain distant enough from. There would be many emotional exercises over the next few months.

Rey laughed at something in the movie and turned her head, rolling over to look at him. “This is such a dumb movie.”

He smiled at her, caressing her cheek. She was soft and warm and very close to him. The evening had been like this. She had told him she was proud of him several times. He didn’t always have the easiest time accepting praise but he almost felt like he’d earned some that day. “I still like it.”

He didn’t really have a favourite movie but if someone held a gun to his head, he’d probably say that this was it. And then the person would laugh and shoot him for liking such a shitty movie.

“I like it when you talk about things you like.” She smiled and moved her head slightly, nuzzling against his thighs. “You’ve been doing that more often.”
It had been easier without the worry of an argument dragging them both down, he thought as he returned the look. He’d been able to be mad. He’d been able to be frustrated. But it was a clear relief for them both not to have so many difficult things to muddle through. There would always be hard times, he knew, but he’d said as much as he could and given her his soul. And his heart had belonged to her in one way or another for the last eighteen years.

Now there were the body issues. That part was something they’d avoided for a while.

Rey turned away again and he knew that he needed her to move soon.

There had been too many times lately, once the emotional storm had turned only into the occasional gust of harsh wind, that he wanted more than she was ready for. Moving his hand to trace down the softness of her arm, he gave himself a few more minutes of feeling desire for her. The way she’d curl up next to him at night, how she let him touch her, would be frustrating if she was anyone else, if he was anyone else. He had been there through every minute of the brutal ordeal she’d had to live through with Snoke. He’d seen the aftermath of Finn moving too fast and not listening to the tears that came with unwanted violation.

But being patient felt ungodly impossible in that moment. He had to be better than this.

He decided the favourite parts of her body to him were her firm stomach and strong legs. He admired the shape of one calf that was peeking out from the hem of her dress. He wanted to reach out to stroke her ankle but it was just far enough out of reach. That was probably for the best. He’d let himself fall fully into want if he did.

He liked kissing her stomach and he’d only been able to do that a handful of times. Each time he got closer to her panties, he could feel her breath shudder and then he’d hear the whine that drew him instantly out of desire. He remembered that sound; he’d been locked in a closet, weeping, as he heard that dreadful noise leave her mouth when he was fourteen. He had thrown out the idea of oral sex too early and still regretted even thinking the idea.

There was desire in his body for her and now only her.

Had he told her all of these things, the things he thought were beautiful about her? She must have read it. She had to have read how he felt the first time he fondled Liza’s breasts, licking and tasting them and hearing her gasp and giggle beneath him. He’d been lost in grief then, not understanding his own desires until years later. He understood that Rey would compare herself to her when she didn’t need to. Her breasts belonged to her and the times he’d touched them, he wanted them more than Liza’s body ever. But the physical things had mattered less than the emotional sides. He had to get this relationship right for the both of them. Who she was inside made her body beautiful in a different way.

He should tell her this. He should lean down and whisper these soft things to her. He wanted her to roll over again, but if she did, he’d be fully hard and she’d feel it. And that would bring out fear or nervousness and even unwanted pressure. At least now she seemed to have let go of some of her resentment about his past partners; he didn’t blame her for hanging on to some of it. Knowing his sexuality had been difficult enough for himself and he was amazed that she saw through so many parts of him.

His mind still drifted. There was only so much time left to be alone together. His parents would be there. They’d have to talk about their relationship and what it meant. His mother had the right to ask the question when he called her that exhausting morning. If Rey had been watching him, staring at him with curious eyes when he was living at home, Leia must have noticed. When she was dating Finn, they’d always worried about her and learned in the end that they shouldn’t have
trusted him. He shouldn’t have trusted him.

Soon enough, they’d be apart again. Soon enough, he wouldn’t have to worry about shifting away in the morning. He respected everything she’d been through and couldn’t press her. And she knew everything that happened to him, every harsh detail that he could remember. He recalled telling Poe for the first time and it had felt so raw; he had felt hopeless and disgusting, not understanding why anyone wanted to touch him. The years couldn’t erase all of those feelings; losing him the way he did, after he treated him the way he did, made it hard to think about how he’d been able to heal those years. But now he was so close to putting that behind him in a safe memory box that wouldn't hurt so much. He was going to have to work beyond his own abilities to put his memory to rest and get the justice that he craved. But in doing that, he’d have to be away from his heart. And he still hadn’t told her everything he loved about her. He’d been still stuck rolling through old hurts until he hit a breaking point. He still wanted to show her that sex could be beautiful and easy when it worked. Right then, though, he was relaxed and aroused. He knew that his mind would let him be free to find release without panicking.

And just to tempt him, his thoughts drifted to how it would feel to be inside her. He had to move at that point, nudging her to get up. It was such a wrong thought to have at that moment when they were watching a bad comedy about a ghost who didn’t understand he was haunting people.

She blinked, narrowing her eyes at him. “What’s wrong?”

He wanted to say it was nothing, but they hadn’t talked about this in too long. Licking his lips, he shook his head. “Rey, do I tell you you’re beautiful as often as you need? Do I make you feel that way?”

“You make me feel beautiful?” she asked, tilting her head. “Yes, Kylo. Today, you looked at me like I was the only thing that mattered. You sometimes look at me that way and I feel so beautiful when you do that. It feels amazing.”

He had seen her that way. The rest of the world had blurred out into nothing. It was like when he picked her up at the airport. Or when she was standing by the window at the bed and breakfast. Or when he came down from the deck to see her in the backyard with the picnic.

But there had been other times when he’d looked at her desperately, wanting her to take all of his hurt without listening to her in return. It wouldn’t be fair to push her right then. He still had too much to make up for.

“I’ll try to do that more often.” He rested his head against the back of the couch, trying to find a way to say what he meant without fucking it up. He clenched his jaw for a moment and swallowed. “You were turning me on with how you were on my lap. I started thinking about you and…Rey it’s going to be hard to be away from you when I’m following this up. Do you still…want me physically? After everything?”

“You know how he raped me and know how long that made me feel useless and worthless. You know how I fucked and used other people. You also know about all of the times I couldn’t get an erection because the pain was too much. He kept all of the thoughts inside but knew he didn’t need to say them. She knew. She knew everything.

“Kylo,” she said, reaching for his hand. “I want you. I feel like…I should say I’m sorry for being still worried about everything too. I like it when…when you make me feel good. I want to touch you too but you pull away. I know it’s because you don’t want to push me. That feels so special. But I…when I read about some of the times you’ve had sex, I realize how much you must miss it. I mean, not the bad times when things hurt too much. But some of the better times. I didn’t like
reading about how you’d feel guilty for,” she paused, “for masturbating or liking sex, but I’ve felt that way too, sometimes, when I touch myself. I understand why we both feel that way but it gets confusing when I think about it too much.”

So many years of therapy still hadn’t taken it all away but at least, at moments of clarity, they knew why they had certain emotions. It didn’t make it any less frustrating.

“Sometimes I actually stop thinking when I’m having sex. It’s only for a few seconds before I start worrying about something, but those are great seconds.” He swirled his thumb against her skin. “I’ve read so much about survivors and how we’re not atypical. It’s such a personal sort of abuse. We both have had...moments of being hypersexual. There’s no real right way to get better but there are many wrong ways.”

Licking her lips, she put her other hand over his. “I didn’t even realize what I was doing when I was six. And you both helped me so much. I don’t think...I don’t think I would be as strong as I am if you didn’t have him when I was younger. He helped you figure out so much of yourself and that helped me too.”

*And I fucked it up. And I can’t fuck this up.* “You know he gave me my first blowjob that night, before I told Han about all of the...sexual abuse. It feels so fucked up when I think about it. He did it and was so worried about me. It took me so long to...”

He knew instantly he shouldn’t have said anything. This was about *her* not him.

She shook her head quickly. “Please, Kylo. I had to read it. I don’t...I don’t want to hear it. I know what he meant to you but it still bothers me sometimes thinking about you with someone else. It’s getting better but I still feel hurt.”

He nodded. He knew he was going too far but had fallen into it anyway. “Maybe I’ve been thinking about him more today. But that doesn’t mean I don’t love you. And it doesn’t mean I don’t want you right now.”

Moving closer, she tilted her head. “Do you want to know what else I thought today?”

“What?”

She dropped her head and smirked. “I thought you sounded so sexy on the phone today. The way you said my name was just...sexy.”

He wanted to grimace at the description. He’d been too eager for any real thought other than calling her once he got out of the meeting. He’d hated how he sounded for most of his life and would rather be quiet most of the time. “My voice is weird. It’s not very sexy.”

Snorting, she shoved him playfully. “Kylo, it’s a compliment. It’s a nice one. Please let me think that you have a sexy voice.”

Feeling himself blush, he nodded. If she thought that, he had to believe that he was, in some small way, sexy. It still felt like it didn’t fit, but the idea that she could think that way made him lift his shoulders. “I was so happy in that moment. And all I wanted to do was tell you and get to you.”

Her hand fell to his leg, light fingers moving along his thigh. “Kylo, it’s always so amazing to see you look and sound so confident. I love those moments. It’s like it’s still you but you’re also another person at the same time.”

*A better person.* “I think that’s why I like nice suits. It’s like wearing a disguise.”
She was watching him but glancing down at her hand at the same time.

He didn’t know how to say it, so he blinked it. *You could never touch me in the wrong way.*

*Do you want me to touch you?*

The look on his face must have been enough and her hand moved up his thigh. Sighing, he nodded.

The touches were feathery strokes, making his breath quicken as they neared his groin. There were so many reasons to stop this but he was always finding new ways to torture himself. Rey was still only eighteen. What she’d been through should matter more than his own satisfaction. He couldn’t even remember the last time he jerked off. But he had probably written all about it and could go upstairs and find out exactly when if he went upstairs.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Rey whispered and he snapped his eyes to her. He hadn’t realized he’d started staring at the ceiling. “Does it feel good?”

“Yes,” he said quickly before swallowing. “How do you feel?”

“I…” she started, then blushed. “I like watching your face. My friends have asked if we’ve slept together yet. Well, I mean Kay has. Rose likes that we’re waiting.”

“I’m glad you still have them.” He wanted to let his eyes slide shut at the soft touches to his inner thigh. “It’s okay that they’re curious. Paige had to hear everything when Liza lost her virginity. Of our friends’ group, her and Hux were the last ones to do it.”

He felt like he was sixteen again, giving up to a kind hand that only wanted to show him how much he was loved.

Rey kissed his cheek and then sat back to tilt her head, her hand drawing down his leg again. “Can I…don’t girlfriends give blowjobs?”

He almost had to roll his eyes at what she must have also heard in high school. “Some do. Some don’t. I really only know from my own experiences and what I read. Sex is about what both people like and about being honest about it.” _As long as you let them be honest_, he added to himself sadly. Selfish mistakes were the breeding ground for wisdom.

Sitting back, she licked her lips. He knew the question was coming but didn’t try to stop her. She had to have her own mind, her own words. “Can I try? Kylo, you’ve been able to touch me. I want to know I’m not broken forever.”

His throat was dry in an instant. His last two partners had been so confident in their sexuality that they let him do what he felt was right as he pushed himself to the brink of his comfort zone to find the sensation of languid arousal. He really had to pull himself back to being sixteen but in his current body. And numerous things had changed since then.

“I’d really like it, Rey. But…”

She quieted him with a kiss. “Just tell me what you’re feeling too.”

He focused on her hand as it returned to his leg, trying to answer the question without dissolving into embarrassment and awkwardness. “It…I had to learn how to do it. And it made me uncomfortable for a long time. I still don’t really feel like it was something I could do to just anyone. But I wanted to make him feel good so I did it.” He swallowed and felt her hand stop.

“Rey, I’m not trying to ask you to do this for me. I was just feeling aroused because of how you
were moving and how close we’ve been the last few days.” *And that I did something good at work.*

The promise he’d made to never pressure her made it hard to fight against how warm her hand was on his leg. And how long ago another person had made him come.

It was getting too warm. He needed to make this stop.

She took a deep breath as he stared at her. “You still haven’t let me really touch you. I want to know if it’s something I feel comfortable with on my own. You don’t always have to decide for me.”

His heart beat hard in his ears, blood rushing at the look in her eyes. She was on her knees on the couch. All he had to do was guide her through what he wanted, what they *both* wanted. He fought off the dark thought that it wouldn’t be fair to her but in a way it was.

“Are you sure?” He swallowed. “I don’t ever want you to be afraid of me.”

She shook her head before blinking, *Can you tell me what you want?*

*I want you,* he returned. Glancing at her wrist, he saw the hair tie. Falling off the edge had to start with a quick push. *Put your hair up.*

Pulling her hand away, she quickly tied her hair up in a ponytail. But he saw how her hands were shaking slightly and felt a spike of worry. “We can wait.”

“No, I want to…” she licked her lips, “I’ve thought about doing this. I’m not afraid. I’m just nervous I won’t be good enough.”

Leaning over, he kissed her. He cupped her face and nudged his tongue into her mouth, lightly tasting the juice she drank at dinner. She shivered in his arms and then sighed as he pulled away. “You’ll be you, Rey. And that will be perfect.”

Hell, he really only could remember one bad blowjob in his life and that was when they’d been really drunk. She couldn’t touch him in any wrong way. He was the one that could mess up by going soft because of his stupid racing thoughts.

But now he was aroused in a confusing way. He wanted to have release, but he also didn’t want her to see that or feel that part of him yet. He would have to be away from her soon and realized that if this happened, he’d have a hard time giving it up if they weren’t careful. And if she didn’t like it, she’d probably blame herself. Everything was screaming at him it was too soon but her hand was back on his leg and she was leaning closer. He could see down her dress, catching the light blue bra underneath.

He’d been waking up next to her in one way or another for eighteen years. And it was only in the last couple of months that he saw this other side of her. How he was going to explain that to his parents he didn’t know.

He heard her breath quicken as he reached for his belt. “I’ll…tell you what to do.”

She licked her lips again and he nodded. He wanted this to be a part of their relationship only if she did. To share their bodies this way, when he could fully trust himself not to ruin it by hurting her, would keep them together in their minds even when they were separated by the miles he was going to have to put between them. Memories weren’t always harsh words but also delicate touches.

She needed to learn how to be comfortable with this and thoughts weren’t enough. Talking
wouldn’t always work.

But this was also him giving himself to her and losing control, like that night in the office when he collapsed from exhaustion.

That thought made him undo the zipper of his trousers. He kept his eyes on her as he took out his erection and watched her face for her reaction.

She was breathing deeper. She was biting her lip. This was the first time she’d really seen him this way and he tried to put himself in her head before remembering to ask her instead.

This was supposed to be as awkward as it felt.

“You don’t have to do anything you don’t want,” he whispered, dropping his voice. “Tell me what you’re feeling.”

She looked up, blinking at him. “I want to do it. But I don’t know how.”

Taking her hand, he brought it to his lips. He kissed her palm lightly before guiding it down.

He’d heard the same words before as he started telling her what to do. How not to grip too hard. How to find a pace that was comfortable for both of them. How to hold her lips against her teeth when she went down. How to be comfortable and not take in more than she was ready for. The suction came from the movement. Gagging was awful, don’t go deep too fast. When she shifted to her elbows and her mouth joined her hand, he didn’t know which direction his body wanted to go in. If he panicked, she’d be afraid that she did something wrong. If he gave in to how good even the slightest pressure felt, he might move too forcefully.

It was a harsh balance between terror and need.

It had gripped him so many times before.

This hit him in a new way.

Instead, he focused on his breathing and talking to her, rubbing her back. How to breathe. How to move. She was so gentle with her hand, but she was still trying to give this to him. It was a soft grip, but it was enough. He kept his hips firmly pressed to the couch. She gagged for a moment and he sat up straighter. She sat back and gasped at him for a moment, but then blinked she could keep going.

And then her lips kept slipping. He felt the brush of teeth and had to hiss. He didn’t want to tell her she was doing anything wrong but had to.

She sat up, pulling away and wiping at her mouth. “Am I bad at this?”

“No.” He shook his head. “You’re learning. But we can stop if you don’t feel okay.”

“I feel…” she stopped talking, sucking in a low breath. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

“Do you want to stop?”

“No.” She blushed. And she held out her hand.

He knew he could take it because this time it wasn’t shaking. “We can…another time. I want…I’d like you to try again but you never have to do it again if you don’t want to. I can show you with my hand. You can close your eyes if you want to.”
Her eyes slipped shut as he brought her hand to him. Her mouth had left him slick enough to avoid discomfort. Softly at first, he started guiding her into stroking him. Now it had almost gone too far to stop, guiding her faster and faster. He would force himself if he had to stop, he told himself. It was her. He was showing her this. Another barrier had been crossed and she was going to get him off. He’d never be able to take this back. Was he forcing her to do this?

Reaching up with his other hand, he brought her lips to his to kiss her. The kiss briefly made her hand jolt, losing the rhythm before he brought it back to the comfortable pace he got himself off with on those rare moments in the shower when he could let himself find release.

He was losing himself. He was kissing her and getting closer to bliss. This girl, the one who saved him, had become a woman before his eyes and he’d missed the attraction that had been buried underneath for so long. She was softly sighing into his mouth, telling him that she was enjoying herself too.

The pressure was building. The warmth in his groin was getting heavier.

Breaking the kiss, he shuddered. “I love you.”

Opening her eyes. “I love you so much, Kylo.”

He had to say it. Their combined hands were about to put him over that joyful edge. “I’m going to come. Let go.”

She almost froze for a moment before withdrawing, both of her hands coming to his face to kiss him.

Groaning into her mouth, he got himself off with two quick strokes and came hard on his work clothes.

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He stroked down her arm again. “How are you feeling?”

It was a soft and gentle question. And she didn’t know how to explain how she felt. There was a war in her stomach. It had been so hard to know how far she could push herself, but it felt easier when Kylo’s hand guided hers. He’d been there with her. He was so afraid of overwhelming her with his body but having him in her mouth or hand made her realize that she could hurt him too in an intimate yet horrifying way as well.

He had trusted her with his thoughts and now she’d given him a release that he hadn’t had in years.

“Yeah, I think I am okay.” She sat up, looking at the mess on his clothes. She’d never seen something like it before and she face burnt. “That’s…”

Sighing, he made an annoyed noise in the back of his throat. He’d already done up his pants but he was still frowning at what had happened. “Yeah. It’s not good. I…wasn’t really thinking. I might have to use the drycleaners across town for this.”

He blushed. It was a deep red that spread down his face to his neck. She’d made him like that. Even as her heart pumped faster as it was happening, she never realized that she could have that
sort of power over him. She hadn’t decided if she liked it yet, but her body had rushed at the sound he made when he climaxed. The softness of his skin, the feeling of his hand in hers…it was nothing like she’d imagined.

“I need to…get changed.” He stood from the couch and frowned again at his clothes. But his look softened when he looked at her again. “I love you. And I loved what just happened here. Thank you, Rey. You were great.”

She tried to smile, but still felt the strange panic flowing through her. “Kylo, I could have done something wrong and hurt you.”

His shoulders fell. “That’s how I feel all of the time. We need,” he paused to fix his pants again, avoiding the splotches, “we are going to make mistakes but if we both know that, we’ll know it’s never on purpose.”

He must have been saying those things to himself. It made her swallow again. She could still taste him on her lips. It was a strange tangy sensation. She had wanted to be good at oral sex but it had felt awkward, like her mouth couldn’t follow his instructions and she was letting him down. A knot of panic was forming in her stomach that she didn’t understand. “I believe you.”

Sighing, he looked at himself again. “I won’t take too long. Let me get changed and we can talk.”

She’d helped him come, she thought to herself as his footsteps disappeared upstairs. She’d seen his penis. It had been in her mouth and she’d stroked him. And most of her fear had come from hurting him, combined with not being good enough for him.

Swallowing, she drew her body up around herself. It shouldn’t feel dirty, but it did.

She had to wait for him to get back to tell him how she felt.

Uncomfortable wasn’t the right word. The feeling of him in her mouth had been so intimate. The sensation of him in her hand had made her excited, but it mostly been from how he sounded. There was a new difference to his voice that had hit her hard.

But it didn’t stop guilt from building inside of her. He had wanted her in a soft and open way, but it still brought back how it felt to be desired in a dark and destructive way. She wanted to ignore the fear but her tears were hard to fight. Kylo wanted her emotionally and physically, she had to tell herself. They were equals; he wasn’t taking advantage of her and taking away her power. He’d given her more control in that moment, even though he had to guide her.

She couldn’t wait, wiping her eyes and going upstairs. Dressed in jeans and a t-shirt, he was washing his hands and reached for her instantly, drawing her hands under the water as well.

“You can feel dirty. You’re allowed to,” he whispered, stepping around her. He rested his head on her shoulder and instead of feeling afraid, she was back to the warmth of security. “We should have waited. I’m sorry.”

Shaking her head, she opened her eyes to stare at their reflection in the mirror. Meeting her own gaze, she counted the seconds and didn’t look away. She was still herself. Flicking her eyes up, she saw that he was looking at himself too. He shivered lightly before turning off the water. He dropped his head to her shoulder again and sighed.

“Do you feel dirty?”

He swallowed. “I usually do. I get worked up and the second it’s over, I feel like I never should
have wanted those things to begin with. And then I have to go back and rethink those feelings, reminding myself that I haven’t done anything wrong. It’s not my body that’s wrong, it’s my mind telling me that it is because I’m always healing from what I’ve been through. And then, after a while, I can let some of it go.”

“I feel the same way.” Frowning, she leaned back against him. “It’s so weird.”

“Maybe,” he started before taking a deep breath. “Maybe it’s good that it happened. We can keep talking about it and now we know more about one another. I don’t want to pretend it didn’t happen because I liked the moment. And now we can talk about it. I just hope you don’t feel like I pressured you.”

She shrugged. “Maybe I pushed myself before I was ready. But it was hard to look at you and not want to do something for you that I wanted too. Even if it feels different now.”

He nodded after a long moment, stepping away to grab two hand towels. “I don’t want to take it back but,” he paused, putting his now dry hands on her waist, “but we can have a healthy relationship without sex. I am attracted to you and do want to show you that sex doesn’t have to have these feelings, even if I fight them too sometimes. But I don’t want to make things harder for us.”

*Us.* They were really an us. Not the old one but the new one she had created when she’d kissed him.

Dropping her chin, she thought about what he was saying. Despite their shared hard feelings about sex, she wanted to share close moments like this. Her body would still go rigid when he got too close some mornings, but it was getting better. It had to keep getting better. “But isn’t that what people do when they’re dating?”

He smirked lightly, tilting her head up to look at him. “Not all people.”

“I think we can keep working on it. I want to have my first time with you.” The simple words made her shiver again. It had been awkward to have him in her mouth. Girls at school said how the first time hurt. Would it be painful with him?

His eyes softened. “I’m sorry that my first time can’t be with you. But you’re the last person I want to be with for the rest of my life, Rey. I know we don’t have much time left together this year, but we have the rest of our lives to figure it out.”

“As long as you don’t get shot.” She tried to smile but she saw the brief panic in his eyes. The scar was always there. Danger would never be far away from him.

“I have to live with that thought too, Rey. When I wasn’t sleeping on the Maryland case, I put myself in real danger. I should have been reprimanded but Owen didn’t disclose everything.” He blinked for a moment before kissing her forehead. “But that part is on me. I need to be more controlled. We need to be able to be angry at one another without me wanting to implode.”

He held her in the washroom for a few long minutes before he yawned.

At least they’d have tomorrow alone to talk about how to approach the situation with Han and Leia.

That was another problem that would make her feel guilty until it was solved, if it ever could be.
Rey thought Kylo would be more tense as they sat down for dinner with his parents. Hugs at the airport had led to a quiet drive into D.C. to eat.

Leia had held her tighter than she expected.

“So,” Kylo started, folding his hands on the table. She almost rolled her eyes at how he was copying George. “The last month, Rey and I have been dating.”

He had said it so bluntly and his parents looked at him blankly. It didn’t really feel like real dating until she thought more about it as Leia took her hand to give her a long look. They had been on dates. They had done things other than arguing. The times he’d touch her in bed and the afternoon on the couch were part of another issue that ran deep, but she’d seen the true other sides of Kylo as the harsher, guarded ones fell away.

“Well.” Han looked between the two of them and then rubbed his face. “I’m guessing it’s been complicated?”

Kylo looked at her for a moment before nodding. He took his hands off the table and his shoulders dropped. “I make everything intense.”

He did. She didn’t want to admit how hard the month had been because there had been sweet and soft moments. But there had also been arguments and hurtful words. There had been the intensity of realizing that Kylo could really put himself at risk by exhausting himself. And how he still kept going. He had always told her to focus on happier, lighter things. Knowing why, knowing how he felt in some of the dark corners of his heart, made it hard not to worry about what might happen when he was alone for this case and if the love she had for him would always be enough. She had to tell herself that George knew what was best for him. They would only be cold case interviews. He wouldn’t be arresting anyone unless he found him. The case still hadn’t made sense to her even when he’d explained it all. Watching him plan yesterday night had made it all seem more real, but still unclear.

“Rey?” Leia’s hand tightened, reminding her that she’d just zoned out their conversation. “Rey? I was asking how you feel about this?”

“I feel…” She shifted to smile at her. It was tight. “I feel like we’ve worked through a lot of things. I’ve always wanted to have his good days and his bad days, even if the bad ones still hurt and there will be more. But I really love him and he loves me. That’s what matters.”

There was a long pause and she met Kylo’s eyes in that silence.

“Well, we don’t want to tell you what to do,” Leia said. “We’ve tried to raise you with a lot of freedom to be confident in the world. You’ve both made mistakes,” Kylo took a long drink of water at that remark, “but you both have always learned from them and have known when to ask for help. We know you’re both mature,” Kylo drank more water, “but you have to give us time to get used to this. We know it’s always been hard to keep you apart. So, we won’t stand in your way. But we can worry about you and love you at the same time.”

“You’ve always done that, mom.” Kylo sighed. “We really want this. And you know I’ll never hurt Rey. I’ve worked very hard to avoid acting like… I did with Poe. We’ve talked about it. Things aren’t perfect but I’m not a perfect person.”
He was to her even though it was a hard sort of perfect.

“We don’t care about the age difference.” Han looked at them both again before raising his eyebrows at his wife. “But we know that it can cause some problems there. Rey, we know you are still thinking about school. And Ben, your job…”

“Yeah,” he answered. “I could have picked something easier.”

“But you didn’t want to do anything easier.” Rey found her voice. “We’ll find a way to be together.”

“As long as I’m not the only one making the plans,” Kylo answered, smirking. I love you, he blinked. Thank you for believing in me.

There was more she wanted to say to Han and Leia but wanted to do it alone. And she knew Kylo wanted the same.

But they had their first dinner together as a new type of family.

And it wasn’t as terribly awkward as she thought it would be.

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Rey knew that doing the dishes would give her some time alone with Leia to talk. “I’m so glad you’re here.”

The rest of their guests were still at the table, dinner on Saturday finally almost over. And she really wanted to avoid one of them at that moment.

Leia lifted her head from the sink. “Me too, sweetheart. And it really has been wonderful to see the two of you together. We’re both still worried but if this is what you both want, we’ll make it work for you.”

She nodded, taking another plate from the rack to dry it. “I just wanted to ask if I could still call you mom and dad.”

She’d waited over a full day to ask the question before it burnt too hard to really keep it in anymore.

Leia’s hands stilled and she reached for the rag to dry her hands before pulling her into a tight hug. “If it’s what you want, then we want you to do it. We adopted you because we saw how much he loved you. Fourteen years ago and I still remember seeing how tightly he held you at in that hospital room. We never tried to raise you as brother and sister, but just as a family. I don’t think you ever saw each other that way either. You’ve been his heart for so long and I thank you everyday for saving him, and him for saving you so we could have a chance to know and love you. I love you, Rey. And I’ll try to help you navigate dating him. Because I know it hasn’t been easy this last month. I can see it on both of you, and from knowing you so well.”

Resting her head on her shoulder, Rey could only nod. “It was so hard at times, mom. It hurt so much. I thought it would never stop and I’d made the biggest mistake ever. And I didn’t have anyone to talk to who really understood. I’m so glad I can talk to you now.” Stepping back, she
wiped her eyes. “I think I’ll really need someone. There’re still some things…that are hard to talk about.”

“He talked to us about the case, how he’s going to be away.” Leia gripped her arms. She really was the only mother she had ever known. Why did she ever think that their relationship would change in any way? “You’ve never liked being away from him sweetheart. And we don’t like thinking of you alone in this house.”

Hearing Grey’s laugh from the next room made her almost roll her eyes. “Grey is here often enough.”

She regretted even thinking that having him around more would be a good thing. It had mostly been for Kylo. But after what Grey said, it would just make it harder for all of them. In that moment, she had just been drawn to the dull reflection of Poe she saw in Grey when she apologized to him. Still after thinking more about it, Grey was just a superficial version of the love that Poe had had for both her Kylo. Poe had truly loved her too; it was easier to deal with that after she’d said what she had to say. Grey was another problem.

He’d been drifting closer to Kylo the entire night. Even with his father and her there, he still did it.

She had really tried hard to understand their friendship. Part of her was relieved that Kylo didn’t want him in their house permanently but that almost didn’t matter because he would drop by whenever. If she was alone there, with Kylo out of town in the future, she was still going to try to still be his friend but at some point it had to stop. All of the things he’d said to her hadn’t been forgotten, but she hadn’t told Kylo the entire truth. Everything had just felt calmer after and she didn’t want to bring up new things. And she was still worried that discussing him would cause some misunderstanding that would set them back. But now, thinking about him coming over to their house all of the time made her stomach ache. The summer programme was over. She didn’t have to go back to the library.

And she’d spoken more to Silla about art school since they’d met for dinner at their house. It really seemed like something she could do. She almost had a portfolio…

“I can see in your eyes that you don’t want him here.” Leia sighed and shook her head. “Ben needs to figure some of that out for himself. But we’ll talk more about this with him and Han. If you want to move home while he’s gone, we miss having you around. We miss you both very much.”

Rey nodded and smiled before reaching to dry another dish.

Did she want to move home? Staring at grandma’s dishes, she still tried to work through what felt right.

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“Look at his stance. The pitcher, Ben.” His father tapped his knee and Kylo sat up to focus. It was only the fourth inning and he was tired and too hot to keep up with the play on the sunny field. He was overly thankful for his sunglasses, hiding how he was mostly sitting there, almost meditating rather than watching the game. Sunday had come fast and their time together had felt good, but he really only could avoid showing some of his irritation for so long.

“Why?” he asked. He sounded just as annoyed as he felt.
Han glanced at him and then back to the mound. “You wanted to be a pitcher.”

He snorted. “I wanted to be a shortstop, dad.”

Han looked from the field back to him and then smiled. “You could have done both.”

Leia cleared her throat. “Just watch the game. We see his stance, Han.”

Rolling his eyes, he blocked out most of what his father was saying. Looking at the empty seat beside him, he found his excuse to leave his father to his musings about how he should have played baseball in high school anyway. He really didn’t want to be reminded of high school at that moment. His mother took his hand at that moment and squeezed lightly, telling him that Han was just getting into the game and to ignore him.

He wouldn’t be the way he is if it wasn’t for baseball.

Swallowing, he went back to how being taken hadn’t been anyone’s fault except for the man who stole him. He was the one to blame.

It still agitated him and he slowly stood. “I’m going to go find Rey.”

She’d left for the washroom only a few minutes ago but being in a stadium filled with thousands of people didn’t exactly put him at ease. But they were nice seats. At least that part had worked out for him. But all of the people still made him worry. His weapon was safe on his hip if anything did happen. It had almost been a thrill to show his badge at the security gate. He didn’t need that to go to his head permanently.

Climbing the stairs up to the concourse, he started scanning the crowd. People really didn’t go to baseball games to watch baseball. They went for all of the other bullshit. Music, merchandise, food vendors…people, people, and more people.

He stopped his search in an instant. Rey was standing off to the side, in a gap in the sea of people, far enough away not to notice him, but she was talking to a young, dark-haired man. He couldn’t see his face but he could see how Rey was smiling at him, tucking her hair behind her ear as she laughed at something the other said.

His throat tightened as he slipped into the crowd to avoid being spotted as he got closer. Hunching over, he narrowed his eyes as Rey put her hand on the young man’s arm. He could see him better now as he moved in the crowd.

He was her age, even though he was shorter than he was. He was closer to her height. Staring at them, he had to swallow his instant anger at seeing her close to someone who wasn’t him. It was the same old dark feeling that used to grip him when he’d see Poe without him on campus talking to his friends. It was the venomous sort of jealousy that he didn’t want for Rey to experience from him.

But it was very hard not to walk up and demand to know what was going on.

The boy could be dangerous. Most people weren’t but he never lost the desire to protect everyone he cared about, especially Rey. She had been out there in the world everyday when he was at work, but he knew where she was. She’d be at home or safe with the people he knew around her. Strangers couldn’t be trusted for long periods of time.

Wincing, he ducked behind a pillar to sigh to himself and avoid getting jostled by the people on the concourse. Grey had been pushing a lot of boundaries the last month. When Rey finally told him
about what Grey had said to her after dinner last night, prompted by his mother, he really wanted to shout at his friend until he was red in the face. Instead he just avoided him. He knew how he felt and he still decided to tell Rey all of those personal thoughts again. When he was around, he’d always find ways to get closer to him than he should. Seeing Rey have her hand on the boy’s arm had reminded him what he was asking of her by allowing his friend to constantly show up at the house. The situation was different now. His parents knew. Even if they hadn’t slept together, that part of the relationship was something they’d promised to work on. Getting to the sweetest part of being together still brought up strange nerves within him, especially with what happened on the couch when he had a weak moment of arousal. It had to be perfect for Rey and life was never that way. And he’d be on the road soon and moments for closeness would be hard to find when he was away. She’d be alone again and he wouldn’t be able to stop anyone from talking to her.

Turning, he finally got the energy to walk up to them. “Hey.”

Rey reached for his hand. “Hi. This is Hunter. We went to high school together. This is Kylo, my boyfriend.”

Hunter tried to smile at him but took a step back at the same time. “Good. ‘Hey, yeah, I remember you. You’re friends with our principal.”

“Yes. I am.” He just stared at him before turning to Rey. “Is everything okay?”

Tilting her head, she frowned lightly at him. “Of course it is. ‘It was nice to see you. But we should get back. I don’t know anything about baseball so I’m trying to learn.”

Hunter was already backing up again, nodding. “Yeah. Sure. See you around.”

Holding Rey’s hand, he tried not to frown as they walked back to their seats. “You never mentioned him before.”

“I just ran into him.” She eyed him. “We didn’t really hang out that much. I didn’t really talk to that many boys at school but he was always nice to me. Is something wrong?”

Shaking his head, he mulled over lying to her. She knew he was capable of so many horrible things. She shouldn’t have to worry about whom she talked to when he was around. He couldn’t let himself fall into that hole again. There were so many times when he lost perspective on how he wanted to act in relation to how he could be. She should never be afraid of him. He was still worried about hurting her physically and would keep working on that. The laundry list of his faults was still very clear in his mind but Rey knew all of that now. He couldn’t hide from her. He had the evidence and was still resisting putting it all together and closing the case.

“I got a little jealous.” He looked forward, guiding her through the crowd. “He’s your age with none of the problems I have.”

“Kylo, don’t think like that. I want to help you with everything. As long as you keep wanting to help me with mine.” She stopped him, making him look at her. “I’m going to miss you when you’re gone.”

Another instant ache to his heart. “It won’t be for a couple of weeks. And I’ll be back as often as I can.”

He had to keep that promise. And he was starting to realize that it would almost be too hard to keep.
A week together as a family went by too quickly.

She went with Han and Leia to Kylo’s office, pulling up to an imposing set of buildings. Getting to see Owen and George at work felt even weirder, having seen them in much more private circumstances.

George still had a picture of them on his desk. He smiled at her when she lifted her head from it, reminding her that he was always watching out for him.

They built the swing set for Benji together as a family. Kylo had wanted them to come in September but all of that changed. It would only be video calls until he made it back to Connecticut. But just seeing the structure standing there in the backyard, and watching Kylo and Han argue about how to put together the look-out fort and reinforce the beams in the ground, made her grin about the promise of more summers at that house. It wasn’t too big after all, even though Leia still thought he should get someone to renovate the kitchen. Kylo’s eyes would flare for a moment every time she brought it up. And she kept prodding him with it.

In the evenings, just watching television like they used to always do as a family, she’d have her feet in Kylo’s lap and there were no hard looks. Kylo would pull her into his lap when he thought no one was looking to kiss her cheek and the world kept turning.

But there were more talks about the future before Han and Leia left.

Kylo was still working. And she had to talk to them alone. If it wasn’t for that early conversation with Leia, she wouldn’t know how to approach them. It was almost a silly apprehension to have. They would never leave her or abandon her. Even if her own parents hadn’t wanted her, they still did.

And she had to tell them about the programme she found back home and how she wanted to apply. It was art school. It would be at Kylo’s old university. She’d be far from him but closer to home. Kylo had told her to speak her heart; this case could take a long time and her life didn’t have to stop because his was caught up in something so important to them. She couldn’t just sit at home and wait for him. That wouldn’t be right. He’d gotten a chance to follow the path he had picked for himself; even if it seemed frustrating and hard at the moment, he really wanted that life.

She’d seem the confidence he wore when he was his agent self.

And she wanted to have that part of herself too.

She wanted to come home to that from her own job. And that wasn’t just volunteering with summer students because Grey got her a spot there.

He wanted her to go to school, or at least try something new. She’d always liked trying new things, he reminded her. Her art. Her collages. Her drawings. She put her heart into those and others would be able to see that, like she did with his writings. Dance had also been a way to express herself; that creativity had always been there and he’d always loved that about her.

It hurt, he said, to know she’d be far away but he felt better knowing that Han and Leia would be closer if anything happened. He confessed that he needed his time at university to grow up more, even if he wasn’t fully an adult by the time he was done. She admitted the same about growing up; she had felt like a silly kid around his coworkers before and that feeling came back again when she
was walking the halls with too many American flags and rushing people in blazers and suits.

It wouldn’t be a goodbye. Because they wouldn’t say it. It would be a pause that would let their feelings for one another grow.

He knew she missed the cat. And he would still be able to move there when they’d both grown up a little more. And maybe he could visit at Christmas. His longest time off, he estimated, would be at Christmas.

To her, Kylo had been grown up for so many years. Hearing him say that he still felt unsure at his job made sense, but it still wasn’t all he was.

Strong. Handsome. And, even though he didn’t like hearing it, sexy.

She cried hard the night before she had to leave. After so many weeks of pillow talk, deep kisses, and honest words, she was getting pulled away again. The arguments had brought them closer in the end, admitting things that wouldn’t have come out in any other way. They had been through so much and didn’t know any other way for it to happen. She’d been so strong, he’d reminded her. He’d been the one to fall to pieces all too often. It was better now, beyond better. That was what she told herself; he wasn’t pushing her away because of his job. She also knew her home was with Kylo, no matter where he was. It would just feel freer to be in a house with her family as she worked on her application. She didn’t need to be at their house with someone dropping by all of the time.

The bubble wasn’t breaking. It was just expanding again.

His kisses were heavier that night. But so were his apologies. In the dark, only a week after Han and Leia had left and they were alone again for the last time, he asked if she wanted to go further. The gentle way he said it wasn’t demanding; the gentle sensuality made her shiver and she took a long and delicate moment to think about what she wanted. Her body wanted him desperately. She had thought a lot about how he felt in her hand and how he had looked so vulnerable when he had shown himself to her after being so careful about what she wanted. She imagined it feeling good. She imagined it feeling like fireworks. Her soul wanted to absorb all of him to carry him with her when they weren’t in the same bed.

But the fear wouldn’t go away. Snoke was always in some hidden corner of her mind, or in some brutal part of his. The worry about the guilt that would follow pressed on her and she couldn’t lose herself to him just yet. He’d be coming back to her; they could wait for now. He softly kissed her neck when she said she wasn’t ready. And he said he didn’t need more from her other than to be close to him even when she offered to touch him like she’d done on the couch. He could hear it in her voice that she was just giving in to something that she thought he wanted. He offered to leave her with a good memory and she had to shake her head in return, even though she wanted it badly. It almost felt more intimate to have him dry her tears and rest in his arms that night than to share anything sexually.

She had a boyfriend. She could tell everyone that now. Going back home, if she ran into someone like Hunter again, she could say that she had a boyfriend and he was an FBI agent. No one else could say that. Those bitchy girls from high school who harassed her and bullied her, called her a rape baby and made fun of her for breaking up with Finn, wouldn’t be able to stop her. She even imagined running into one of them at a coffee shop or at the downtown diner hangout. Even seeing Liza would make her feel different. It was almost okay that she had slept with him and hurt him. He wasn’t the way Liza thought he was.

She was going home a different person. And she had two homes now.
But time together never lasted forever. For now.

The ache of him leaving her at the airport gate was different than all of the other times before that he’d left her. She had no luggage, only carryon. She’d left the dresses, suitcase, and makeup there. He wanted, he said, to come home and feel like she’d still be there when he went to sleep. The few paintings she wanted to take with her were already sent with Han and Leia. Her sketchbook and art supplies were over her shoulder in a canvas bag.

He gave her one of his shirts, a deep maroon one that she’d liked seeing on him. It was stuffed in her purse.

He had his own suitcase, the sleek silver and black one, heading in another direction to start his casework. The office had been filled with post-it notes and papers that outlined who to talk to first. He had to start with the oldest case, to see if anything seemed familiar or if there was anyone there who remembered anything strange. He had looked so lost the last time he’d looked at the notes, taking another picture before turning to his notebook. But when he shut his computer, he was all hers. The tension in his shoulders always came from something else when he turned from his work.

It was another fantasy she felt drawn into the more she thought about it. She’d spoken with Silla about an old art gallery show she’d had years ago when she was younger. No one came but Owen. It sounded so sad at first but so romantic by the end. What if her art really was something she could share her hurt with in another way? She could talk to Kylo, paint or draw her feelings, and show him and he’d always understand. He’d always understood. Even when things were bottoming out, he’d always know what she was trying to say with how she created images on a page or wall.

It had made her smile to see her sweet pea drawing and her picture on his desk at work.

It felt like everyone was looking at them when he kissed her when her row was called to the gate. She clung to him, not wanting to let him go.

He whispered one more I love you. And then she had to turn and go.

And their time apart started.

And she had to start counting the days until she could see him again.

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All sound washed out around him when the door to her gate slid shut and locked.

He hadn’t realized how long he’d been standing there, staring, just hearing his own heartbeat.

And then he had to sprint to catch his flight.

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“No one has looked at this for a while,” the old clerk said, putting the file in his hands. Kylo frowned at it instantly, looking up and narrowing his eyes. “Some of it didn’t end up in the
Turning, he made his way back to find the detective who’d sent him that way, into the strange, dingy room filled with filing cabinets. He was used to their archives: endless warehouses with boxes of evidence and files, all labeled and carefully watched over before being signed in or out. He’d signed off on a few bags of evidence, but he mostly left that up to Owen. He’d always been lead. Him or George. All of this was on him now until they could get additional funds to put them on the road with him. Owen could hopefully join him in a month. He hadn’t left all of their cases in a lurch. Just most of them. And Owen really didn’t want Gerd as a partner but he’d have to do until he broke something on this.

He was getting ahead of himself. This was only the first of too many places to visit and explore.

Rey’s eyes at the airport flashed at him and he had to blink them away.

The case. Focus.

He was basically on the border to Canada. He’d had to drive far with his rental car to get there. And his nerves were already telling him to look across the border.

One step at a time. He needed to get his head together. Focus.

He needed to stop thinking about hearing Rey’s voice on the phone last night at the hotel. She was home and safe but missed him already. She was in his room, already wondering when they would be together again. He had to say soon, but couldn’t promise what soon meant.

Fuck bad timing. Fucking fuck bad timing right to hell. The urge to bite his arm had almost overwhelmed him in that room. But he promised himself he wouldn’t do that. He could fall asleep and imagine she was there.

It was a small town with really only two detectives. He was at an empty desk in the corner, waiting to get someone’s attention. He drummed his fingers for a moment, reminding him that even if he hadn’t bit his arm, he had chewed his nails down to the quick. Eyeing his hand for a moment, he rolled his eyes at himself before returning to the folder. Flipping through the pages, he started making notes about witnesses he’d have to track down without help. Many of them had probably left town. At least the parents were still there.

He flipped the page and had to look at the solemn face of a dark-haired eighteen-year-old boy with amber eyes in his eleventh grade picture.

“Oh, there you are.” The voice from Detective Hastings made him lift his head. There were two cups of coffee in flimsy paper mugs in his hands. He took one and managed a tight look of thanks. “I see you found it.”

No thanks to you. “Was this your case?”

He’d asked earlier and hadn’t received an acceptable answer. “Not mine. My former partner. He’s retired. Those are his notes.”

So, another person to talk to. “Is he still alive?”
“Yes, but he’s in Florida.”

He briefly shut his eyes. “I’m going to need his number. But these should still be on the ViCAP database or at least somewhere other people could look at them, even just on the state level. Someone should type them up.” He sat back, sipping at his coffee. He slid his notepad over.

The older man flinched slightly and sat down in the empty chair beside of him. He jotted down the name and number before letting the pen drop. “Look, I know you explained this to me on the phone but it still doesn’t make sense why you are here digging into a case like this. He probably just ran off and fell into gangs or drugs. That’s what Peter thought and that’s what I think too. That’s what people like this do.”

You didn’t even pull the file until I got here, his thoughts burnt. “I’d still like to look at this and talk to the family. The Bureau thinks we have a serial killer here. It may be a cold case, but I’m here to look at it and see if it connects to our larger theories.”

He sometimes surprised himself how confident he could sound when it mattered. He had come into the station with false assurance, mostly still dwelling on how he’d fallen asleep wishing he was somewhere else, but the second he’d been curtly shown to the ‘archive’ room he flipped the switch in his head. And, now, just how the man was sitting irked him further. Balding and fat, comfortable in how things were, he didn’t want to stick his neck out for anyone. The boy in the picture would be twenty-seven now. He could be out there living a life, somewhere on a beach, or he could be long dead. Someone had to at least look into it and it wouldn’t be the man sitting across from him with donut crumbs on his shirt.

“Are they sending you out here because you’re a rookie on some wild goose chase?” Hastings dared to raise an eyebrow at him and he sat up straighter. How young did a person with a scar like his seem to this man? “Most of the witnesses are gone and there’s no crime scene. He went to the store and never came back. How much good do you think talking to the family will do?”

His focus narrowed on the man. “Families always deserve to know what happened to someone they loved.” Standing he kept his eyes on the man. “Is their most recent contact information in the file?”

Hastings matched him, standing as well. His hard eyes seemed to glare back at him before he reached out to take the folder from him. Glancing at the number, he called out to someone in the corner. Kylo could only keep his eyes on him. When he turned back, he jolted slightly. “Yeah. Sandy says they’re still in town. Same number. Same address. And it looks like you don’t want me to go with you.”

Closing the folder and picking it up, he looked at him with tight lips. “Nope.”

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Rey stretched out, matching Paige’s pose. The September air was still warm enough to do yoga outside. Benji was splashing in a kiddie pool, always within earshot. Rey kept turning her head every time she felt Paige look away.

Being home had been both comfortable and confusing, finding new things to worry about alongside old routines. But Kylo called every night. He was still in Maine, looking at the first case on his list. Kylo was always making lists and plans. Sometimes, since being home, she almost missed the old
FBI application checklist that used to dominate their fridge. Now, it was just newer pictures of them, the dogs, or the cat and magnets that Han that were funny.

But in one corner, was still the picture of the first Christmas they had with Poe. He looked so happy and young. Kylo looked right at the camera and looked annoyed. And she almost didn’t recognize herself in the picture.

Shifting her arm, she exhaled and held the pose.

“I applied to college yesterday,” Rey said. “There’s a programme at Hux and Kylo’s old school that I hope I’ll get into.”

She’d talked to Silla about her entrance essay the last week. They’d emailed it back and forth until it looked ready. She had her computer on her lap as she hit send before looking up at Leia to see a warm face filled with hope and pride. If she met the requirements, the rest of her portfolio was going to be sent by courier by the supplication deadline. Han had already said he’d drive it down for her. Being home had been weird, but it wasn’t all bad.

She guessed they were happier because, despite her longing for him, she knew more or less what the future would look like. Almost.

Paige turned her head and grinned, one long strand of dark hair slipping loose. “That’s so wonderful, Rey. I knew you’d find something when you were ready. I mean, even if you didn’t go to school, I still would have supported whatever you did. But it’s a really nice campus and good school. Don’t listen to the guys complain about it not being a top-ten school.”

“Yeah, I remember.” She felt boosted by the grin, but her worries still didn’t leave her. “I’m still nervous I won’t get in for the spring.”

Paige shrugged, turning to stretch in a new way. Rey copied her, arching her back to match the movement. It ached slightly in harsh way before it felt good, releasing more of her tension. “Well, then you can apply again for the fall. Or look at another school. Maybe one in D.C.?”

She was already nodding. “I looked at a couple there. But Kylo wants, I mean, Kylo thought it would be better if I was closer to Han and Leia for a while. It’s only a two-year programme. And Kaydel will be with me. He’s always worried about me making new friends.”

Paige rolled her eyes and dropped into a new pose, down on her arms to hold a plank. “He always worries about that. He used to hate making new friends. High school was so weird with him. I mean, it was nice but still weird. It’s like other people didn’t exist at times for him because he had us.”

Rey sat on her knees for a moment before stretching out to rest on her elbows. “I’ve read almost all of his journals.”

Paige’s arm slipped before she moved to rest fully on her mat. “He really let you read them?”

Dropping out of the harsh pose, Rey moved to rest on her side. “It was…it was a really bad day for us. He said some things that…” She needed to sigh, feeling the sweat on her skin start to drip. She lifted her head for a moment, following Paige’s eyes back to her son. He was throwing a ball up in the air, still jabbering to himself. “Paige, I don’t want to ask again about hurtful things…”

Biting her lip, Paige said up and folded her legs. Sitting up, she straightened her back. Like she was used to doing, Rey copied her.
“Rey, it hurt so much when he cheated. I thought he really loved me but it was all…” Paige sucked in a long breath. “When Poe died, it was like we all lost him and Kylo at the same time. Armie wasn’t himself. I cried. I mean, a lot. Armie cried too. And don’t let him know I told you that but I guess he’d tell you the same. He’s not your principal anymore. But Poe was like the light in our group. He always cheered me up. He loved how we could double date and hang out as couples. When Kylo did…when he tried to kill himself at the same time, I never saw Armie so lost in what was going on. His friend had died and his best friend had almost died and you had been missing. I felt the same. For a while, I guess I was Kylo’s best friend. And Poe had been there for me in school too. But that night was so messed up. It kind of broke us a little. It took a lot of work. So much work to get us back together. We fought all of the time. I hated him at times when I found out about that stupid girl. We went to therapy and talked a lot. And I realized I still wanted to be with him. Forgiving him took so much out of me. I needed to go back to the clinic because I wasn’t eating and thought that it was all my fault.”

Rey reached out to take her hand. It was all she could do.

Paige gripped her hand and finally smiled. “But that hard work meant so much. I can get sad and still think about those bad times but I refuse to let them destroy what we have. Because now we have a little boy and we can still get into small fights and I can be stupid sometimes but I’m me. I say stupid things sometimes. But we work through them. That’s all you can do when you love someone and figure out they’re not perfect. But we love them anyway.”

The words hit Rey and she squeezed Paige’s hand. “You really do know Kylo. But I’m sorry that so many things have happened, Paige. Sometimes I feel like I don’t belong in all of this, like everyone still looks at me like a little kid, but you…”

Paige lifted her head to give her a smile that made her ache. “I sort know how you feel. I mean, it’s not the same. I used to know him when he was Ben, when we were children. But since he’s been Kylo, I sometimes see those bits of Ben again. Like, the little kid I remember sometimes.”

Nodding, Rey glanced over at the boy in the pool again. He was leaning over, plucking at the grass beside it. “I think I get it now. You want him to be Ben too. Like Han and Leia.”

Paige licked her lips. “No, no not really. I just like seeing the parts of Ben I remember in Kylo. And that sounds so weird. But I think you get it too. You’ve been around him your entire life, when all of those terrible things were happening to you both. I’ll never forget seeing him again for the first time again when I was fourteen and I just couldn’t believe what he’d been through and he’s still sitting in my stupid basement like my other friends. He stared at a painting on a wall for like fifteen minutes and then freaked out because Liza was a moron. And I still didn’t want to stop being his friend, even when Armie was dealing with the stuff he got from his dad and was a jerk. I always think about how life would be different without Kylo around. It would mean you wouldn’t be here. You wouldn’t have grown up to be the young woman you are now. You’re not a little kid anymore, Rey. You’re with a real person who I’ve known or thought about so much of my life. And if you want to go to school, you should totally do it. Kylo will still love you and come back to you. Armie came back to me after so much hard work. And if you guys have already worked through some of the harder parts, there are only good things in the future.”

She looked over at Benji who stumbled over the edge of the pool to run into her arms. Grinning, Benji turned and she got a wet hug too.

“Thanks, Paige,” Rey said, her arms filled with a wet three-and-a-half-year old boy. “I needed to hear that.”

Benji whispered in her ear. “Call Kylo?”
She smiled and stood, taking him by his hand. “He wants to talk to his godfather.”

Paige motioned towards the towels on the deck before shifting into a new pose. Rey saw how toned, but thin, her stomach looked in the moment but kept it to herself.

Drying Benji off, they went to her phone on the chairs on the deck.

Kylo should still be in Maine. Checking her watch, she hoped it would be lunchtime, or that he could take a break. Setting her phone up so he could see them both, she pulled Benji into her lap as she clicked to start the call.

It rang.

It kept ringing.

Benji looked up at her and was frowning before the call connected.

“Hi buddy.” Kylo’s voice crackled for a minute before the sound and video stabilized.

“Hi Kylo.” Benji tilted his head, looked at the video. “Where’re you?”

Rey looked at the video. It was an office. He hadn’t answered because he was trying to find somewhere to answer. It made her heart beat quicker.

“I’m at a police station in Maine.” Kylo finally put the phone down on the table and looked right at her. “Hi Rey. I miss you.”

She didn’t like video calling on the phone. She liked it when they were on the computer. But this was Benji. She understood more why he had moved to answer as quickly as possible, tearing himself away from what he was working on. “I miss you too.”

He licked his lips for a moment and blinked I love you. “What did you do today?”

Benji looked up at her and then back at the phone. “I played. I did a bunch of stuff. And then Rey came to be with mommy. Daddy is at school.”

Kylo moved the phone again. Rey knew he had looked at himself and didn’t like what he saw. “Well, daddy is busy. He’s like me. We have important jobs. But we still love you when we’re doing them.”

“You’re both heroes,” Benji said. “Kylo are you going to get the bad guy?”

He kept looking right at the camera. “I want to get the bad guy. That’s my job. And your daddy is going to make sure that there are fewer bad guys out in the world.”


His bare feet thundered against the deck and they were left alone. Blushing, Rey wiped her cheeks. “We’ve had a good day. I’m sorry for calling and not texting before.”

He shrugged before looking up at the ceiling. The room was too white. His dark hair and pale skin made him stand out too much. “I needed the break. I think I forgot to eat. Just sitting here, talking to you, it was a good break. I have to,” he sighed and closed his eyes, “I have to go and deal with these people again. Tell Paige I said hi. And if you see Hux, tell him I’m sorry for not returning his texts. It’s really…I’m really frustrated right now, Rey. I’d give anything to have you here with me.”
Letting go of the shiver his voice brought, she swallowed. “What’s wrong?”

His eyes closed again and he sighed. “There are people here who don’t know how to do their jobs that accuse me of not knowing how to do mine. I…” he paused his eyes flicking up. “I’ll talk to you tonight. I miss you. I love you. I need to figure this out.”

“But, I love you.” She kept herself short because he was looking pained when he looked back at the camera.

And then he clicked off.

And he was gone.

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Another house, another home, another dead end. Another police station with uninterested officers about something that they could shrug off.

The families still thought more about it and it kept drawing him into it all. Young men, despite their racial profile, couldn’t just randomly fall into death or gangs with no previous leanings. They came from more or less stable homes. The problems had been with how no one had looked at these cases before. The killer had known exactly who to strike out at as he planned his…

Stop it. Stop. It could all be unconnected until he found more evidence. At this point he was in Vermont. And even if George had put his neck on the line, the Canadians weren’t interested in a ‘wacky’ profile built on ‘no’ evidence.

Rubbing his eyes, he wrote down more of his notes and thoughts from the conversation from the family, trying to get himself unstuck from the overarching frustrations that were growing inside of him. September was gone and October was slipping away. His time on the case would keep getting shorter if he didn’t have some results. Still, people had a hard time remembering last year, let alone eight or ten years ago.

He was already sick and fucking tired of staying in hotels, driving between homes and broken memories.

Swallowing, he rested his head against the steering wheel of the rental car.

He had to slow down. He had to think about what he was doing. He needed to follow the clues and trace the evidence.

And the last thing he wanted was to burn himself out.

But he was getting so close to losing it.

Shaking his head, he started the car and started driving.

He hadn’t just figured out where yet.

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“I got in!” Rey called him right after he texted. He was in Massachusetts. So close to home yet still so far away.

He gripped the phone to his ear, ignoring the dampness from the shower. He’d just got in, back from another round of interviews that just made his notepad fatter. He needed time back home to put it all together. Driving around, changing rental cars and hotels while wearing the same damned clothes all of the time, made him itch. At least Owen would be there tomorrow. And he’d bring new clothes for him. “That’s so amazing, Rey. I want… I wish I could hug you right now.”

October was almost gone. He should have figured out that she would be accepted by then. She got in on the first round. Even if he didn’t understand a thing about art school, he knew that it meant she was as good to other people as she was to him. “Oh, Kylo. But this means…”

“Rey, we’ll figure it out.” He hated cutting her off. It cut him up inside. “I’m…I just want to come home. I want to be with you. And I can’t tell anyone that but you. There’re so many hurt people out there and I’m starting…” he sucked in a deep breath. “I want to help them all but I know I keep missing you at the same time.”

She breathed in and out. “But it will feel better if I’m not alone. And it’s somewhere that you know.”

_Exactly_, he wanted to say but bit it back. His old university. Their old campus. He knew every inch of that place. Even after they changed the main library, he had looked up the differences the second Rey had applied. “There’s not much you don’t know about me.” He took a deep breath. “Owen will be with me soon. And then I’m coming home for Thanksgiving.”

“Kylo, I love you.”

He looked at his bleeding cuticles. “I love you too.”

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The snow had already created a drift on the rental when he and Owen ducked into the car. He turned it on, blasting the heater to max, before stepping out with the scraper to brush off the snow.

By the time he sat back in the car and tossed the scraper in the back, he didn’t want to look at his partner.

“Really, Kylo, it’s Buffalo in November. The Great Lakes hate this place and even the people agree with God that it shouldn’t exist.” Owen adjusted his coat and took out his phone. “But it is nice to see you.”

“I’ve never wanted to be back in our boring office so badly,” Kylo managed to say before turning and giving him a light smile. “And it could be worse. We could be in Cleveland.”

Owen’s grin broadened. “I missed you too. Now, let’s get going before everything turns white and we have to sleep on the side of the highway.”

Even if these interviews turned out to be nothing, he had his partner with him.
He’d been wearing Rey down with their calls without visits.

If he didn’t have Owen with him, he might just have gone inside of himself before the Thanksgiving break.

Because they would only get the saddest stories if they tried to interview anyone over Thanksgiving. Christmas was also thankfully out of the question. Invading another family’s holiday traditions was low on the list of things he wanted to do. That list was mostly filled with getting through more interviews so he could go home. He was getting better at interviewing and paying attention to families, but was getting worse at talking to other officers.

As if what he was already hearing wasn’t the worst sagas about loss and not being heard that he’d ever listened to in his life, he always had to be built a rapport

Owen was flipping through his notes as they drove. “Did you change the questionnaire for the police?”

He ground his molars together. “I had to. The last, I guess, five places I was at didn’t care about it. So I changed it.”

He heard Owen sigh and look at him from the corner of his eye. “We’ll have to go through this when we’re at the hotel. You should have checked with me or George. But I like how you were able to think on your feet because most of this looks good. This isn’t hopeless yet, Kylo.”

Staring at the snow that was starting to fall, he started to feel like it was entirely that way.

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Kylo’s plane still hadn't changed from At the Gate to Arrived. She kept watching the board, trying not to pace back and forth. Instead, she just stamped her foot.

“Sweetie, you can’t make it get here faster. It was the damned weather's fault.” Han glanced up at her and tapped the seat beside her. He'd already been delayed by two hours and now they wouldn't let him off the plan. “Come on, sit down.”

Folding her arms, she huffed as she slumped into the chair. “I haven’t seen him since September. It’s not fair.”

She actually wanted to pout then. It wasn’t Kylo’s fault. It wasn’t his job’s fault. It was the world’s fault for being so evil.

Han put his arm around her. She exhaled trying to lose the demanding thought. “I know, Rey. He’s taken on a lot this time. But you’ll see him now and then in December. And then again in January, when you move.”

She almost didn’t want to go to college now. She’d just be further away from him. Biting her lip, she took a deep breath. “Maybe I shouldn’t go. Maybe it’s a dumb idea.”

“You feel that way now but you’ll be with Kaydel. And he’ll be forced to take more vacation time to come be with you. You know he will.” Han gripped her again. “Rey, come on sweetheart. He’ll be here soon. And I want to see him too.”
Think about other people. Rey lifted her head and hugged Han back. “I love you, dad. I’m sorry I still don’t have my license.”

Both of Han’s arms came around her. “Hey, sweetheart, there’s still time. And taking it in the winter is just unfair. I know you can handle it but the people at the DMV might think otherwise.”

Pressing her face against his chest, she breathed him in. “I’m sorry for all of the times I got mad the last few months.”

He hugged her tighter. “Rey, baby girl, you can be as angry as you want. It hasn’t been all bad being home but we hear you talking to him every night. When we talk to him, we hear it too. He needs a break. So, what I’m thinking is that we try not to be mad at him for all of this. We love him. We’re going to go home and sleep and then tomorrow we’ll eat and be a family.”

Nuzzling closer, Rey shook her head. “Is Luke coming?”

Han sighed. “Leia talked to him. He won’t be there if Ben is there. It makes my head hurt because I miss him too.”

More mystery. More problems that Kylo didn’t need. “Maybe we should tell Kylo that we told him not to come.”

A deep chuckle from Han made her sit up. “That’s probably a good idea.” He lifted his head to the board. “He’s in baggage claim, come on.”

Slipping her hand into Han’s, Rey was led back to the arrivals door. She kept looking at him and found herself smiling for more than letting go of her desperate frustrations. He missed Kylo too. If Leia hadn’t said ‘oh no, you go, I’m working on dinner for today and tomorrow’ she’d be there too. But she had the same look in her eyes when Rey had glanced over her shoulder in the back entrance. Go and get our son.

Her breathing grew quicker when a new batch of passengers in heavy coats started coming through the doors.

Finally, finally, a dark head of hair that seemed to tower above everyone else emerged, instantly scanning around until he found her eyes.

She was in his arms in three steps.

And home was hers again.

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He just wanted to hold her throughout the entire meal. Last night he’d almost fallen asleep after the flight and the delays before they could really eat. And even then, the entire time he just wanted her near him.

He couldn’t even talk about the case. Departing in different directions from Owen had made him feel briefly positive but, really, what could they do in such a short period of time? Without results, or at least a working profile that went beyond ‘well, he murdered my boyfriend and is out to get me’, they would be stuck doing things as bare bones as possible.
“Kylo,” Rey said, nudging him again. “You need to eat.”

He’d just been holding her hand, but had been lost in it. “Of course, yeah.”

He lifted his head to look around the table. Hux had been staring at him hard the last few minutes. He’d seen it from the corner of his eyes but had chosen to ignore it. The second he looked at him he caught at smile and then he saw his friend lean over to whisper to his son to go to him. Kylo glanced at Rey and then a full grin spread across his face as Benji came to sit on his lap. He got the cut-up plate of food slid over to him.

Looking over at his parents, then over at Hux and his mother and Paige, and finally landing on Rey, he made up a plan for Christmas. It was probably coming out of some place of grief and loss but also love. He couldn’t have the next holiday without them. When he was finally on the ground for longer than a few days, they needed to be at his table.

“Hey buddy,” he leaned in to whisper to Benji. “For every bite you eat, I’ll eat one too.”

Benji’s bright eyes locked on his. “Mommy said you need to eat more. And me too.”

“Then it’s a deal.”

Switching to his left hand, he kept holding and helping Benji with his right. But he still ate. And he knew that Rey was shifting closer the entire time until Benji was almost in her lap too.

He almost didn’t hear the rest of the conversation around them.

After hearing about so many families being torn apart, he almost didn’t hear what normal, happy people said anymore.

-=-

“Kylo, you need to sleep.”

People had been telling him what to do all night and he wasn’t snapping back at them. She had been watching him stare at his laptop for the last fifteen minutes, hardly typing anything as he frowned at it. He met her eyes and hit save before he released it into her hands.

“Thank you.” He sighed as she lifted it away from him.

He had almost been gone the entire time they’d been together. And he was leaving tomorrow. If it wasn’t for Benji, he would have just leaned against her and frowned the entire time.

“Have you talked to George? You don’t look…you don’t look okay.” She gently put his laptop on the floor before leaning up to turn off the light. They were in his room, the old one she remembered from when she was small. The bed downstairs held too many bad memories, despite how big it was. “You promised to take care of yourself.”

He’d lost some weight. It wasn’t much but it was clear in how he felt when she’d hugged him. He was himself but at the same time not.

Kylo swallowed. “I’m getting used to this, Rey. I always need…time. You know.” His voice dropped. “You know me. How can I keep you leaving you alone?”
Turning, she gripped him tighter. “Kylo, you’re home. We’re together. It’s okay.”

It really wasn’t. But she could maybe help him believe it was.

Slowly, his mouth found hers. She kissed into his softness, the delicate pleading he was offering her. He was putting all of himself into what he was working on while trying to balance everything else in the middle.

“It sucks so much out there, Rey,” he broke away to say, pushing her hair behind her ear. “Nobody cares about these people except me. Owen saw it too.”

"You're going to do it, Kylo." Tightening her arms, Rey didn’t know what to do. “I love you.”

Putting his head down, he kissed her chest. “I love you too.”

-=-

He didn’t have words for how worn out and angry he was by the time he landed. Getting screwed over by the airline and the weather had made him close to screaming by the time he escaped the crush of people at baggage claim.

Grey caught the look at winced. “Christ, do you look pissed. And weird. What the fuck.”

“Fucking leave it alone.” He frowned at his friend. “I had to leave early only to spend five hours on the other side of security because of the fucking weather.” He lifted his hand to show his bruised knuckles. “It was just a wall but there were so many people who deserved it more.”

The spent a few awkward seconds standing there before Gregor took charge. He almost needed a personal handler at that point. The long walk away through the crowd of slow walkers out into the parking lot, back into the cold, almost made him come back to himself.

Guiding him to the car, Grey nodded. “It’s right after Thanksgiving. It’s the worst fucking time of the year. Thanks for nothing, right?”

He closed his eyes and let out a long and frustrated exhale that came from the bottom of his lungs. Once his bags were in the back and he could sit down, he pulled his coat around him and frowned. “I had to leave her again, Grey. I know it’s only three weeks until I get time off and she can come here again but it’s getting to me. It’s all getting to me. Having to be fucking calm all of the time during interviews and restrained when I talk to Owen or your dad or having to not be a mess around my family…I had to look Rey in the eyes and see how hard this has been on her and it breaks my heart every damned time.” He let out a long grunt, clenching his teeth. “I have so much work to do the next week and then I’m back out again.”

Grey gave him a long look as he started the car. At least he’d been there to pick him up. He wouldn’t have handled the wait for a cab or another ride. “So, do you want to get hammered and shoot some zombies?”

“Yes.”

Smirking, his friend let him rest as they made their way back to his house. He still couldn’t get his mind off of Rey and his family. They had prepared for all of this but it hadn’t been enough. He had
promised her that he’d be around and it just wasn’t happening. The feeling that his phone calls weren’t enough remained. He already missed being in her arms. Those hours had been too short. He almost didn’t count them in days. They’d just been hours.

His hands were still clenched when they got inside. Almost giving into how agitated he was, he wanted to let his suitcase rest by the door rather than unpacking it right away.

“I can set us up,” Grey offered. “I picked up your dry cleaning. Everything else has been good here. I come by every other day and check the security set up. I saw a deer once.”

He grunted in response, but he started doing the small things that would start to get him out of his mood: putting his laptop and notes on his desk; unpacking his clothes and putting half of it to wash and the other half to be taken to the dry cleaners; changing into sweat pants and a t-shirt; and staring at himself in the mirror until he felt human again. Washing his face helped. The stupid scar was still there but at least he was more awake.

Grey was on the couch, already screwing around with the game. “You probably haven’t eaten. I know you. I ordered pizza. I’ll head out to pick it up in a few.”

Sitting down heavily, Kylo sighed. “Thanks. It’s just been a shitty trip. It’s been shitty since September. I have tomorrow off and then I have to look your father in the eyes and try not to look pissed off at how slow this is going. I know Owen came back thinking things were better but fuck.”

Putting down the controller, his friend licked his lips. It was his nervous tell. “You don’t need me to tell you that he’s okay with your progress. I mean, he’s frustrated too that you have to do most of it alone, but it’s going to take time, Ky. Cold case shit is cold for a reason. You’re going to get a handle on it soon.”

Spotting an opened beer on the table, he picked it up before he sneered at himself. “I feel stupid for complaining. I wanted this case and it’s still something I need to do for him, but now I’m getting too close to the other families too. I see him in all of them. I see my family in them too. Someone is gone and you always hope they’ll come back until you see a body. That type of waiting and hurting is making it hard to keep going. And Rey tells me to keep going but it’s hard on her too. She’s going to start school in January. The trip will be even longer to see her. I don’t…getting placed at headquarters is such a privilege for someone as inexperienced as I am. Your dad worked hard to get me there. It would feel like I’m betraying him by asking for a transfer to the Connecticut field office.”

“How long is her programme?”

“Two years.”

Grey scoffed. “That’s not forever. She’ll have spring break and summers. Even if you don’t solve this thing next year, they’ll pull you off of it and put you back in normal rotation until you’re more seasoned and then you can get back at it. With her here.”

He still stared blankly at the frozen television. “What if he kills more people while I’m doing that?”

He almost wished that the new televisions gave off the same electronic wheeze that he remembered from his childhood because that would have at least broken the silence.

“I don’t want to leave you with that thought. My dad has put holes in the walls over shit like this too. But he’ll talk you through it. And so will your shrink. But I’m going to go get us something to
“She understands, Ky. She’s trying to plan her life too so, on the other side, it will be easier. You’ll see her soon.”

He managed to nod but still dropped his head and slumped down. Grey left him alone and he could call Rey again. He needed to apologize to her for the angry phone call he got while he was waiting for his bag.

“Are you feeling better?” Her voice was soft but steady. He still hadn’t broken her yet, but that fear felt heavier now.

“Yeah. I just got home. Everything looks fine here. We’re going to eat and then I’m finally going to rest.” He couldn’t disguise his lingering anger even if he wanted to so he had to take a deep breath. “I’m sorry I couldn’t stay longer. You know I am.”

“Kylo, I know. I miss you so much but I’m okay. It feels so long until Christmas but I’ll be there soon. I have things to do. I’m going to miss you everyday but I don’t want you to be mad at yourself. You were here. Things were perfect even when we were sad. It will hurt me more if you…if you hurt yourself.” Her voice fell at the last part and he took a long drink from his bottle. Was it a healthy release? Probably not. He’d just have to stop himself when he felt numb enough. “I miss you.”

He bit his lip. “I wish you were here. I’d feel better if you were here. But I know you’re safe. Please don’t feel sad, Rey. I’ll take care of myself, I promise.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

Hanging up, he stared at the wall until Grey got back.

The door finally opened and Grey stomped off the wetness. “Fuck this storm.”

Kylo had finished his first beer and was reaching for his second. “You should see how it is in Buffalo. I hate New York.”

Grey groaned as he sat down and opened the box. “My stupid grandparents live in New York. Those assholes can fuck right off back to Ukraine for all I care.”

He listened to Grey talk as he ate. Even if he got drunk tonight, he needed to work out the next day. Being on the road in shitty motels without gyms had left him feeling the opposite of okay. He’d mostly been stuck with running in the mornings, getting his frustrations out that way. Grey pulled out more to drink as they started talking about something that wasn’t how depressed they both were. Both of them were excellent about feeling sorry for themselves.

“I’m still sorry I wasn’t here when you moved.” He had missed his friend. It wasn’t in the same way he missed Rey. Being with her felt more raw and instant, like coming home. This was more like visiting a place he forgot he hadn’t been in a while.

Grey shrugged. “It was okay. I left most of my shit at dad’s. I had to buy a bunch of new sheets because this guy has a huge bed. He left his dishes too but I’m too much of a pussy to use them so I bought some cheap shit.” He gave him a long look before tilting his head. Grey followed his gaze and then rolled his eyes. “Yeah. I know about my hair. I’ll dye it or something if you keep fucking looking at me like that.”

There were flecks of whiter hair along the side of his friend’s head. He really hadn’t been lying. “I
used to want to get older faster. Now I almost want it to stop.”

“We’re almost thirty. What are you going to do?”

The box was empty and he was glaring at it before Grey pushed it to the floor. He’d clean it up tomorrow. He’d have to.

“You know what, fuck it,” Grey said before standing. He crossed the floor and Kylo finally realized he’d been wearing khaki shorts the entire time. “I was going to give you this for Christmas, but we’re here now.”

His backpack, the faded blue one, was leaned against the kitchen island. Gregor picked it up and out came the whiskey.

He still had a bit of snark left in him. “I hate that kind.”

Gregor tossed his arms up. “Then I’ll get you something fucking better for Christmas, asshole. Are the shot glasses still…”

Kylo cut him off. “Same shelf as the dessert wine glasses. Above the red wine glasses.”

He made a face. “Why the fuck do you own dessert wine glasses?”

Looking at the screen, he smirked. “I don’t know. I inherited them.”

They turned the game play into a drinking game. Kylo was losing hard, his hands slipping and had to take two hard shots. But then he got the upper hand. Three kills in a row. He paused the game to sit back and watch Grey take the three shots, making sure he didn’t spill them.

“Fuck you,” he finally said. “I’ll get you yet.”

More shooting. More shots.

More darkness creeping closer.

Things blurred when he went to the washroom. And then he was back on the couch.

Grey nudged him. “It’s your turn.”

“Don’t fucking touch me,” he growled. His focus was back and Grey had four shots on his hands.

“You’re being an asshole right now. I picked you up from the fucking airport, fucker. So we split these.” Two overflowing shot glasses were already on the coffee table he’d spent too much money on.

“Fine with me, fuck you,” he thought he said.

Those were the last words he remembered before tilting memories blacked out into nothing.

When the world blurred back into focus, he thought he was looking at another hotel wall. He wanted to scream at it in an instant. Trying to make it go away, he pressed his eyes closed and rolled over. When his hands found a warm body next to him, he tried to pull it closer and grunted when it resisted.

“Ky, stop.”
Opening his dull eyes, he met Grey’s. “Where’s Rey?”

Sitting up, Grey blinked at him. They were both still dressed. But how did they get in the bed? “She’s at home. We’re both… Kylo, it’s only four a.m. Go back to sleep. We’re both too fucked up for this.”

“Rey’s not here?”

Rolling over, Grey’s arms grabbed him. He knew that much. He just couldn’t figure out where Rey was. He settled his head on a warm chest and a soft mouth kissed his forehead. “You kept asking for her and I had to keep telling you she’s not here but she’s just not here right now. Okay, Ky? But she’s safe. Go to sleep.”

In warm arms, he nodded and let unconsciousness take him.

And the bed was empty when he woke up again.

He’d apologize when he felt like it.

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Flipping through a book Silla recommended to her, Rey checked her phone again. Bee grumbled as she moved and she reached out to soothe him. Han and Leia didn’t care when she went to bed but staying up all night waiting was something they didn’t like. So sitting on the couch until it was almost too late was what she’d been doing for the last hour.

The last few months had been strange. It was like going back in time but she was still the same person.

They’d had August together. Now, December was finally there. She’d bought her Christmas presents. And her suitcase was already packed to go to Virginia.

She used to be angrier when she was away from Kylo. Now, she spent most of the time worrying. She forced herself to focus on getting ready for school. She’d be living in the dorms with Kaydel. She’d been there to see her last week, after Thanksgiving. She wanted to get her mind off of being in Kylo’s room without him. Staying with Kaydel for a weekend was a relief. Being there, seeing the other students, made it easier to think about being there. He wanted her to do it. He’d have a few more months on the road and then the case would be up for review again.

But he had sounded better since Thanksgiving. He was more focused and promised he was eating and sleeping more. His bosses, not just George, thought he was getting somewhere.

And he was also planning for Christmas.

That part made her smile. Making other plans took him out of his head.

Her phone buzzed. “Hi.”

“Hey.” He didn’t sound tired. She sat up straighter. “How are you?”

Petting Bee, she smiled. “I had a good day. I was mostly reading. Did you have a good day?”
She could almost hear him nodding. “I found a witness who might have seen something. I need to find a few more people, but I needed this.”

Bee started purring. “You did. But I miss you.”

A deep sigh. “I miss you too. But we’ll be together in a couple of weeks. It will be okay, Rey.”

Time just had to keep moving faster and then it had to stop. If she had one wish, that would be it.

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“I don’t know how you got all of this together Kylo.”

Paige’s voice drew him away from cutting the celery and he quirked his head. “What? I got the groceries delivered.”

It didn’t mean that he didn’t forget some of the things and had to send his parents shopping for the last of it, but that was another detail that he’d missed. There had been too much to think about the last few months. Not being on the road finally meant he could catch up with so many things that had piled up as he drove around the country, chasing ghosts, old leads, and feeling like he was failing every step of the way.

“No, I mean…” Paige sat up and sighed, still sipping on her water. “You have so much going on and you get us all here like this and it’s nice. And we’ve missed you so much.”

He had to turn away because he knew he was blushing. The last year had been strange, hard, and infuriating at times. There was no question that his parents would be there for Christmas. They’d be departing the day before New Years Eve, taking the cat with them. Rey starting school in January meant that Bee couldn’t stay there; he was also eyeing every piece of furniture for the scratch marks he knew were coming if he stayed longer.

Really, the last few months of being mostly alone and interviewing so many people who’d lost someone had made him want to draw his friends and family around him. And having it at his home made it even more his own. His house had been empty for too long. So Boxing Day was the best time. Benji didn’t miss his Christmases with his grandparents and Hux and Paige could come be with them.

“Hey, I missed you too.” He put the knife down, leaning against the counter and folding his arms. “I’m glad you could make it. I know I said that before but I…”

Paige reached out her hand and he moved to take it without thinking. “I…Kylo, it’s so weird how grown up we are. I’m a mom and you’re…you’re doing that thing you always said you would.”

He swallowed. “They’re both important jobs.”

He held her eyes for a moment and pulled her into a loose hug. The entire holiday had been different flavours of chaos that felt even stranger after that morning. George had come over with all of his children, explaining that he had to deal with some emergency meeting. Grey had looked at him with pleading eyes to let him stay with his younger siblings, to give them more people to talk to and something to do. He was ‘flat out of ideas’ and had already looked worn out. And now they were hoping that the abrupt meeting would still mean he could be there for dinner. With Kylo
misremembering certain ingredients, dinner was getting later and later so the hope almost felt real.

Hux, Rey, and Rose had taken all of the kids ice skating. Han and Leia were shopping.

That only left them and Grey.

He heard his footsteps up from the basement and stepped back to give Paige a small smile. “You don’t know how important you are to me, Paige.”

Her smile almost touched her eyes. “I think I do, Kylo. I really think I do.”

He turned before Grey came into view. “Hey,” the other man greeted, holding up two bottles of white wine. “Which one did you want again? You sent me that list and to me, it’s all just wine.”

Kylo looked between the two of them. Paige had never been shy and Grey really was the opposite of anything close to introverted. It should have been more awkward to be the only thing connecting them. “Open the Chardonnay. We can drink and talk and finish this.”

Grey raised his eyebrows and grinned. He’d missed him too. Since he got back, Grey found excuses to come by. Kylo also knew that he felt alone in his own place. He sometimes wished that Grey’s need for so many people would truly rub off on him. For the most part, he was only interested in seeing and talking to one person. Now, knowing how many people would be around him for the evening, he found the longing that he hadn’t realized was there for them as well.

If Kylo had learnt anything these last few months, it was when to breathe and enjoy the people he was with. And he was also mostly distracting himself before Rey got back. Owen and Silla were bringing some side dishes when they arrived later. It really would be almost everyone he cared about under one roof. Deep inside, he thought about locking them all in there and keeping them there until the end of time but as George had repeatedly told him, it really wasn’t a feasible idea.

But a lot of his ideas were bad.

He moved to hand Paige a glass and she shook her head. He blinked for a moment and then let a slow smile spread across his face. “You didn’t tell me.”

She shrugged but let a small bashful look cross her face. “We didn’t really know it would be…it would be a thing until recently. This one is a little trickier. I was sick for a while.”

It made his delight fade almost instantly. “You could have really told me, Paige. I know I can’t be there like I was before…”

She licked her lips, glancing at Grey for a moment. “I mean, Kylo, you were on the road. You were worried about Rey being with your parents and feeling alone. You had tons of stuff to worry about. Armie wanted to tell you so many times and we decided to wait.”

He reached for her hand, needing to hug her again. “I really haven’t found anything, Paige. I’ll be pulled off of it some time in the spring. And I’ll be back to having more regular hours.”

She sighed in his arms. “I’m sorry, Kylo. I wanted you to find who did it too.”

He pushed off the frustration at himself and his lack of conclusive evidence and shook his head. “It still doesn’t mean I can neglect the people around me.”

He held Grey’s eyes when he opened them, glancing over Paige’s shoulders. His friend smiled, taking the apology as it was. *Fuck you*, he mouthed.
Paige had juice, while him and Grey put a good dent in the bottle as potatoes were peeled. The
turkey they’d put in the oven in the morning, mostly done by his parents but he and Rey had still 
been in the room, needed to be checked. The last things his parents were out buying were for 
dessert so there was no real rush. Finish a few more side dishes for the kids. Fold a few more 
apples. They could sit together and not be too stressed. The morning had been a kick in the face in 
terms of throwing things together. And George had never apologized more in his life.

“It’s just a little weird,” Paige said, watching them both sip wine with more than a little envy in her 
eyes. “If my boss came to me after Christmas and said ‘hey take care of my kids’ I wouldn’t know 
what to think.”

He looked at Grey who downed the rest of his glass before he reached for more. He narrowed his 
eyes at him and only took half a glass. “That’s mostly my fault. Their stepmom hates me and 
refuses to come for Christmas if I’m here. When they were little, Grant and Grace thought it was 
cool to get two Christmases too. They still like it because it’s double the presents but they’re 
figuring it out more and I feel shitty. But if they can do something with Rey, then they’ll be happy. 
They like her.”

The words settled deeply into Kylo’s heart. Being around all of the children stirred an old thought 
and he had to shake it off.

They had everything on the stove or in the oven by the time the door opened with a rush of cold 
air, ushering in a complaining Hux, laughing Rose and Rey, and three rosy-cheeked children. Benji 
was at his side in an instant and he scooped him into his arms without thinking.

Meeting his eyes, Kylo carefully blinked. Missed you.

Video calling wasn’t entirely bad.

Smiling, Benji nodded. Miss you.

He caught a look from Rey from the corner of his eye and almost grinned wider. “Did you have fun 
skating?”

He cuddled closer. “Daddy fell down.”

Hux smoothed his hair before reaching for his son to continue undressing him. With reluctant 
hands, Kylo let the boy go. Still, Hux was smirking as he took the small, blue jacket off of his son. 
“I was the only one without skates. Give daddy a break.”

Kylo met his friend’s eyes. “You don’t know how to skate.”

Hux snorted. “Neither do you. So shut up.” He put Benji down, but he clung to his leg. “That’s 
why he has to learn. We want to put him in hockey next yet.”

He saw Paige fold her arms from the corner of his eyes. “I think we’ll wait until he’s five for that.”

“Let me dream,” Hux said. “How are things going here?”

Kylo kept looking at his friend. He was looking older too. It was hard to miss. “Under control. I 
hope.”

“There’s wine.” Grey lifted the bottle, gesturing at Hux with a grin. “You look like you need it.”

Drifting away from the conversation in the kitchen, Kylo went to the door to the help the other
kids. And finally have Rey in his arms for the first time in hours.

*You don’t need to teach him that,* she blinked as he stepped closer. *I saw you.*

*I want to.* He smiled, tilting his head. *It’s useful.*

“Kylo, can I play FIFA downstairs?” Grant asked. He’d left his boots, toque, and coat in a heap and Kylo had to sigh. He’d turn twelve soon and caught the look. “I mean, after I pick up my stuff.”

“It’s not your house, Grant,” Rey said. *It was her house too,* Kylo thought warmely. “So thank you for remembering.”

“Yeah, I know.” He ordered his boots by the door and hung up his coat. His blonde hair was spiked up and he quickly smoothed it down. “So can I?”

“Sure.” He stepped back and nodded. “Your dad will be here soon.”

That only made Grant roll his blue eyes and leave for the basement. Grace was still holding Rey’s hand, looking for her father too.

“Grace, he’ll be here. I got a text. He’s almost done.” Kylo met George’s daughter’s eyes and hoped that he hadn’t just lied to her. “What do you want to do?”

Shyer than her brothers, Grace looked first at Rey than him. “Can I watch a movie upstairs? I don’t want to think about dad being gone right now.”

He could almost feel Rey about to volunteer but she was cut off by Rose. “I’d like to watch a movie with you. Let’s go find a new one.”

He watched the two go upstairs and he was sure he caught a wink from Paige’s younger sister.

Finally, Rey could step into his arms and he sighed against her. “Thank you for going with them.”

She shook her head against his chest. She was still cold from being outside and he rubbed her back, needing her to be warm again like she should be. “Kylo, it was my idea. Are Han and Leia back yet?”

He kissed her forehead, still not letting her go. “No. But they’ll be here soon.”

There it was. The centre he’d been looking for.

Guiding her by the hand to the kitchen, around the long table set up in the living room, he rejoined his friends.

Sitting at the kitchen table, he pulled Rey onto his lap and felt an easy peace around him; for the first time in so long, he didn’t want to think about the case. He was lightly buzzed and had her against him. He could still feel some of the initial tension from before easing. For a moment, he dropped his head in the midst of conversation.

Even when he felt happy and good, there was a shuddering incompleteness in not knowing who took him from a moment like this. He should be with his family, having times like this. He should be older now but still endlessly filled with energy and light. And maybe if Kylo wasn’t so slow in drawing attention to the pattern, to the case, it would make it all easier to put his memory into the right place. It was so easy to hate someone for being gone; having someone real to blame and punish gave a bit of solace to survivors.
Grey slid his glass into his hand again and he looked up and smirked. He caught Hux’s eyes and he raised his glass.

Thank God he had enough wine for that evening in the basement.

He was able to step back when his parents returned, complaining for too long about D.C. traffic when he told them not to go there in the first place. And it only made his mother give his father a hard look about showing off and thinking he could drive faster than was possible on bizarre one-way streets that changed directions in the middle of the day for no reason.

And then he watched his mother and Rey make dessert as he drifted back to stand with his friends. Benji grabbed for his hand and he lifted him up again. When the doorbell rang, he brought the boy with him. He was playing with his hair, reminding him to get a haircut before he had to go back to the office. At least he was using the usual notch on his belt again.

“Look who I found outside,” Owen looked at him and grinned, gesturing to George over his shoulder. “A man who feels horrible about leaving his children with you as he argues about budgets the day after Christmas.”

Silla, her blonde hair in perfect curls, nudged him with her shoulder. “Owen, please. Hello Kylo. And Happy Christmas. And hello…?”

Benji’s eyes shot to Kylo for a moment, a panicked look. Friend?

Yes. Friends.

The boy looked back at them. “I’m Benji. And he’s Kylo.”

>Hello Benji. I’m Cecilia,” Silla said, still smiling even as she raised the cloth-covered dish in her gloved hands. “Please let us come in. This is right out of the oven.”

“Put it right on the table. Go in with your shoes. It doesn’t matter at this point” He stepped aside and nodded. He finally met George’s eyes and tried to smile at him. “It was really fine, George.”

Owen was still lurking there before Silla glared him into moving, to help with the table and say hello to the other guests.

George took off his scarf but still shooked his head. He twisted the tweed in his hands, betraying the aggravation at being called away during the holiday. “It doesn’t mean I don’t feel bad about it. When I’ve retired, Kylo, don’t ever let them promote you to section head. I don’t want this for you. I’d prefer they punish Owen. And hello, Benji, it’s been so long since I’ve seen you.”

Benji eyed George and then leaned against Kylo’s shoulder to whisper to him. “Is it Grace and Grant’s daddy?”

Kylo grinned, mostly looking at George. “Yeah. It is.”

He saw the older man’s face soften when Benji turned and looked at him. “Hi.”

Standing with George, he sighed. "Everyone has been well behaved."

"Even Grey?" George raised an eyebrow. "Kylo, I feel like I should apologize again..."

He had to shake his head again. "George. It's fine. Really. We have the time now."

Holding his eyes, his mentor nodded. "You've done a lot of good work this year, Kylo. I really see
you maturing. Even if things have been rocky with this case, I know you're working through it."

He swallowed, but forced another nod. "There's still so much left to do. But talking to those families...sometimes I feel hope for them."

"As you should."

The entrance was a mess of coats, gloves, boots, and hats and he had to fight the urge to move all of it but he managed to get away from those thoughts by leaving it behind him for the kitchen. Benji wanted mommy. Grant wanted Grey to play FIFA with him. Grace wanted dad and Rey to finish watching her movie.

And as he was look at Rey as she climbed the stairs after George, shrugging at the request, he was locked into how he wouldn’t have this almost-perfect moment without her. He wouldn’t have made it through all of his time out in the world without her. Getting through the fighting and the pain and the dark memories of the past hadn’t been easy, but they both deserved a house filled with friends and family. He wasn't feeling guilty at all in that moment as he looked at his Christmas tree. They hadn’t forgotten the people they all wished were there. Grandma and grandpa’s dishes were on the table. They’d put the decorations on the tree from Poe’s first Christmas with them up in the house. Bee was asleep underneath the tree and hadn’t climbed it yet, but Kylo knew he was thinking about it.

He kept glancing at the door, wondering if Luke would show up.

“It’s fine, Ben,” his mother said, standing beside him. He didn’t jump but let his face fall instead when he realized that someone was reading his mind. His glass was returned to him and he covered up his frown by drinking. Dinner would be soon, but he should have come long ago if he was going to show up at all. Leia pursed her lips, eyeing the chair that both of them suspected would sit empty. “He hasn’t answered my phone calls since November.”

“I know,” he said. Owen was out of earshot, standing with Hux and Han out on the deck. And George was upstairs. “Mom, I work for the FBI. I know where he is. And I still think that…”

She put her hand on his arm. “He’s always done this, Ben. Let him have his secrets. You have enough to deal with. And please, at least for the kids, don’t talk about any cases at the table. You were almost there last night. There will be time when we’re alone, but we’re all here now.”

“Not all of us.” He slipped up there but he had been drinking.

Leia hugged him then, making him slouch down to have his arms around her. He was always so amazed when he realized how small she was. In his mind, mom was always looking down at him but since he got back, he’d been taller than her. “You’re going to do it for him, sweetheart.”

They slowly parted and both covered up the rising emotions by turning to their glasses.

And even though the turkey was dry and some things got burnt, and Leia took too many pictures, he had everything during that dinner.

So what if it had been annoying to move all of the living room furniture? He had the space in the basement for it, even though it had been annoying to move it all downstairs with his father. And it would be even more annoying to bring it back up. His stupid big house wasn’t always so stupid but the stairs were always a problem. Same with basements.

Even though he looked like he wanted to sit anywhere else, Grey sat between Grace and Grant and seemed to enjoy the energy from his siblings. He was laughing with them, whispering small
comments about everyone else there. He’d be gone after New Years, having Orthodox Christmas with his mother and grandparents. And he was dreading it. Kylo could see it by how often he’d ask if they all needed a refill of wine. Han and Hux kept encouraging him to go down into the basement, to get another bottle. And Silla kept pace with them, causing Owen to give him wild eyes before joining in. All Kylo could do was look at Rey with annoyance, mostly to make her smile.

How had he been able to be away from her for so long?

She had been so worried about having such a big dinner. He’d squeeze her leg every time he felt her drifting into some anxiety about starting school or about how hard it was to remember grandma on that day. Rose sat beside her and Paige was across from her. He didn’t need to tell them how much this day meant for their family. Even as Silla started talking faster, her accent growing heavier, he knew that the Hux-Tico family was used to so much intensity from the people connected to the Solo family.

But mom was talking too much to George. And when she’d drift away from the table to take another picture, he saw dad take up more of his time. If he talked about that fucking hockey game one more time, he might cut his father off.

Someone was tugging on his sleeve and he only had to look down to realize that Benji had left his spot. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he answered. “Did you get bored?”

“Nah.” Benji climbed onto his lap and then pulled him down to whisper. “Mommy said you weren’t eating.”

He hugged him closer. “Then why don’t you help me?”

He caught Rey’s eyes again and tried to shake off her worry.

He hadn’t really done much more than taste the food and then sit back and absorb everything around him. In the back of his mind, there were all of the empty spaces at tables across the country that he hadn’t been able to fill with at least some sense of justice. He wasn’t a failure, but knowing that the clock was ticking made it hard to let go fully of his anxieties about the new year.

Even though he offered, he wouldn’t let Benji feed him because he saw Leia lift her phone for the picture and glared hard at her before grabbing his fork.

So he ate. And made a promise to himself that he’d order the food next year. It was worthwhile to make it but getting it made would be so much simpler and it would probably taste better than the mess they made.

With Benji on his lap, he couldn’t help clear the table.

Rey kissed his forehead. “Sit here. You did so much today. I can help too.”

He turned and almost frowned. “You already did…”

She shook her head and left without a word.

But the guilt was always lurking. He didn’t deserve this. He didn’t deserve someone as loving as her. He didn’t deserve to have his godson telling a loud story across the table to Owen and George about how he, apparently, fought dragons. That got Grey and Hux a glare who just shared a mutual
laugh at his expense; he’d have to have a long talk with Benji about real life and what was on the television, apparently.

But he was drifting again, because there was suddenly a firm hand on his shoulder. Grey stood there, not looking exactly like he wanted to get the children out of the room, but was willing to do it anyway. The awkwardness from after Thanksgiving was gone and he was back to himself. He’d been forgiven for what he’d said to Rey. They seemed to be fine together. Everything was fine.

“I’m going to go set the kids up with a movie downstairs. Grace is okay taking care of Benji until he falls asleep.”

It made Kylo shake his head. He was about to speak about the kids like they weren’t there and had to look at Grace and Grant. “There’s dessert. And I don’t care if you make a mess. I used to make so many messes.”

Grant smirked, looking like the younger, blonder clone of his brother. “That’s your way of saying you won’t yell at us.”

It was true and he had to smile in return.

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Rey wasn’t sure how much Kylo had to drink, but he started whispering things at some point with his arm getting tighter around her. She wanted to get up and help with the dishes, but there were so many people to wave her off. They would all have to go home at some point and even though she didn’t want to say goodbye, it had to happen.

Grey had offered to help walk his family home, but his father had stopped him, embracing him instead. Kylo had watched them and just stared for a moment before drinking his coffee to hide that he’d been spying. But Grant and Grace had been so wonderful that it was hard to see them go home again. When Rey watched them leave, George had them both by the hand taking them down the street. And even though Grey had just picked up his glass again, acting like nothing happened as he went directly to the kitchen to help them clean up, she saw the change in his shoulders. She needed to keep watching him. Even if he’d apologized for what he said, there were still too many things about him that bothered her.

She left Kylo with Han, Hux, and Owen at the table to help Grey, Paige, and Silla in the kitchen. She stood and watched them from the edge of the kitchen island as Grey took up dish drying duties. About to help them, she felt an arm stop her.

It was Leia, her hand loosening as she turned to look at her. “We’ve got it, sweetheart. Just sit down and enjoy yourself.”

She still had to blush a little whenever Leia talked to her like that. “It’s still…it’s still sort of my house.”

Leia pulled her into a hug. It was as warm and as comforting as all of the times before. “It is. It really is. And your boyfriend is getting very drunk with his father and his friends. You did so much last night, Rey. Take some time to not worry for a bit. Everyone is safe and happy. We want to help you.”
Rey sighed against her, not wanting to let her go. “Thanks, mom.”

Leia’s arms tightened for a moment and then she pulled back to smile at her. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

When she stepped back, she smiled again to stop from yawning.

Benji was asleep in Kylo’s lap and he was stroking his hair. He’d wandered upstairs earlier, teary eyed and sleepy and just wanting him. Not daddy. Not mommy. Just Kylo. Grace had looked upset, like not being able to handle him was a huge disaster. Rey promised herself that she’d talk more with her. She had been the most uncomfortable person that night; she kept sighing and reaching for Grey’s hand when she didn’t know what to say during dinner. Watching Grey be so soft and kind with his sister made some of her remaining resentment for him fade.

As long as he stayed away from sitting too close to Kylo.

But Rey picked up on what Kylo was talking about and sighed. They were talking about the case. He was going over what he’d found and what he hadn’t found. But he really latched onto the relief he saw from the families and friends that he interviewed: someone cared about their missing person. The bad part was that he felt like he was failing him.

Still, she sat down next to them and shook her head. “He might be asleep, but he might hear what you’re talking about.”

Blinking, Kylo looked at the others before back at her. “I’m not talking about bad things. It’s just interview procedure.”

Still, Rey gently reached for Benji. Kylo straightened and gently handed him to her, trying to keep him asleep. She eyed Owen for a moment who mouthed that it was actually okay but he also looked a little drunk. But it probably was okay. It had to be. Owen was there to keep Kylo safe when George wasn’t there.

I’ll be right back. She blinked at Kylo, making him meet her eyes.

He smiled and nodded.

It was strange to walk in one of Kylo’s plans that actually worked. When he brought up the idea, she had no idea that it would actually be exactly like he’d imagined. For a long moment, he thought George wouldn’t be there and instantly took his children to have a piece of him there. It didn’t help that Grey was having a hard time and wanted to be there too.

Taking Benji up to bed, she heard Rose stir from her bedroom, her phone in her hand. The boy she liked from her stats class was texting her more often. “Is he finally going to bed?”

She winced. “Hi, yeah, can you help me?”

She’d forgotten about her friend as the world dissolved only into Kylo’s.

“Oh of course.”

They had to wake the boy up to change him. It was one of the things that Rey remembered sharply from her childhood in the world. Anyone touching or changing her without asking wasn’t right, even if they meant the best. Kylo’s fury at Han and Leia putting pyjamas on her on that first night or how he had yelled at nurses coming close to her rattled in her mind for a moment and she had to
So his sleepy brown eyes opened and he squirmed as they put on his nightclothes after brushing his teeth. He fought more against that than anything. He was too tired to pee and it made them both sigh in unison. He was still working through some anxieties about not being at home. It was better that he wore a diaper to sleep under his pyjamas. He put it on without a fuss but still asked that they both get into the bed with him, even though they said that mommy and daddy would be up soon. He just needed to feel safe. Rey remembered that feeling all too clearly.

Sighing, Rey looked quickly at Rose. “Do you want to hear your story?”

“Yeah, Kylo’s story.” Benji was under the covers but the two of them were on top, on either side of him. “I won’t be ‘fraid this time.” He was already almost asleep again.

Rey couldn’t remember if Rose had heard this story. It was something she had been working on since she came home in September. But she had to tell it anyway.

“Once upon a time, there was a boy. He was small, but really brave. He just had to learn how to be brave because he didn’t know it yet. He had dark hair and loved baseball. He had his best friend and promised to never leave him. They played in a big field and did everything that best friends do. They told secrets and shared everything, like ice cream. But then, one day, a big monster came and took the boy. And he was really, really scared. The monster could have taken his friend too. He wanted to eat up all of the children. And down, down into the dungeon they went. It got so dark the boy couldn’t see anything. The boy didn’t know what to do. He had never met a monster before. At first, he was afraid. Things were really creepy and the monster scratched him and bit him. He never thought he’d get out and back to his best friend and his parents again. But then, he said ‘I won’t be afraid anymore’ because a little girl came. He found a reason to be brave. She was also afraid and scared and he had to save her. He was such a brave boy. And he decided that the monster couldn’t hurt him anymore and nothing could hurt the little girl, especially not the mean monster. So the boy fought the monster and he won. He escaped the dungeon and took the little girl back home to his parents’ house far away. They flew there the entire way. And he saw his best friend again and realized he was free and everything would be okay one day because he had hope and love and a family.” Rey told the same story in many forms before, but only because Benji loved hearing it. “And now the boy is a man and he’s still fighting monsters to keep us all safe.”

Benji snuggled against her, still yawning and not asleep. “And daddy was the best friend. And Kylo was the hero. And the girl was you.”

“Yeah,” Rey said, looking over at Rose. “That’s Kylo’s story. And how brave he is.”

Slowly, Benji’s head settled against the pillow. Meeting Rose’s eyes, she tried to smile but it faltered. What could she say right then?

Thankfully, Paige drifted into the darkened doorway to whisper that they could go to bed. Rey hugged her firmly, promising conversation over tea the next morning. Taking Rose to the guest bedroom that used to be hers, she tried to shrug off the story that she’d just told.

“I’ve really missed you, Rey,” her friend said, sitting on the bed. “I know that we talked today, but it will be so nice to have spring break with you. It’s still...weird for me that you’re with Kylo. Kay doesn’t care but I’m still so worried that he’ll hurt you.”

She really understood now, even deeper, how Kylo felt every time he had to leave someone or have someone leave him. Rose couldn’t stay long. She’d be flying out with her sister and her family tomorrow. And then Rose would be back at college and they wouldn’t see one another until March.
Everyone had other places to be and it didn’t mean that they didn’t love one another any less. “Rose, it’s okay. I don’t know who I’d be without him. It doesn’t…it’s only been hard when he’s been away.”

Rose took her hand. “As long as you’re still okay. He’s been really…everything today. I wish I could be here longer.”

“Me too.” Rey smiled before hearing deep laughter from downstairs and rolling her eyes. “I think we’ll have time at breakfast tomorrow to talk about it.”

Rose pulled her into a hug and Rey lingered in it. She almost looked forward to coming downstairs the next day and seeing everything cleaned but no one else being awake. And then waking Rose up so they could have time to talk as friends without so many people around.

Leaving her, she met Han and Leia in the hall. Hugging them both, she let the first Christmas of being with Kylo really settle into her heart. They still loved her. If anything, they loved her even more for giving him a place to really call home. She’d always been home but seeing them realize it in a different way was both heartbreaking and renewing.

Now, she had to deal with the downstairs.

Owen had Silla pressed against his side. She caught her eyes and instantly the taller, blonde woman was pulling her into a hug.

Lingering near her, she looked around the kitchen table. At least they’d left the living room. The three men were locked in conversation that Rey didn’t know how to break. She glanced at Silla who quirked a grin before clearing her throat. “Boys, I think it’s time to go the bed.”

As they all looked at their glasses, Silla whispered almost too loudly, “That’s what you say the next time. And they’ll never listen. So just say it again and again.”

Silla was so warm, she almost didn’t want her arms to leave her as she went over and swatted Owen’s glass out of his hand, wondering if he’d bothered to call a cab. Kylo and Grey laughed with Hux and at that point, Rey didn’t want to watch them anymore. She escaped with Owen and Silla to call a cab. Silla held her hand even as Owen was swaying.

“You can stay here,” Rey managed to say. “There’s the couches downstairs.”

Silla smirked and shook her head even as Owen gave a thumbs up. “You already have a full house, darling. We’ll talk soon. I want to have brunch without these….idiots. When you have time, before you go to school. I can help you with anything you need. Thank you so much for having us, Rey. I loved tonight. I hope you did too.”

One last hug and they were gone. Rey watched the taxi drive away and then turned up to the stars. She hoped that there was really something more out there, like the old idea of heaven that Kylo used to tell her about. Maybe somewhere out there, her parents were watching her have a good life, even though it wasn’t a typical one. The grandparents that had wanted her might also be looking out for her. She had worn a necklace from grandma that evening. The chain was too short and sat snuggly against her neck, but she loved it anyway. The small, looped heart was a way to connect herself to a wider world.

At least Kylo had always been under the same sky when he was away.

Leaving the cold behind her, she came inside to a suddenly quiet house.
When Rey turned, the kitchen was empty. It was just the expanse of their rented long table in the living room in the silence. She sighed for a long and hard moment.

She looked downstairs first, fully expecting her heart to be broken by another heated moment on a sofa. Instead, it was empty. Peaking into the bedroom, she only saw the outline of Grey asleep there.

*Stop doubting him,* her mind thundered at her. The looks between them weren’t flirtation. Grey was just a touchy person. He had been putting his hands on everyone that night. She was surprised at the times she saw him talking just to Paige, whispering to her and grinning. It was almost like he’d always been there in their lives. But now it seemed like they’d never get rid of him.

Grey hadn’t even changed his clothes or bothered getting under the covers. His hands were on his phone as he was sprawled out on the crimson duvet. Rey reached for the quilt at the edge of the bed and pulled it over him. He sighed slightly as she did and he sat up.

“Hey, everything okay?” He rubbed his eyes, yawning. “We finished everything. Ky was wondering if you left with them.”

Fixing her skirt, she tried to smile at him. “No. I just needed some time to think. Thank you for cleaning up.”

Smirking, he adjusted the blanket. “It’s no problem. I probably won’t be here when you guys get up. I’m going to make breakfast for the kids.”

It was almost an instant relief in that moment. “It’s okay. Merry Christmas, Grey.”

He held her eyes for a long moment before lying down with a grunt.

Climbed one flight of stairs, she finished turning off all the lights. There were still some dishes soaking, waiting to be put in the dishwasher. The leftovers were put away but she did pause to grab one last piece of chocolate.

Taking in the ground floor, her eyes fell on the Christmas tree before she moved to switch it off. She woke up Bee and cradled him in her arms. He had been quiet all night, overwhelmed by the loud voices. After double-checking the alarm, she took a deep breath and tried to find where she was. With Bee purring against her chest, she let go of some of her remaining worries. It had been so freeing to see how everyone had been able to be *real* with one another.

And she could also stop questioning why Kylo wanted a big house. Five bedrooms didn’t feel like too many in that moment: Grey in the basement, even if he could have really slept in his own house that night; Rose in her old room, looking at the stars; Han and Leia in one guest room; Hux, Paige, and Benji in the other.

But Kylo was in the master bedroom.

Slipping inside, she left the door slightly ajar. Bee hopped out of her arms and directly onto the bed, finding his spot at Kylo’s feet. He sat up and mumbled something and she shook her head.

God, how she’d missed him.

Going into the washroom, she undressed. She’d left her pyjamas in there that morning and quickly changed. Brushing her teeth and washing her face, she just wanted to go to bed in a house filled with people and sleep rather than wait for someone to come up the stairs and hurt them all.
Curling up against Kylo, he only smelt fresh.

“Are you okay?” he mumbled, clumsy lips pressing against her cheeks. “I loved tonight, Rey. It was so great.”

Rey could only smile. “It was great. I love you.”

He yawned. “I love you so much. Never loved you more. Don’t leave me. Ever. I’m done fucking up, I promise.”

Safe in his arms, she let herself drift off into different Christmases that they had shared.

And she slept soundly with his breath against her neck.

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“I don’t want to go back to school,” Brianna complained. “My grades sucked and dad was pissed.”

They were watching a movie in the basement, spending time catching up on New Year’s Eve. “I’ve never had good grades. I don’t know if I’ll be able to handle getting them again.”

Brianna reached for a chip. “How pissed were your parents?”

“They weren’t mad at all,” Rey said, thinking back. “They just tried to help me feel better about myself. If Kylo and Silla didn’t believe in me, I wouldn’t even be trying this.”

“I think you’re a really good artist.” Brianna was smiling. “I liked the postcard you painted for me.”

“Thanks, Bri.” Something thumped upstairs and she narrowed her eyes.

Brianna sipped at her cup but lifted her head in agreement. “I’m still sorry I thought they were dating, Rey. I know Kylo loves you and how stressed out he’s been. But he really should send him home when I go.”

“Yeah, I hope he will.”

Brianna’s eyes were drifting to the wine fridge.

Rey tilted her head. “I’m sure you can have some if you ask Kylo. He got a case delivered for Christmas and there’s still some left.”

“Then I’ll be right back.” Brianna’s face brightened.

Let alone, Rey thought about how it would be at university. Kaydel had told her about the parties she’d been to. Kylo and Poe didn’t drink as much as she had once thought. Kylo’s journals had told
her that. She’d really only tried wine a couple of times.

So when Brianna came back downstairs with two glasses and a bottle opener, she made a decision to let some of her frustrations about Grey go by trying again.

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Sitting in the kitchen, after watching Brianna disappear down the hall to the basement, he looked back to Grey. “Did I just make a mistake?”

Chewing on something, Grey glanced up from the card game on the table. “Nah. You’ve said how Rey doesn’t like it. And Bri can pass out here and you won’t catch shit from her dad. It’s your turn.”

Looking at his hand, he still didn’t like the feeling he got. He’d let the girls talk for another hour before checking on them. The urge to always be around Rey couldn’t always get to him. She’d make her own friends at school. She’d…

His phone buzzed on the table. The work one. The sound made Grey groan. “Can’t they leave you alone?”

“You can’t.” Standing, he answered. “This is Agent Solo.”

“Agent Solo? This is Thomas Marx. I got your message about what I saw the night Bentley disappeared. I’m sorry I’ve been out of town…” The witness he needed was finally calling back. He needed this, badly.

Filling his glass to the near brim, he had to shrug at Grey and go upstairs to his office to take down notes. At least he could drink during this hard interview.

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“Hey girls,” Grey’s voice floated into the basement. Even if her head was starting to spin, she knew he was there.

“Can’t you ever leave,” she said, hearing a voice leave her mouth that she didn’t recognize. “Why are you always here?”

Someone was taking her hand. “Yeah, Grey. Get out of her house.”

“Brianna, don’t start with me. Rey, how much have you had to drink? Ky got a phone call and…”

Ugh. “He’s always getting phone calls and he’s always gone. And when he’s here so are you.”

Things were starting to really get hazy and blurry. Is this what it was supposed to feel like? It just felt like everything was spinning and her hands were numb. Was the bottle really empty? Why had it stopped tasting bad after a while?
“I think you guys should come up stairs and get some water…” Someone was lifting her up off the couch and she shoved the hand away. “Christ almighty, Bri, she doesn’t drink.”

“It’s not my fault, she wanted to.”

Someone picked her up. It had to be Kylo. It smelt like him. “Can we go to bed?”

More voices were arguing and everything felt fuzzy, like she couldn’t focus.

But the arms she was in felt nice.

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Finally done with his phone call, he checked his watch. Of course it would take that long.

But downstairs, Grey wasn’t there. And Brianna was crying by the door.

“Bri? What happened?” His heart was starting to race in an instant. “Where’s Rey?”

“Kylo, it wasn’t my fault. She was fine until Grey came downstairs.” She looked up, pulling her coat tighter. “Please tell Rey I’m sorry.”

His face must have looked furious because she scrambled to pull her boots on and leave.

Rey wasn’t in the basement.

Neither was Grey.

Focusing, he finally heard noises from the bedroom.

He didn’t even have to think before he was there.

She was on the bed, but her hands were also fisted in Grey’s shirt, trying to pull him onto the bed.

He was about to tackle him to the ground and destroy him until he saw that Grey was struggling against the desperate kisses that Rey was trying to place on his lips.

“Ky, help me.” Grey turned, still pushing Rey away. “She won’t let go and I don’t want to hurt her.”

“What the fuck is going on?” He heard Rey saying random things, mostly mumbling them. How could he let her get drunk and not be there? He was always fucking something up.

“Kylo?” Rey’s head lolled to one side, letting go of Grey to flop on the bed. “Why are there two of you?”

Huffing, Grey stepped back, discomfort fresh on his face. “Fucking Brianna. Kylo, this isn’t your fault. She thought I was you and she’s so messed up. I just didn’t want to hurt her.”

Rage still drummed in his veins. “Just get out. I’ll take care of her.”

Wincing, he finally left.
Looking at the bed, he rubbed his face to resist biting his arm. “Hey, Rey? It’s me, sweetheart. You’re drunk right now. It will be okay.”

She reached out for him and he took her hand. “I’m…what’s happening?”

Trying to hold Rey up, he had to keep turning his head away as she tried to kiss him too. “Rey, please. I don’t want to kiss you right now.”

She hiccupped and he scooped her into his arms. He watched her head rolling around and he thought about calling an ambulance. Christ, how had people been able to take care of him when he was like this?

He knelt her down beside the toilet. “Are you going to be sick?”

“Kylo I don’t like being sick. I used to make myself throw up sometimes and I’m sorry I never told you. I never told anyone.” Bursting into tears, she leaned against him. “I’m going to throw up. And I don’t want to.”

He held Rey’s hair as she vomited, caressing her arm. “You’ll be okay, sweetheart. It will be okay.”

“Kylo,” she said, gasping. “I hate this.”

“I know, I know. It will be okay.” He rubbed the back of her neck and tried not to get drawn into her pain. It was all his fault. Everything had gone wrong because he left her alone. And soon she’d be alone by herself at school and this was going to happen again.

Putting her into the bed, Kylo finally stood to breathe. He caught Grey’s eyes as he lurked in the doorway. He had to deal with him now. He didn’t want to shut the door, but he desperately needed to sort out his thoughts. Taking a few steps out into the hallway, he shook his head. He hoped that the liquor would black everything out for her. What he’d had to drink hadn’t quite left his mind and he was still not thinking clearly. He should have never left them alone.

Sighing, Grey touched his arm. “She’ll be okay, Ky.”

Kylo shook his head as he inhaled. When had Grey started wearing his cologne? “I know it’s just a part of growing up but it still fucking sucks.”

Rey needed water. He needed to wake her up and make her drink. He went down to the kitchen, Grey trailing after him.

“She’s still mad at me and I don’t blame her.” He leaned against the counter and folded his arms. Grabbing the bottle, Kylo closed the fridge and stepped closer to him. “I didn’t like seeing her try to kiss you. I know you’re not like that but I was going to kill you.”

Grey grimaced. “She’s kissed me before.”

“When.”

Grey’s eyes flashed, narrowing in an instant.

“I don’t know! Years ago, when she thought someone was trying to break into your house! I just had to tell her to save it for you.” Grey stepped closer, getting in his face. “I’d never put the moves on your girl. So don’t fucking threaten me. All I’ve been trying to do is get you two together and
Glaring, Kylo moved closer. “You still didn’t have to tell her all the shit you did in August. I need your help and want to be your friend. And we’ve said that all of the time. We’re just friends.”

“Yeah, but you told her the same thing. You did think about us getting back together. That messed up my head too.” Grey wasn’t backing down. This had been building the entire fall. The discomfort of Thanksgiving rolled through him again. Why the hell had he been in his bed? “We are just friends. But I’m only here all of the time because you want me here. You fucking get me to do all that shit for you and I fucking do it because I love you. I’m in love with you and I have to see you with someone else all of the time and it fucking hurts to know it could have been me!”

He wasn’t just annoyed now. Being yelled at had brought out true anger. “Grey, you know I don’t have those feelings for you anymore! You’ve known that for years! You were the one who fucked it up from the start! I let you back in my life and we had a deal. The last few months have been hard but I’m finally able to be happy when I’m with Rey when I’m not on the fucking road. I know that things will never be perfect, but I really love being with her. I want to be your friend. I need you a lot. But I don’t know how our friendship will look now!”

Gregor’s eyes narrowed hard. “Then I’ll fucking make it easier on you. Breaking up or whatever we’re doing.”

Before he could really react, Gregor grabbed him hard into a brutal and harsh kiss, pressing him against the counter. He heard the water bottle hitting the floor and was stunned for a moment. Trying to pull away, Kylo was locked into pure panic as Gregor poured himself into the kiss, entirely too much teeth and tongue.

Why was this happening?

Finally able to pull away, he shoved Grey hard, knocking him back against the table as he tried to focus on anything other than striking him. He fought to contain his anger. He could tackle him, wrestle him to the ground and punch him for doing what he just did. It was a painful betrayal to have his mouth against his again. Glaring, Kylo wiped his mouth and tasted blood. Staring down at him, he felt bitter tears sting his eyes as he watched the other man crumble before him on his kitchen floor.

“Hate me, Kylo!” Grey yelled as he pushed himself to his feet, gripping at the table. “Fucking hate me! Hate me like you used to do. It will hurt less if you could just hate me. I can’t let you go but if you could hate me then maybe I’d be less miserable. I fucking love you so much and I’m so sick of this.”

He could only stare, not knowing what to say.

Sobbing, Grey finally turned and left. He threw on his boots and coat and slammed the door behind him.

Alone in the kitchen, he picked up the bottle of water and went upstairs before he could let his emotions fully hit him.
She woke up feeling her heart in her throat with her head throbbing. Her mouth tasted like vomit. And the first thing she wanted to do was cry. Tears bubbled up and she was suddenly made aware that she wasn’t alone.

“Shh,” Kylo whispered, stroking her hair. “You’re okay. There’s water.”

“This is awful.” She didn’t even recognize her own voice, her head pounding harder as she tried to move. The sun was out. It was morning. “I feel so bad right now.”

He kissed her forehead, despite how sweaty she was. “You just need more water. And to rest. It’s just a hangover, Rey. You can rest for now and then we’ll order a pizza or something when your stomach feels better.”

Shame was the only emotion that seemed to pass through her. “I don’t remember...everything is just blurry and black and spinning.”

He hugged her again but it hurt to move. “It’s okay. You got drunk. But you were here when it happened so we could help you. And I blame myself. I fucked up.”

She whimpered a little and nodded, but could tell there was more on Kylo’s mind. His hands were making circles on her back.

“You tried to kiss Grey last night. You thought he was me.” He paused to swallow. “I was very...jealous for a moment. I really understand now what you think about when you think about me with other people. I felt it with Finn and saw it last night too. I’m not mad at you. You weren’t really...yourself.”

Tears came to her eyes and her head started spinning again. “I’m so sorry Kylo. I don’t even remember that.”

“It’s something that happened. We can talk about it. But only when you’re feeling better.” He sighed, one of those annoyed sighs that came from the back of his throat. “He also kissed me and said some things. He’s...we’re not friends anymore.”

It was another hard knock, but she nodded. None of it made sense and she just shut her eyes. Everything hurt too much to think. “I’d like to sleep now.”

His arms tightened around her and she tried to will her headache away.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Oral sex, handjob.

There's a lot to this chapter (and it was actually longer...) and I thought long about splitting it up, but it will build to the next chapter and any problems that come from this can be dealt with there so I can stick to the outline.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 55

Chapter Summary

After struggling with what happened after New Years, Rey moves to college while Kylo moves on with the case and finds something that blows it wide open.

Read chapter notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I feel disgusting,” Rey mumbled, frowning into her bottle of water. “Does it always feel like this?”

She’d woken up an hour ago, moving slowly and really only able to sit up surrounded by pillows. Kylo had tried to sleep most of the morning so Rey could rest but his thoughts kept falling back to last night. His phones were silent but there were things he had to deal with before Gregor could be cut off for good. Whenever his thoughts turned to him, he wanted to reach for her but stopped himself.

“When you’re hung over? Yeah.” He sat up, trying to keep his voice steady. His own head was heavy for a different reason. “It feels even worse with red wine, or if you mix things.”

She closed her eyes, looking pale and exhausted. The soft lashes looked damp and he wanted to dry her eyes, but still let her talk. “I’m never drinking at college. Never. I don’t like not remembering things.”

The words made him wince. “There’s safe ways to do it. I mostly drink at home and I know…I know it’s too much. But drinking more water helps. Not sitting in the same spot all the time. But if your friends make fun of you for not drinking, you don’t need to be friends with them.”

“You say that like I’ll actually make friends.” She scoffed and then bit her lip. Shaking her head, she sipped more water. “Kylo, what if I can’t do it? What if I want to quit right away?”

Swallowing, he shifted to sit beside her against the pillows. He didn’t really quit things and if he did, he hated the entire process. In school, if he got a bad grade, he’d just study more and find ways of figuring out what he was missing. He’d find a focus beyond his pain, even if it was hard on everyone around him. About the only relationship he’d forced himself to quit had been with Liza and she had made it easy to do. And now he had to do the same for Grey but the years of their friendship would be harder to let go of than a few random sexual encounters and distant childhood. Narrowing his eyes, he finally put his arm around Rey and gave himself a moment to hate himself: he’d let Grey lie to him the entire time because he found himself needing the other man in a twisted way that hadn’t really been clear until last night. But his behaviour had been strange even the last few months. The thought had struck him when sleep wouldn’t take him. Grey was upfront and always ran his mouth but their interactions had been strained…

Since he’d been with Rey.
“I think…” He took a deep breath, refocusing on her. His head was always taking him into the wrong thoughts and it was instantly frustrating. “I think starting something new can be frightening and it will take time to get used to it. But as long as you don’t compare yourself to other people, you’ll find things you like about it. I really don’t know anything about art other than there are things I like and things I think don’t make sense. I didn’t mind art class in school but the second I could take something else, I did. But you’ve always been so creative and think in a different way. It’s going to be hard but you can do it. And if you want to quit, then Han and Leia will come get you, talk to you and we’ll figure out what you want to do.”

She blinked for a moment and then tears started to shimmer in her eyes. “What are we going to do when we don’t have them?”

It was a question he asked himself many times over the years. The same feeling stretched to George. He hugged Rey around the waist, shaking his head. “We will be older. And we will have to handle it. I think that’s why I tried to help so much when grandma died. I wanted…I wanted to at least have a clue about how to do it.”

Rey was quiet for a moment before she sniffled again. “We’ll have each other.”

He kissed her forehead. “Always.”

She sipped her water again and shrugged out of his arm so she could look at him. “Kylo, Grey wouldn’t just kiss you for no reason. I know that I…tried to kiss him but I would never have done that if I didn’t think it was you. I’ve tried to remember and all I see are blurry things and thinking that it was you. I hope he didn’t do that because of me.”

Swallowing, he licked his lips. Glancing away for a moment, he tried to put together what he wanted to say. Looking at her again, he wanted to ask her to wait to talk about this. She didn’t look well: her hair was greasy and unwashed, her skin was dull, and she was still sweating slightly. How many mornings did he look like that and someone would make him coffee and hug him into feeling human again?

“I’m not mad at you about that. I…I smelt him too. I don’t know when he started doing that, or if he was in here when I wasn’t. That’s why I need my keys back and to change the codes. He’d never hurt us.” He didn’t want to make her worry, but had to say it. “My weapon is still locked up. He’s never had the code to that.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think he’d ever hurt us like that either. He’s not…evil.”

She’d seen him around children. She’d also seen the charming sides when Grey was focused on something else. That was the person he liked being around too. He didn’t like the side that was slowly being revealed to him in the aftermath, when things had cleared and his eyes were open.

Now he had to talk about another morning after. “I told you what happened after Thanksgiving. He was here and I was angry and got drunk with him. It was like how it normally was and I didn’t really think about it. I talked about you a lot and…he always said that he wanted us to be together but I don’t know how much of what he’s said I can trust. But when I woke up in the middle of the night, he was in the bed. I didn’t remember anything. He said that nothing happened and I know my body so…”

Her eyes got wide and glared at him. “He was in our bed? Kylo, he could have already kissed you then if you don’t remember. Maybe you said some things that you don’t remember. That’s not
“It happened before, before we were together,” he replied, keeping his voice low. “I’d have a nightmare and he’d be here.”

She sucked in a long breath. “I know you want to be with me, Kylo. I really believe that. It’s been hard being apart and we’re going to be that way again soon. It’s going to hurt so much if I have to think that he’s somehow still in your life when you’re here and I’m there. Stop picking him.”

He held her eyes and managed to nod. “I promise, Rey. I really love you. Please…please don’t leave me.” *Even if I deserve it, please don’t leave me alone.*

The aching wound, the old hurt, was torn open again. He had just started to believe that he wasn’t capable of hurting her enough to truly push her away. And now, again, his own selfishness was doing that. His desperate, flailing qualities put him in situations like this when he should know better.

Rey shook her head and quietly reached for his hand. “Go talk to him. I know that you’ll…I know that you need to. You always do things like this Kylo and I’m still trying to understand why. I’m going to take a shower and need to be alone for a while.”

“Don’t be sad, I…” He started and she just glared at him. He dumbly nodded, moving to stand off of the bed. “I’ll be back soon.”

He really hoped that he wouldn’t have to be away from her for that long. He didn’t care about showering for once and he pulled on yesterday’s clothes. He glared at the state of the downstairs and would punish himself with cleaning up when he got back. Rolling his eyes, he grabbed a canvas bag, one from a useless conference that he could easily give away. The shower turned on upstairs and he sighed. This had to be over now, today. His thoughts would take a while to settle but if he had this conversation, he could start working through the weeds to get to the other side.

He let himself grow angrier as he moved around the house to gather up the things that Grey had ‘forgot’ at the house. There was a sweater, a pair of gloves, a couple of books, a phone charger… Stopping to check the office, his eyes fell on the taped-up box of pictures he still hadn’t moved into the garage.

There wasn’t really much left to think about when he put on his coat and boots and left. When he set the alarm, he knew that it would be the last time using that code. After glancing at George’s house in the distance, he turned the other way and went to Grey’s new address. He hadn’t even had a chance to be there yet. But that didn’t matter. Rey needed him more. He’d done so many things to break her trust before. The hurt in her eyes was enough to tell him that she’d have more to say when he got back.

And then she’d go home.

And he’d follow after.

And everything would change again.

She’d be at school. He’d be back on the road, mostly alone.

They couldn’t have this question lingering over them when they still had more important things to work on.

Grey’s car was in the driveway. Okay.
He rang the bell and shifted his weight, staring at the doorknob.

There was no answer.

He didn’t want to call him but tried to open the door.

Of course he wouldn’t lock it.

He stared at his hand for a moment, realizing that anything could be behind the door.

“Gregor?” he called, stepping inside with quick eyes surveying the inside for potential danger. His shoulders lost their tension instantly when he spotted him.

Sitting on the second step of the staircase directly across from where he stood, the other man lifted his head and then a bottle. “This is how long it took you to come confront me.”

He ground his molars together. “Did you even sleep?”

“Yeah. A bit. I stopped drinking for a bit but then I got up and knew you’d be coming so…” He sipped on the vodka and then snorted. “I put your stuff in a bag too. Guess I do know you that well. Your keys and other shit you loaned me are all there. I couldn’t find that book about…” his voice was wavering and he sighed, “that one stupid book. It’s probably at dad’s. You can get it from him. And now he’s just going to hate me again too so just go there next and have your revenge or whatever. And I didn’t make any fucking copies of your keys but I guess change the locks anyways. I don’t care.”

He didn’t want to get closer to him, but put the bag on the kitchen counter, grabbing the plastic one waiting for him there in return. All of the sets of keys were inside, along with a shirt he’d leant him and some things from the garage. It was everything.

Now only the words were left.

“Gregor…”

Scoffing, the other man let his head fall back. “Oh, don’t use my fucking name like that. Do you want me to call you Ben too? So we’re both super serious?”

Pushing down his annoyance, Kylo knew what he had to do. He couldn’t be angry in that moment. There were answers here that couldn’t come from confrontation. “We can do that. But I’d just like to talk to you for a few minutes about the last few months. So I understand what happened and can get your side.”

“My side? Okay.” He took a long swig from the bottle and leaned back, settling his elbows on the stairs. “I was trying to help you. Like, when it was just us and we were just friends? That was fine. I liked talking to you and being around you and doing all that shit for you. I felt like less of a selfish asshole for once in my fucking life. And then, like, you and Rey get together and I was like ‘Yeah, cool. Finally.’ Finally you guys can talk about all of the shit you both have been through. But then, oh then…” He trailed off, taking another drink. “Then I have to hear all of this shit from the both of you. I see you driving yourself nuts and into exhaustion because you hate problems you can’t figure out. Just like right now. I see Rey and, oh boy, nobody has ever fucking said she can also be demanding of you too. ‘Bla bla bla Kylo slept with other people, bla bla bla Kylo went to school and got a job.’ I got told to grow the fuck up all the time when I was eighteen and so did you. And nobody has ever sat her down and said ‘Hey, maybe dating someone ten years older than you who has one of the hardest jobs in the world who went through fucking hell for seven years is going to be fucking hard’.”
Kylo shifted his weight, holding back his reaction to the words. Everything he’d every told him about Rey was going to haunt them. He knew too much. “Grey, things were different for you and me. And you did grow up. And she will too.”

“But don’t you see it, Ky? You still don’t see it. You’ve had to bend over backwards to even try to make her even close to happy. You’re real around me. You’re whatever around her.” Grey must have been thinking about this all morning, probably having fake conversations with the door, waiting for him. He couldn’t be drawn into this because he was a better person around Rey. He was…someone else with him. “You told me straight-up how to change myself, what I needed to do. And I begged you for another chance. And you told me we could be fucking friends instead. I said no to you that Christmas because I didn’t want you just to be fucking me and thinking that it was a friendship. You fucking did that shit when you were sixteen and it blew up in your face and I was trying to stop you. But then…” Grey bit his lip and his head fell. “Then I hear from her that you said there could have been a chance. And it fucked me up. No one has ever just wanted me for me. Not my dad, not my mom, not the guys I’ve dated…but you fucking thought about it. I’ve been fucked up since August and you were never here. And when you were here you were just crying about how hard it was for her when you were fucking hunting a serial killer.”

“I understand that, Grey.” Calm, calm, calm. Fight to be calm. Deescalate. “I’m going to work on myself more this year. And I’m sorry I wasn’t honest with you about my thoughts. But right now, I’m with Rey. Were you confused or hurt?”

Create the alternate question. Let him choose where he wanted this to go.

“Fucking rights I was confused! And so were you,” Grey’s eyes flared for a moment before they narrowed. “Nothing happened on Thanksgiving. You can go and tell your fucking princess that. You didn’t cheat on her and I knew you were with her so even if you forgot where you were, I would have stopped you. And I didn’t take advantage of you. I wouldn’t do that. I just took care of you and laid you down and looked at you and hated myself until I passed out. And then I had to be there at Christmas and show none of that, sitting with my little brother while dad only pays attention to Grace and everyone else. And now I’m getting cut out of all the fucking pictures. So she won’t have to fucking look at them.”

Blinking, Kylo swallowed. He clenched his fist but fought to keep his face neutral. “What did you think would happen, Grey? Did you think I wouldn’t choose her?”

“I’m going to throw this fucking bottle at you.” Gregor sat up, glaring harder. “I knew you would fucking choose her. And the only way for me to stay away from you is for you to hate me. Forget all the fucking good stuff. Just hate my fucking guts and put me in another box in your fucking office.”

“Grey…” his voice was low, finally allowing his emotions to show. “If you want me to hate you, you’re doing a good job.”

“Well, fan-fucking-tastic! I can do something right. Now get the fuck out of my house.” He stood, swaying before he gripped the railing. “I guess you were wrong. I am worthless. And now I’ve got to go to my stupid mother’s and hear that bitched at me even more. Get the hell out so I can drink and forget I ever fucking knew you.”

“Fucking fine then! You told Rey to think about other people and you need to think about that too right now. I don’t deserve her love but I want to be the type of person who deserves it. And as long as you’re around, I won’t get there!” He grabbed the bag, finally losing whatever composure he had.
“You keep telling yourself that.” Shrugging, Grey just stared at him. “We wouldn’t have been perfect together but at least you could talk about Poe without someone looking at you with disgust that you had a life before them.”

He went up the stairs and slammed the door.

And Kylo had to force himself to leave because the argument was never going to end until he left.

He deleted his number on the walk, watching it finally disappear from his phone.

-=-

Kylo had finished retelling the New Year’s Eve events and their aftermath.

And Hux rolled his eyes.

“You know, if things like this keep happening to you, you’re the problem, right?”

He wasn’t offended. He just shrugged. “The thought has occurred to me.”

Sitting in his parent’s basement, Kylo was thankful to sit still for longer than ten minutes. They’d spent the day loading up the cars for the drive down to move Rey into college the next morning. He was able to get away for a long weekend and then the memories of the holidays could fully fade away.

“Is this why you’ve been avoiding me?”

Had he? He was slow on returning everyone’s text messages except Rey’s. “It’s been an extreme couple of months. I’ve been on the road more than home. I’m sorry.”

Folding his hands behind his head, the redhead eyed him. “Kylo, you’ve always done shit like this. And I didn’t mind Grey. He’s an okay enough guy to chat with, when he writes in complete sentence, but the few times we’ve all hung out together, he’s always doing things for you without you asking. It bothered me how he was so close to Paige over Christmas. We talked about it and she saw it too. It’s like he’s looking for the person he thinks is weakest in the room and latches onto them. And sometimes, when you’re in your head, that’s you.”

“I guess I lost perspective.” He dropped his head to the back of the sofa and stared at the ceiling. He could always find some spot to stare at, focusing on everything he’d done wrong. “We got drunk after Thanksgiving and I don’t remember some parts but we woke up together in my bed. He swears nothing happened but he’s always found excuses to be close to me.”

Hux glared at him and then punched him hard in the arm, right where a lingering bite mark sat under his shirt. “You’re a fucking asshole for doing that to Rey.”

Sitting up, Kylo rubbed the spot and scowled at him. “We didn’t have sex.” He stared at him. “Nothing happened.”

“But he was in your fucking bed. Fuck’s sake, Ben Solo, you’re a dense asshole sometimes. I know you get lonely. I remember you doing that shit to me. Get a dog or something if your bed feels empty. Or a fucking body pillow.” Hux exhaled and shook his head. “Don’t have someone who
you used to fuck taking advantage of you because you’re stressed out and losing your mind.”

Blinking, he nodded. “You won’t have to worry about that anymore. I’m fucking done with him. I have the keys. I changed the security codes and the locks. I don’t care about him anymore.”

“Yes, you fucking do. You wouldn’t be sitting here complaining to me about this if you didn’t.” Hux sighed again. “What did Rey say when you told her?”

“When I told her everything, she was hurt and told me she didn’t want him around anymore. He was the reason why she got drunk on New Years. He’s always around us and she couldn’t take it anymore. I don’t blame her. And I know she’s happy that he’s out of our lives. It makes…” he started and then bit his lip. He needed to sort out more of his thoughts but he couldn’t lie to Hux’s face. He’d call him on that. “I’ll start feeling better once I’m back on the road and have something else to think about. Rey will be at school. I’ll be doing my job. There won’t be space for him in my head anymore.”

“You fucked up there too, letting her get that drunk without you being there.”

“I know.” He couldn’t make the excuse that he got a phone call. He couldn’t blame Brianna. He went to her house the next day, after the painful conversation with Grey, and was overly thankful her father wasn’t there. He apologized to her and told her that Rey was okay, just hung over. Brianna said pretty much the same thing as Hux was saying: what is the deal with Grey and why is he always there? Getting told off by a twenty-year-old girl just cemented how badly he fucked up.

“That night didn’t go how I planned. I wanted her and Brianna to be able to talk about school and us. Rey needs to be able to complain about the things I do to someone her own age, not just Paige or my mother. I didn’t really think that they would sit there and drink a bottle of wine in the time it took me to get a witness statement.”

“Look, Kylo, her going to school is also freaking you out. You won’t be there and but I think she can handle it better than we did. Sometimes I forget it too, how young and stupid we were when we were eighteen. But we had one another. And now she has Kaydel and can have her own world for a bit. Paige and I made the long-distance thing work until, you know, he died and I fucked everything up because I couldn’t deal with my own emotions or how badly you were handling it because I almost lost you too.” Hux licked his lips. “I think it’s a really good thing if you just forget about him. Cut it all off. Don’t poke at it. Because if you just let a trickle in, it will be a flood before you know it. I had to do that once for Paige and now I have the life I really wanted. Don’t give Rey more things to worry about while she’s away.”

He rubbed his eyes. “He was right. We were breaking up.”

“Yeah and that’s really, really fucked.” Shaking his head, Hux leaned forward to catch his eyes. “I know you have a hard time making friends. But maybe find one that you haven’t slept with, who’s not in love with you, to hang out with. He’s a grown up. He can take care of himself. Don’t go driving by his house in the middle of the night and worrying about what he’s doing.”

Kylo could only weakly nod at the words. “It just sucks that I have to pay a service to look after the house while I’m gone.”

“Kylo, how much does your suit cost? It’s probably worth more than my entire closet. You are just like your father, you fucking cheapskate.” Hux’s voice dropped slightly when he spoke next. “I know that money doesn’t bring back all of the years you lost and all of the horrible things you went through. I still can’t believe it’s been almost fifteen years since you called me in the middle of homeroom out of the blue. Some days I walk by that classroom and have to shake my head. It felt like lightning struck me and my life was never the same again. But I know you don’t like strangers
going near your house…”

“I vetted the service. It’s okay.”

Sighing, Hux rolled his eyes. “Well, you should have done that to your former friend.”

There really wasn’t anything he could say to that.

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Kylo came upstairs and leaned in the doorway of her room as she was going through the list of things she needed to bring tomorrow. He’d helped her write it. It wasn’t like she couldn’t call for anything, but it would feel good to be settled as quickly as she could.

“How did it go?” she asked.

Shrugging, he came and sat on her bed. “He punched me in the arm. At least it wasn’t my face. I deserved it. Maybe I missed so many things because it was just comfortable to be around him. I’m still sorry, Rey. He said so many things to you and about you and me…”

She put her hand on his, wanting to be quiet before he worked himself up. “Kylo, it still hurts. But maybe we’re both going to have to make new friends.”

His eyes focused on the wall for a moment before turning and giving her a small smile. “I know you’re right. Do you think you have everything?”

Tilting her head, she nodded. “I checked off the list. I think it looks fine.”

He leaned forward, kissing her cheek. “That’s good. I’m going to shower and then read a little in bed. Come to bed when you’re ready.”

She knew she’d hear more about what Hux had said to him later that night. But she had to let Kylo think through it before she pressed him.

Having Kylo back for a few days at home had been what she’d needed since the awkwardness of New Years. Her ears had burnt when she told Han and Leia about what had happened. They weren’t mad at her, but did give Kylo a hard time. But it almost felt good to see him uncomfortable about his choices that night. They also both made promises that couldn’t be broken: Grey was out of his life and she would stick to water at parties. She wasn’t even sure she wanted to go to any parties but she’d wait and see who her classmates were to decide that.

Looking around her room, she shook her head. She would be studying at his old school but was leaving in a much different situation. Her boyfriend wasn’t coming with her. She wouldn’t be renting an apartment with stars on her bedroom ceiling. Because it had been over nine years since that fall, it was like it existed in another dimension than her life now.

Finding the old teddy bear on the bed, she hugged it. The last almost fifteen years of her life felt like they had been on a different planet.

Han was in the garage when she found him. “Hey, sweetheart. Are you worried about tomorrow?”

It was cold in there and she pulled Kylo’s hoodie tighter around her. “A little. So maybe not
enough. But Kylo and I talked about it before Hux got here.”

“Has he left yet? He wanted to borrow some tools and I have them for him.” He was fiddling with something on the workbench. He’d been out there more often the entire fall when she’d been home. She still didn’t have her license. He would only ask about it some of the time but still didn’t pressure her. It would come with time.

“Yes, Kylo said he left.” She shook her head. “He didn’t even say goodbye.”

“Well, we’ll stop by for coffee tomorrow morning so you can say goodbye. Your Kylo will need that too. If Armitage left like that, they were probably mad at one another.” Han put down the screwdriver to meet her eyes. “You know he’s worried about leaving you, right sweetie? He sometimes picks other things to think about to avoid thinking about other things that are important to him."

So Han had seen how Kylo had fallen quiet the last few days when there wasn’t work to do. “I think I understand. He doesn’t want to be on the road again. He’s frustrated with how it’s going. And then there’s Grey.”

“Yeah.” Han gave her a tight smile. “He would have told us something if he’d known what was going on. He gets a little…hell, I’ll never figure out how he thinks. But you know, Rey, things like this happen in relationships. I mean, he’s…he is how he is and he’s always working on getting better. He’s got a hard job that isn’t getting any easier. We’re worried about him all of the time being out there. And we’re going to be worried about you but we’ll be close by. We can’t really help him with this change in his life other than to listen to him.”

“He depended on Grey for a lot.” She bit her lip, not wanting to think too much about him. “I won’t be able to be there for two years.”

Han wiped off his hands and took the few steps to pull her into a hug. “Don’t think that way. He does have other friends. He knows how to take care of himself but just doesn’t like doing it on his own. You’ve got your own life to live, Rey. Sitting at home waiting for him sounds like a good idea right now but in a couple of years, it’s going to be pretty boring.”

She snorted. “Things are never boring with Kylo.”

“Yeah, but he’s not always going to be around. That nice Norwegian woman was telling us all about that. His partner’s wife…”

“Silla.” Rey smiled lightly as she said her name. It was much more pleasant to think about Owen and Silla than the annoying figure of Grey in their lives. As long as she was around, giving her hope for how life would look when she was finished school and could move their forever, it meant the future wouldn’t be as hard as everyone else said it would be.

“Yeah, her.” Han paused for a moment. “When he came back to us, when he was angry and hurting all of the time, thinking about you or this life were the main things that got him through a lot. We’ve always tried to let you follow your own path too. All we’re saying is give this a chance. If you hate it for more reasons than you’re away from him, then we’ll come get you. Okay?”

Stepping back, Rey nodded. “I think I get it, dad. I promise I’ll really try at this. Even if it’s hard.”

Han smiled at her. “That’s all we’re asking you to do, Rey.”

She left the garage feeling like she could handle the next morning. Still, she couldn’t help but compare herself to how it was the night before Kylo and Poe moved. Kylo had a car. They’d
picked out their own furniture for the apartment and it was going to be delivered. She was moving alone into a furnished room with other students in a corridor. They had a life planned that was cut short. She was just trying to get her life started.

Leia was in the kitchen and looked down at her when she came in the backdoor.

“Did you remind him to come to bed?”

She shook her head. “But I think he will come in soon.”

Sighing, Leia pulled her into a hug when she came up the short steps. “How are you feeling?”

Stepping back, Rey sighed. “I have too much to think about. I know I won’t be alone but it feels a little like that.”

Taking her hands, Leia nodded. “Sometimes when we do things on our own, it feels that way. But we’ll be here for you whenever you need something. We know you can handle living with someone because you’re responsible and mature, but living alone, on your own, can really teach yourself a lot about who you are. And it won’t be forever. Time will just fly by when classes start.”

She really hoped they would. After saying goodnight, she went up the stairs to Kylo’s room. It was strange that he still had a room there when he had a house in another part of the country. But her room would stay there too, no matter where she was.

He was sitting up in bed, writing. Looking up, he set his pen down. “I heard you talking. I never wanted you to feel alone.”

Fiddling with the edge of his hoodie, she frowned. “I’m going to try not to feel that way. But it will be hard. Even when you weren’t here, when we were apart, I had Han and Leia. Now…I really only know Kaydel there.” She stopped closer to him as he furrowed his brow. “But I know we’ll talk all of the time. It won’t be like it was when I was younger.”

He took a deep breath and gave her a short nod. “That was a hard year. But you got through it. And things are different now.”

Sometimes she still felt nervous about touching him. Just reaching out and running her hand through his hair used to be so innocent. Now, it meant so much more to them both. He pulled her into a hug and took a deep breath. Safe in his arms, she hoped that he realized that she didn’t want him to feel alone either.

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When Kylo sat on the bed in her dorm room, it squeaked underneath him before he sighed and pressed his hands down on it again. “I can ask them to get you a better bed.”

Turning from pinning up her pictures, Rey raised her eyebrows at him. She’d been more concerned about making the room her own rather than worrying about what she would sleep on. Every night, she’d be able to look at pictures of her friends and family. Her happy wall was back; there were other things to set up and this was more important. This could be a real home for two years. She had her own washroom and kitchenette. And she knew that Kylo must have been the one to get her one of the nicer rooms on that floor even though he wasn’t admitting it. She could let him have this
It still made her chest warm to think about the small kindnesses he did for her that he was also embarrassed about. She’d wait to feel uncomfortable about having nicer things than her dorm mates when reality finally hit her that she was going to be there for what felt like forever in that moment. Her mind kept going back and forth, feeling like time was messing with her again.

“I think I’ll be able to get used to being here. But it will be weird not to live in a house. And I think the bed is fine.”

He looked like he wanted to argue but settled for nodding. He sighed, some of the tension leaving his face. “You’ve already made it look like a home.”

They had a moment to themselves. Han and Leia were looking through the last things from the cars, making sure nothing was forgotten.

They were also giving them time alone.

Moving onto campus in the middle of winter had been more annoying than she thought it would be but it was almost done; it was almost time to start this part of her life. And that also meant it was time for Kylo to go again. He’d be on the road, back out there talking to more cops and more families. And she’d be studying, being reminded of how she’d been there when she was a girl but was there in a new way now. Their time together since New Years had been soft but all too short. Looking at what they were both doing made her find a new sore spot. He used to teach there. He used to have a shared office there, talking to students and lecturing even though he thought he was terrible at it. She’d spotted him looking at his old office building when they wandered through campus earlier that day. If was still working there, everything would be so much easier...

He caught the look of sadness cross her face and he reached for her hand, pulling her onto his lap. Holding her, his breath warmed her neck. Moments like this never lasted long, but being with him around the holidays had taught her that she had to cherish each one. And the days apart would get easier when she started class. Their time together since New Years had been soft but all too short. Looking at what they were both doing made her find a new sore spot. He used to teach there. He used to have a shared office there, talking to students and lecturing even though he thought he was terrible at it. She’d spotted him looking at his old office building when they wandered through campus earlier that day. If was still working there, everything would be so much easier...

“I’m so tired,” he said, leaning back. “I don’t know how I’ll sleep without you.”

The months without him had been blacked out by their time together. Now, it was about to end again.

But time was always about learning how to accept change. She was almost nineteen. There were so many years left, she kept telling herself. She had to keep believing that.

“I don’t…” She looked around her room again and took in how small it was compared to the open spaces she was used to. Their house and Kylo’s house were so big. Kaydel was just down the hall and she already knew she’d be sleeping there that night. Her friend had already shown her around campus, but promised that there were more tours before class started. On that walk, she saw the coffee shop where she had shouted at Kylo that faraway morning. There were many more memories to be found there again. “I know we’ll be okay, Kylo. You have your work and I’ll have mine. Silla tells me that all of the time.”

And so had Han and Leia. It didn’t mean that it wouldn’t hurt.

“I’m glad you like her so much.” He hugged her tighter. “Han and Leia should be back soon. And then we’ll have to go. I have to meet with George tonight so we can prepare for tomorrow. I won’t
be that far away if anything happens.”

Shifting in his lap, she straddled him. He liked this. And she was getting more comfortable with it. She lightly kissed him and he returned it with a sigh.

He’d been quiet on the drive and then hadn’t said that much when he was looking at the other students either moving in with their parents or just lurking around at the new arrivals. He’d instantly stared down any of them watching for too long. Looking so much like a cop, in any form, had meant many of them had quickly disappeared.

But sometimes, the way he stood and the way she spoke, brought her back to so much of why she wanted to be with him. He wasn’t just her protector. Despite all of the problems she had with being away from him, she had to keep reminding herself that he had an important job to do. It would be hard to remember tomorrow but just seeing him put that face on made her recall his confident self with warmth. That was the one she’d missed the last few days.

He was dressed for work. But even in his dark jeans and a t-shirt, she wanted to be closer to him.

His arms tightened, deepening the kiss. This was what time alone was for. Soft lips and strong hands. Her heartbeat getting quicker. Knowing that he was often worried about the same things. The intimidating form from the hallway was in her room, complaining that the bed squeaked.

His hands settled on her hips. And she shuddered lightly when his grip tightened.

Pulling away, she swallowed. His eyes flashed with concern as he tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m not sad about being here, Kylo. I’m going to try hard not to worry about you but it will be so hard when you’re far away again.”

“I’ve thought about it too. And it’s okay. It’s hard…it’s hard not to feel emotional before…” He paused to sigh. “Before we’re separated again. It’s hard for me not to feel like this is my fault. I could have found a different job. I could be doing anything right now. But I really want to do this, even if it’s…hard.”

He was in his head again, going over everything he’d done wrong. He’d look distantly guilty whenever he thought no one was looking at him.

“I know you do,” she said, trying to get him to look at her again. “I’m still sorry about Grey.”

His face went cold. “Don’t be. I don’t care if I ever see him again. I promised Hux that and I promised you too. I’m never speaking to him again. I still have to deal with some thoughts about him but it doesn’t mean I’m not worried about you. I get obsessed with things and I hate when my mind won’t let things go.” He let out a low sigh as he worked through what else he wanted to say.

“You can send me your journals when you’ve thought through this, Kylo,” she finally said. “I need you to really see that he really bothered me. I tried to be his friend and he just…I don’t know. He was always saying strange things about you that friends shouldn’t say about one another.”

This was another repeat conversation. But she couldn’t back down from the true words that were difficult for him to hear. She wanted to make him stop, to yell at him to really see what had happened. But this was the last time they’d see one another for a long time. He had to leave. She’d save some of her anger until this change in her life had passed, or at least until she was settled. Hux had started guiding him in the right direction. Now, he just needed time. How much she had come to hate Grey would have to be saved when he wasn’t so close to the edge.

“I’m so sorry that I forced you into liking him, if you ever did. You can hate him if you want to.
He was lying to my face when he said he didn’t want to sleep with me again and he knew I was with you. It was so fucking unfair that I didn’t see all of that.” He could only shake his head again. “Don’t think that I’ll be thinking more about him than you.”

“I know.” She didn’t want him to blame himself even if it was what he’d earned. “You couldn’t… you couldn’t control how he felt. I wish you had done more but I’m not…not really that mad at you anymore. It’s not your fault he was in love with you. I love you too so I understand how it feels to be hurt seeing you with someone else. I guess the things you did wrong were letting him be so close to you and letting him do all of those things he did.”

Closing his eyes, he rested his forehead against her shoulder. “Yeah. I know.”

Even without romantic feelings for Grey, they had depended on one another for years. And now that she was going to be away, Kylo would be alone again any time he was home, working himself too hard. But now he’d talk to her more about it instead of him. That part gave her even more hope for their future.

“I love you,” she said. “I know you can figure this case out, Kylo.”

Nodding, he hugged her again. “Just don’t forget me while you’re here.”

That would be very hard to do.

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They were waiting at a gas station for George to pick him up at the halfway point. His father had driven him, sending his mother home to an empty house again. Glancing at the shop, he thought again about buying cigarettes.

“Do you want a coffee or something?” Han asked, catching his turned head.

“No, I’ll have enough trouble sleeping tonight.” He slumped down in his seat. At least for a few more minutes, he could be his father’s son: immature, demanding, and moody. “You need to replace the windshield wipers. They weren’t working for half the drive.”

Han snorted. “Well, there’s always something to fix.”

Closing his eyes, he shook his head. “Not now, dad.”

“Ben, I haven’t had five minutes alone with you since September. And the whole drive you didn’t say anything.” He licked his lips. And the words made Kylo finally look at him. “How are you doing?”

His hands went deeper in his coat. “Worried about everything. It’s been hard to go over case notes with so many other things to think about. Rey is living where he got killed. Rey will have to deal with a lot on her own and I won’t be there. I’m not sure this is even going anywhere and that’s why George is coming down. I don’t want supervision even though I feel like I need it. And I hate that.”

“And then there’s Gregor.”

He almost snapped but settled for a shaky sigh instead. “It’s only been a week. Let me beat myself
up about this for a little while longer. I also let Rey get drunk that night so I need time to not feel as shitty as I do right now. He’s away from me and now she is too. Everyone gets what they want.”

“Ben,” his father’s voice firmed. “I’m sitting here, waiting for you to be picked up by your boss at the FBI. You aren’t sixteen anymore and I’m not dropping you off at high school. What are you talking about?”

He finally sat up, taking his hands out of his pockets to wipe them on his pants. If he ran from the car, he wouldn’t have to take it back. “I’m just letting some of the things he said get to me. Rey is in school now. She’s going to meet other people, people who her age own. I know you said you didn’t care about the age difference but we’re not normal. There’s a seven-year gap in my life. She almost doesn’t even remember being there, even if her reactions say a different thing. I don’t want her to remember anyway. It was fucking awful and I still…she has a hard time hearing about what happened. I need to share it with her, along with all of the other hard shit I’ve been through and that I’ve put myself through, but I feel like I’m putting too much on her still. She’s going to find someone her own age, who doesn’t have the potential for hurting others like I do. And now that I see all of the manipulative shit Grey did to me and that I did to him…I don’t think I deserve to be the person I want to be, the one that would never do something like this to her.”

Han’s hand landed on his shoulder and he fought from jerking away. “We didn’t encourage her to go to school to get her away from you. Okay, Ben? You have a career. Your mother and I were also very driven in our careers and that cost us a lot when you were growing up. We thought about that every day that you were gone. Even if Rey doesn’t end up with a job out of this, she’ll have more skills and will have grown up a bit more. Don’t forget all of the growing up you two did just because he died. You also want this too. Because, believe me, things won’t work out if you’re leaving her at home all of the time. I know you two argued a lot. Things like that will happen all of the time, and they’ll be brutal, if she doesn’t have other things to think about that aren’t you. You weren’t here for a lot of the meltdowns. You weren’t here when she didn’t want to do her homework because you were out living your life. Don’t blame yourself for those moments. Instead, just let her grow more into herself. You’ll still have her on the other side.”

Blinking, Kylo stared at his father. “What if I don’t?”

Han squeezed him gently. “Deal with that if it comes, son. Don’t go chasing trouble in your thoughts. Even if…even if she falls out of love with you, she’ll still love you in the way that you shared with her for almost nineteen years. You let something beautiful come out of something horrible. Don’t forget that.”

He was blankly glaring at the dashboard when he heard Han pop the trunk. “Your boss is here. Get going and we’ll talk soon.”

Looking up, he saw another car beside them and gave George a quick nod as he steeled his face. “Thanks, dad. I love you.”

“I love you too. Go get him, Ben.”

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“It will be good for her to have your parents close by again but still have a great degree of freedom,” George said, looking over from the driver’s seat. He waited until they’d been on the
road for fifteen minutes before speaking, other than saying hello and asking how he was doing. “And I know you’ll feel better about being away as well.”

Nodding, Kylo let his eyes blur for a moment at his notes. There were still so many names and the connections still weren’t coming together. Having George with him for a week would help settle some of his looser ideas. And as long as his thoughts stopped dropping back to other things, he would be able to do this.

“It’s just something I don’t think you need to go to school for but Silla keeps hitting me every time I say that.” He tried to smirk but it felt empty. He didn’t want to be away from Rey and it had made the knot in his stomach tighten every time he thought about it. Countless hotel rooms and heartbreaking interviews made him long to just come home to her. But it wouldn’t be like that for at least two years; it was only fair that she got to follow her dreams too. Han was right. He couldn’t take up her entire life like he’d done to so many other people. About the only good thing about her going to school was that she’d make her own world of friends and education, bringing her hopefully to a career that she would love too. Even if he questioned his job on the harder days, it filled his life with enough activity that he hadn’t fallen into an unfocused, chaotic hole of exhaustion in months. The lingering fear of her meeting someone else would fade with time, he hoped. He didn’t question her feelings, but it was something that used to bother him about a different person too. “But it does make me feel better that she chose this school. I know this campus. And her being in the dorms makes it…different than it was for us. She’s safer. There are people who can walk her home. She’s not as reckless as I was.”

Standing on the grounds again, all he saw was him. Despite the sorrow of leaving her behind, he had to keep working forward for him, for all of them. All of his thoughts were twisting again, overlapping into an endless knot that he didn’t have time to untangle in that moment. He had to refocus.

George nodded, watching his head fall briefly before he came back to himself. Kylo flipped a page and spoke. “I’ve been thinking about modifying the line of questioning again…”

If they talked about the case, he could turn his focus away from his own hurt and could attention on how another family had gone almost a decade without answers.

Despite the routine of the drive and the talk of procedure, along with confirming a meeting at the station with the sole cold-case detective, Kylo took his worries with him to bed and couldn’t ward off the vivid nightmare that hit him in the middle of the night. He was being cut into ribbons, each piece of flesh being torn apart by an unseen hand. He felt every stab, every rupture, his body fading away into cruel darkness.

A firm hand woke him from the blank terror he was feeling and instincts told him to strike out, but his arm was blocked and he was pressed instantly against the bed.

“Kylo, please breathe.”

He blinked up at George and did as he was ordered, seeing his panic reflected in the firmness of the older man’s face.

“I’m okay,” he rasped out. “I’m okay.”

More weakness in front of George. He wanted to disappear into the blackness of their room, just like the dream.

“You aren’t but you will be, I’m sure.” His grip loosened and Kylo sat up, staring at him. “You can
pretend I’m not your boss right now. It’s after 3 a.m.”

Kylo clenched his jaw. He really needed to stop avoiding the dentist and get a mouth guard again. “They don’t happen all of the time. Really.”

George still motioned with his head and, like he used to do when he was fourteen, he shifted to rest his head against his shoulder. A warm arm encircled him and he sighed at the peaceful sensation it brought. “I know that. But I also know you were overly stressed when you had your session before you left. With all of the other changes in your life, you need to reach out more when you need it.”

He swallowed. “I know that Rey is safe. I trust her not to be as careless as I was. I might have made an enemy with campus housing with all of my phone calls.”

George almost laughed. It was one of those low, sharp exhales through his nose that Kylo occasionally heard during meetings when someone was getting a little too far-fetched in a theory of a crime. “That’s in line with your habits. And I don’t blame you. I did the same for my son when he was Rey’s age. But that was many years ago.”

His eyes narrowed at the mention and he was silent for a moment. “He had those feelings for me the entire time and lied to me. I have the case, Rey, my parents, and my other friends to worry about. It makes me hate myself for not seeing his true feelings.” He paused and sighed. “And for missing him at the same time.”

Taking a deep breath, George’s arm tightened around him. “He can be very…perplexing. I still haven’t spoken to him, but I will when he’s back from his mother’s. I’m angry with him but…I will be there for him if he’s hurting. He hid many of these things from me, but so did you. I was the one that suggested he apologize to you in the first place because I know you don’t like loose ends and he gets…difficult. I was very thankful when you formed a friendship. He was around more and very open with me, but also kept many of those thoughts about you from me as well. And at many times, it was inappropriate for me to step in and tell you both how to run your personal lives. I guess I owe you an apology as well.”

“He was so supportive of me and my relationship with Rey. He knows what she means to me and still thought…I don’t know.” Kylo lifted his head and sat up. “I really love her, George, and this could have cost me everything. Everyone is telling me to shut him out of my life and I have to. He went too far and…”

“I’m not asking you to let him back into your life. It’s actually for the best if you shut him out now. He can handle it this time. He knows what he did. He can make other plans. He’s not as aimless as he was.” George shook his head. “What I’m saying is that you shouldn’t let the end of your friendship cloud the positive sides you saw from him, and how you were able to grow as a person as well. Reflecting on what we do wrong will help us in the future, but so are the things we’ve done right in light of them. I’ve always told you that. But internalizing more blame over another person’s feelings isn’t very healthy. You’ve admitted you made a mistake and now you’re moving on. That’s what I’m saying. He’s very capable of taking care of himself and so are you. I don’t hate him. When I’m back and I can talk to him, I’ll speak with him but I won’t let him know a thing about you. Let him go but don’t forget the good sides of yourself you saw when you were around him, and don’t look too hard at the bad sides you brought out in each other.”

Nodding, Kylo promised himself to take the words to heart. “Thank you, George. I’m sorry I woke you up.”

“I’m just doing my best to help us both sleep easier.”
He wasn’t exactly wrong.

It really was time to put his guilt about how he’d let Grey almost ruin his relationship with Rey behind him and forget that distraction. The fear of Rey finding someone else would also have to be buried in one way or another; the greater worry was someone finding and hurting her. She was safe and loved him, he told himself. When he had work to focus on, those thoughts would be where they needed to be. Everything would be easier when they started their interviews the next day.

And then his guilt could be about how every mile he went, he was further away from her.

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“How was your first day of classes?”

He sounded tired but more focused than their last conversation. He wasn’t just asking because he had to. Curling up under her quilt, she shrugged and pulled the phone closer. “I don’t know. It was just so much information. And one class already has a deadline at the end of the week. We haven’t even learnt anything yet and I need to send in an outline.”

She could hear Kylo sitting up. “It goes like that sometimes. I liked having all of the deadlines. It made it easier for me to focus. We used to put it all on the calendar so we didn’t forget anything. I still do that now. I mean, sometimes I get distracted and end up staying up all night to finish things but as long as I have the bigger things done, I don’t lose my mind about some of the smaller things. Do you think putting everything on a timeline would help you?”

Staring at the stack of textbooks on her desk, she didn’t know what to think. It would all just feel more overwhelming to realize how many days they had been apart. “Kylo, I miss you. Everyone is a stranger in my classes. I don’t know anyone but Kaydel and my professors just talk and then everyone else has a smart question for them and I’m just sitting there feeling stupid.”

“Rey, I’m sorry.” He sighed. “You know you’re not stupid. It just takes time to figure out a new situation.”

“But you never thought school was hard. You knew how to do it.”

He took a deep breath. “You know I forced myself to be like that. I had to get good grades when I started school again because I was fighting people all of the time. Everything sucked and hurt all of the time because you were at home and I had people looking at me like I was a freak. And my head would never leave me alone when I stopped to think about anything but school. High school wasn’t easy either because…” he trailed off. “Yeah, you know why. But I still had my grades because I pushed myself to have something I could control. I’m me and you’re you. As long as you’re learning something, that’s better than getting perfect grades. No one is going to care about your transcripts when you’re looking for a job.”

Sniffling, Rey wiped her nose. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Rey, I know I complained about your courses before but I’m…I’m not good with things I don’t understand. I get your art but for the most part, I don’t get a lot of other types of art. Look at the movies I watch. When we were at the museum, I was more interested in the ancient weapons than abstract art.” Kylo was leaning back, she could hear it. He was on a bed somewhere, probably reaching for the other side and running his hand along the sheets and thinking about her.
Both the memory and the image made her smile, helping hold back the frustrated tears that were going to spill once he hung up. He’d been searching for things online back in their time alone in August. “I still don’t want you to buy a decorative axe.”

“What about a sword?”

She rolled her eyes. “Please don’t buy a sword, Kylo.”

He was silent.

She sat up, almost laughing. “Did you order a sword? Without asking me?”

He swallowed. “No.” A pause. “I bought two.”

She started giggling. It was too hard not to. He laughed too, probably realizing how ridiculous he was being.

He finally sighed. “I can send them back when they get to the house. I just…wanted to have something else to think about other than the case and missing you.”

“So you looked up swords?” She shook her head to herself, focusing on the pictures of them together on the wall. “They’ll look…nice. Above the television.”

“If you don’t like them, I’ll send them back.”

He shouldn’t have to do that. But she would have to look at the swords and decide for herself. Their house was going to look like George’s before she would be able to see it again. Just thinking about being back at his house made her sigh, sadness closing in on her again about how far away he was. He was still in Connecticut, but he wasn’t there next to her so he might as well be across the country. “Kylo, I miss you. I missed you last night and I’ll miss you more tomorrow.”

“You know how much I miss you, Rey. It’s frustrating to deal with these people. The families have so much stuff brought back to them and they want to keep talking and we have to walk away and leave them with open wounds. And the police don’t care. As long as there’s no body, they don’t see the crime because they don’t want to listen to the pattern. I’m figuring out how to think like him. There’s a long enough pause between the cases that we’ve found that I know he stalked them like he stalked us. He figures out when they’re going to be alone and takes them.” He paused and she heard a voice in the background. “George just told me not to make you worry about me. And you shouldn’t. Miss me but…don’t miss me too much. Try to focus on your work and I’ll focus on mine.”

Nodding, she took a deep breath. “Kylo, I love you. Please come see me soon. I had a dream about you and…

“I know. I did too.” It was also his way of saying George was in the room and he couldn’t really tell her more. “I don’t want to go, but I have to get some sleep. I miss you. I love you. I might not be able to call tomorrow but I will text you if I can’t. Just try to write out your deadlines and everything might feel less overwhelming.”


“Goodnight, Rey.”

Setting her phone in her lap, she let out a long breath.
A knock made her jolt out of her empty thoughts. Unfolding her legs, she answered the door.

Kaydel smiled brightly when she saw her. “I totally wasn’t standing out here waiting for you to finish talking to him.”

Stepping back, Rey let her friend in. “It’s okay. Han and Leia tried not to listen to us when we were at home but I know they heard some things.”

Sitting on her bed, Kaydel quirked her head. “I just heard your voice, not what you were saying. I didn’t mean to spy.”

She had to sigh, sitting beside her. “He bought swords for the house.”

Kaydel’s eyes went wide and her mouth gaped open. “Why do boys like swords so much?”

Rey smirked at her friend before shaking her head. “I don’t know. Like, remember when we were kids and the boys used to fight with sticks? I never understood why they liked hurting one another. I hated going to Kylo’s wrestling matches.”

Smiling, Kaydel sat up. “He must have been so good.” She stopped talking to let her look fade. “Rey, don’t be mad at me, but I think your boyfriend is hot. I liked seeing him when he was here. But it made me so happy to see how he looked at you. It really was different from how it was when we were kids.”

Leaning against the wall behind her bed, Rey smiled before she sighed. “I was still afraid the last time we were alone together at home. I really wanted him and he wanted me but I just couldn’t do it. I kept thinking about…everything. What happened to me, all of the stuff with Grey, being away from him…It’s like I can’t let go of it. And Kylo he’s…he’s been able to have sex before. And I don’t know when I’ll be able to.”

Kaydel swallowed her smile into seriousness. “I’m sorry for teasing. Like, Rose keeps getting mad at me. I know what you’ve been through but sometimes it doesn’t feel real. I don’t remember much before I was like five or six. It’s like we’ve always been friends and I…” Kaydel paused for a while, playing with the quilt on her bed. “No one has ever hit me. No one has ever hurt me like you’ve been hurt. I have a hard time imagining how you must have felt. But it doesn’t mean that I don’t care about you and want to keep trying to get it.”

They hadn’t talked about this in a while. Looking at her friend, Rey tried to smile but knew it must have been a sad one because Kaydel reached for her hand. “I don’t really remember everything anymore. When I was small, like when I was six, it was like my brain couldn’t make it make sense. Kylo was still there but suddenly we were safe. I had friends who wouldn’t disappear. I could eat everything and ride in a car and go shopping…But I still remember thinking that everyone would be gone one day. But now it isn’t really a memory. It’s more like a feeling.”

“You’ve known so many people who’ve died.” Kaydel sighed. “You know, I still hate those girls from high school. I should have done more to help you. They were such bitches.”

“You did help me. You were my friend.” Rey lifted her legs to her chin, wrapping her arms around them. “We don’t have to think about them anymore. It’s kind of nice to not know anyone. Nobody knows who I am and Kylo hasn’t been here in so long. No one remembers him either.”

It was really true. She’d only run into a few people she’d gone to high school with when she had been home in the fall. All she had to do was imagine Kylo beside her and she could lift her head and ignore them. It felt so much easier now that she didn’t have to worry about Grey.
“Yeah,” Kaydel said, looking over to grin. “Yeah, totally we don’t. Did you meet anyone in class today?”

They slowly started talking about their first day of class. Rey had to admit that she’d been too shy but Kay reminded her to sit in the same place if she could during the next classes. She had gotten to know people from her lectures from sitting next to them. And it was always good to have someone to share notes with. If there was any group work, it might mean possible friendships. They promised to have lunch the next day to talk more. Kaydel did have other friends but promised to help out when she could, and maybe they could all hang out together and see if it worked. But it felt good to have her friend. Tomorrow, they both decided, they’d call Rose together to remind her that they still missed her too. And they both hoped that she had a matching prom picture on her dorm-room door too.

And by the time Kaydel left for her room down the hall, Rey felt like she could sleep better and was more ready for the next day and the rest of the week.

Because when that week was over, it would be one more week closer to when she could be with Kylo again.

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But January slipped into February. And February slowly turned into March. Spring break was coming. Kylo would call from a different city or town every other week. When he was home, back in Virginia, he’d sound the most comfortable. Maybe it was the swords or maybe it was just being in his own bed. Han and Leia would come up on some weekends so she could worry about Kylo and they could do the same. But they always tried to turn the conversation to school work and her friends from class. She had new friends. They’d get coffee or hang out and play board games. They’d study together at the library. But her thoughts could still get to her. There were some weeks when things got to be too much. She’d go home and sleep the entire time. She still felt embarrassed when she remembered being angry with Kylo and Poe when they’d be home on weekends and just be in bed the entire time.

There were some assignments she’d do well on.

There were others that she finished but didn’t do her best on. She’d still passed but didn’t feel like she actually learnt anything from. Kylo had been right. She had to stop worrying about grades and focus more on what she could get from her classes.

But every time he’d call or they could talk on the computer, it would ease some of the pain. If he’d had a bad day, or had been alone for too long, he’d go off on how he wasn’t good enough, how everything he was trying to do was wrong. If he didn’t find something soon, it would mean going home and having to start over at a later date, when more memories and more evidence had been lost. She almost wanted him to be back in Virginia. She wanted to imagine him at his office or in their house, not alone on the road.

And she also felt bad that she was planning to go to Mexico with her friends over spring break rather than be with him.

He wasn’t mad, but his eyes did dart around for a moment when she told him about how they’d planned it for so long. How it was something she looked forward to even if she missed him every
day and night. Kaydel and Rose didn’t pressure her into going. But she wanted to see more of the world. Maybe if she was far enough away, her thoughts would clear. She wanted to see the beach she had been promised when she was six.

He’d come to see her after spring break, when he had time off. And then she’d have more memories to tell him about rather than just how much class sucked most of the time.

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He had to hold another mother’s hand and try not to make promises.

And it was getting harder to keep his grip on his sanity after hearing the same story *again*.

The Wallis family hadn’t heard from their son Matthew for a few days. He had just moved to his own place and they didn’t want to smother him. They went to check on him and found an empty apartment, but there were signs of a struggle. They still remembered everything from that day ten years ago. The sound from the open window: a busy highway. The way the lock on the door stuck: it had been broken into before and repaired. How there was still a bowl of cereal on the counter, uneaten.

No one had paid attention to them. The police had swept *another* case under the rug and ignored it.

Embracing vengeance was getting easier to descend into with every passing day that he spent on the fucking road.

Holding Mrs. Wallis’s hand, he tried to centre himself and not fall into a hole of rage. He lingered in the memory of the last time he had been in his own house and was able to relax and reorient himself. “I’ve only been working on this since late last year, but I’m going to go through the evidence and see if I can find him. I can’t…I can’t promise anything.”

The words almost seemed rehearsed now, but he had to keep himself in that room. At least when he was talking with families, he didn’t have the same worries he had when he was alone at night.

Mrs. Wallis looked at her husband, and then back to him. “I never thought anyone would try to find him, Agent Solo. They never believed us and then you started calling us and actually came here. It’s so…I actually have hope now.”

*Don’t hope. Don’t depend on me.* He kept his face still but winced internally. “There’s someone out there hurting people. I want to stop him.”

“Their?” Mr. Wallis asked. He’d been silent throughout most of the interview. He looked bitter and withdrawn, like the last ten years of his life had taken more out of them than they should.

It wasn’t the first time one of the families had asked him that. And the bruise still hadn’t numbed because of all of the times it was prodded. “I…lost someone too. A long time ago. I’ve found ways to deal with my grief. I found many reasons to be happy again but this hurt wouldn’t go away until I found out who did it. I’m here to help you both find some…relief. To find justice in the answers for you and everyone else I’ve spoken to.”

It couldn’t be all pointless. None of it should feel that way.
Still, he left the home not feeling all that confident again. Taking in the evening air in Maine in early March, he had to shake his head and lean against another rental car and kick away some of the slush from his shoes. He was back there again. He missed Owen. He missed George. It was easier to be out there when he had help. He was detailed. He had looked over witness statements but trying to re-interview them was almost impossible. He also had to keep fighting the urge to go to the store and buy a pack of cigarettes and chain smoke all night as he rewrote his notes…

“Are you here about the boy?”

Turning, he frowned. An older woman, probably in her sixties, stood on the porch of the next house, smoking. She pulled her bulky jacket around her larger frame as she quirked her head.

Slowly, he walked towards her. “That’s a good question. Should I be?”

She offered him the pack as he climbed the steps and he really couldn’t turn it down. It was for the case now. “I’m not sure. I thought they’d never stop looking, but they did.”

Letting the first hit of nicotine snake into his lungs he thought about what she was saying. “I was here to talk to the Wallises about their son. He disappeared about ten years ago.”

The woman took a long drag and shook her head. “I know. But he’s not the only one.”

Not letting himself react, Kylo met her eyes. Sometimes, talking to strangers settled him more than when he was with people he knew. But that was only on a case, when he could be his other self and be in control. Anytime he wore jeans now he wanted to tell the world to fuck off. Because jeans meant being at home. And home meant being alone. It was a hurtful comfort whenever he was home. “Can you tell me about it?”

“Sure. But just tell me what sort of police officer you are before I invite you inside.” She was studying him, looking him up and down. His dark coat cost more than he wanted to admit but it kept him warm. He was rotating his suits, but only had three on the road this time. They were starting to get too well worn in the seams at that point. And one of them was his favourite. The thought of having to give up his charcoal suit gave him a moment to silently hate himself for not taking better care of it. At least with all of the driving, he didn’t need to worry about his shoes.

“I’m Special Agent Ben Solo. I’m with the FBI.” Showing her his badge only took a moment, but it was about building trust and not showing off. “My job is to look at things that no one cared about before. So, I would really like to hear what you have to say.” He put out his cigarette and didn’t turn down another when it was offered to him. “And thank you for letting me smoke. My…partner lets me but my girlfriend doesn’t.”

The woman’s face transformed into a thoughtful smile. “She’s looking out for you. It’s what good girlfriends do. Come inside.”

She introduced herself, still smoking indoors. He was about to ask but he smelt the inside of the entrance and saw the walls and didn’t bother. His presence had drawn her outside instead of decorum.

Ruth Yates. And her five cats.

It was another wave of smells when he went further inside.

Sitting on her plastic-covered sofa, he forced himself to turn down the drink she offered. He was driving but really didn’t want to say now. He squeaked every time he shifted his weight and forced himself to sit still. “I’m interested about what you wanted to tell me.”
“It’s not that much. A little boy, Jack, used to live down the street. He disappeared about two years ago, I guess. And the Wallises son was suddenly not important anymore, if he ever was. I guess a four-year-old white boy is more important any day of the week.” She sucked against her teeth and shrugged at him. “Jack Mueller. That was his name.”

He took his notebook from his pocket and jotted down the details, trying not to let his growing anxiety show. There was something here: something he had to look back at, retracing things he might have missed. Because he always missed something. He’d only talked about the case he had at the top of his mind with the cops at the station. This one hadn’t come up. Why hadn’t he looked more at more recent disappearances?

“Can you tell me anything about what happened?” He kept his face as calm as he could, leaning forward and trying to smile. He tilted his head so the scar was less visible. He was less intimidating that way. He put his phone on his knee and gestured to it. “I hope you don’t mind if I record this.”

“No, that’s fine. I don’t really think I know anything.” Ruth let the smoke from her cigarette curl around her face as a cat jumped into her lap. It meowed, reminding him of the orange beast back home. “But about Jack? I just know that he vanished from the playground. His mother is a single parent and, you know, turned her head for one second and he was gone. The police looked up and down it didn’t go anywhere. Jack is still gone.”

“What do you remember from that week?” He glanced towards the door. “It looks like you keep an eye on things out there.”

She put out her cigarette but still nodded before taking another one. “I’m out there every morning and every night. But it’s hard to remember things from that long ago. The police never talked to me, you know? Bunch of morons.”

He sighed. “It’s beginning to look that way. But is there anything that seemed unusual to you? You spotted me. If you could put yourself back out there, on that porch, at that time, think about around the time he disappeared and what you can remember about it. It’s before you heard about it, before you read it in the newspaper. You’re out there and you’re having a smoke. On the street. What’s there?”

“Well,” she started before lighting her cigarette. Yes, Kylo thought. The smells and tastes would help her, he hoped. “The neighbour down the block, the one across from them, had his garage open. He was having people over so there were so many strange cars on the street. I let people mind their own business, but all of those cars? Agent, it was annoying.”

“I can imagine.” He nodded. “The music, the voices, and the noise…”

“Yeah. The noise. Christ.”

“So, you’re out there. You’re watching your neighbour have a parade. You don’t know the cars and they’re not where they belong…”

“Yeah, but there was one car.” She paused and licked her lips. “That’s why I thought it was weird. I’d seen it the week before. It was this white car, but it looked like a rental. That was another thing that bothered me. The man was looking at the Wallis’ house and then saw me and kept driving. I didn’t see much of him other than that he was a man and he was white. He had sunglasses on so it made it hard to see much. Then he had to brake because Jack was running around on the grass, almost like he was going to sprint in front of him.”
“But he didn’t.” Kylo needed her to keep going.

“No. And then the week after, couple of days after the garage party, he was gone.” She shrugged at the end, as if what she said hadn’t opened up an entire new world of possibilities to him. And all of them pointed to greater danger.

Running his hand over his face, Kylo took a deep breath before he snuffed out his cigarette in the ashtray. He’d just given away his frustration but didn’t care. “Ruth. You’ve given me a lot to think about and to look into. Thank you. Can I have your contact information in case I need to follow this up? Especially with the description.”

“Of course. I’m just trying to be a good neighbour.” She gave him a tight smile and took his notepad. She complimented his handwriting and he managed to give her what he hoped was a reassuring look. He showed himself to the door, dodging a few cats as he left.

The drive left him buzzing. And it wasn’t just the jolt of nicotine.

Back at his hotel, it only took him a half an hour to put the pieces together and call George.

“He comes back for them, George.” He was talking even more his supervisor had time to say hello. “He comes back and takes someone else.”

“Slow down, Kylo. What have you found and what do you think it means?”

Taking a breath, fighting to be calm, he nodded to himself and stopped pacing. He hadn’t even realized he’d started stamping around the room until the voice hit him. “I’ve only been able to cross reference about fifteen names, but at least five of them are followed up by an event years later. Years later he comes back and…he abducts a child. The addresses line up. He comes back to check on the families and takes a child from down the block, on the same street, in the neighbourhood. I need to look into this more…”

George exhaled and he heard him sit up. “Where are you?”

“Just outside of Portland.” He actually had to look at the top of his notepad to remind himself. He didn’t blame George for not knowing.

“Well, come home so we can take a look at this together. Kylo, I know it’s seemed hopeless at times, but if this lines up, we can know more about him.”

Swallowing, Kylo let the thought settle heavily around him. “Is this how we find him, George?”

“Only time will tell, Kylo. Your flight is booked for tomorrow morning. I’ll talk to you then.” George paused for a moment. “And the accounting department needs you to stop paying for your hotel yourself. Please submit a receipt this time.”

He sighed at the remark and said goodbye. There was another phone call he had to make.

“Hey,” he said quickly when Hux answered. “You need to put up with me being a little intense right now.”

He heard his friend sigh heavily. “Thanks for starting with that but I could already hear that in your voice. What’s going on?”

“Hux.” He paused to sigh and rub his eyes. “I want to be wrong about this but I have that feeling again. The one that there’s something more to this. You believed me once and I really need you to
believe me right now.”

He heard his friend swallow. “What happened?”

“I think the same guy is taking kids too. It lines up and I’m going back to the office and we’re going to look into this but I need…I don’t want to make you afraid but…” His thoughts were racing and that was never good. He was back to being twenty-one and seeing the cat at the top of the stairs and about to lose himself in pure pain. His eyes. His face. The terror of not truly knowing. In the same breath, he was seven again and being raped on a couch, tortured and confined again. That different flavour of not knowing mixed with the first.

“Kylo. Stop. I’m…” Hux sighed. “You can get me worked up too when you talk like this. But just, slow the fuck down. Is my son in danger?”

“I don’t…I’d rather prepare for the worst than hope for the best. Is he still at the same daycare?”

“Yeah, and it’s…it’s safe. It’s either me or Paige picking him up, or his grandparents or your parents. If we’re busy at work, he’s always with people we know. Kylo, you’ve told us for years to watch for strange cars or strange people. I’m going to,” he paused to sigh again. “I’m not buying a gun but we have pepper spray and a bat. We check the cameras every night. You can’t, Christ, you can’t call in the middle of the night and tell me this shit if you don’t have proof. We will be careful. He’ll be safe. Call me tomorrow when you’ve figured more shit out but…” Hux trailed off. “Look, you’re freaking out. I can’t freak out too. I’m looking at him right now. The windows are secure. We put in better doors after that break in. Nothing happened today except that he spilt juice everywhere and swore he didn’t do it. That’s how we are. Picture us fine in our beds. And try to get some sleep. Okay?”

“Just, Hux…” He took a deep breath. “I miss him. I miss you guys.”

Exhaling, Hux shifted his phone. “We miss you too. Listen to me, okay? Call Rey. Talk to her. Get back to yourself. We’ll call you if we see anything weird.”

His eyes found a scratch on the hotel wall and he nodded. “Thank you. I’ll talk to you soon.”

When he hung up the phone, he realized it was well almost midnight. How long had he just been sitting there, staring into space? It was late.

He wanted desperately to call her. He wanted to hear her voice. But he was too wound up. He’d made Hux worried. He needed to sleep. She was preparing to go away with her friends soon. He couldn’t make her worried about Benji. He’d been able to have moments when he didn’t care about anything, just hanging out. So what if two of those people he used to hang out with were either dead or deleted from his phone? He couldn’t go to her. He’d be in Virginia and if this was something, she’d just be alone in the house. He’d come home exhausted. At least at times like that he’d be too aggravated to have sex.

Frustrated and angry at himself, he sat down on the bed in his empty hotel room. They hadn’t had a chance to be close enough to touch since January. He’d been away. She’d been studying.

He was her distraction.

But what he wouldn’t give to have someone hold him that night. He needed her to say the nice things he usually hated hearing because he still didn’t like so much about himself. Handsome. She thought that. Confident. Well, only when he needed to be. Sexy. Christ, that had been only once
that she said that.

Breathing in and out, he tried to find his centre, the one that was connected to her. She’d always been there, through all of the pain, grief, and pure anguish that had made up so much of his life. But she’d also been there in the soft and happy moments. Having Christmas again. Seeing her wonder at the world. Seeing her becoming a beautiful and strong person.

One whose body he missed extremely in that frustrated moment.

He couldn’t call now.

Instead, he texted. He stared at the picture of her and Benji from Christmas in the background for a long moment before he finally started typing. *Had a long day. I miss you. I love you. Talk to you tomorrow.*

He got an answer almost instantly. *I miss you too. Get some sleep. I love you.*

The words pulsed in his eyes.

Shaking his head, he put his phones to charge and decided to take a shower, hoping it would calm him down.

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Flipping the page of her textbook back and forth, Rey sighed. Kylo still hadn’t called. But he would. Sitting in her room all day studying and then having to sit even longer and be patient was not really working for her focus.

Bored, she rolled over and started the short walk down the hall. It was the quietest it had been all semester. Normally, she had to sleep with music to keep the sound of feet and voices from getting to her. The campus therapist had suggested moving off campus but that made her panic even more. She knew what that meant.

“Hi Rey,” Kaydel answered when she knocked on the open door. Kay always left her door ajar in the evenings until she went to sleep, just in case she wanted to drop by. It made her feel more at home, always having someone to talk to. “Kylo hasn’t called?”

She almost blushed, sitting on the floor by Kaydel’s bed. Her friend sat up, pushing her textbook aside. Her midterms were harder than hers had been. Rey knew she had one early tomorrow and really couldn’t sit there long. Her mid-term projects had mostly been submitting progress on her portfolios. Her art history mid-term was probably going to be the hardest one to focus on tomorrow morning. She spent a lot of time in that prof’s office hours and was getting nervous that she was taking up too much of her time.

“No, but he will. I think he’s still in Rhode Island, but he might be in Maine again.” She shrugged, sticking her hands in the pocket of her hoodie. It was one of Kylo’s, the black one that she usually slept in when it was cold at night.

Kaydel sighed. She took her hair out of her ponytail, letting it fall down to her shoulders. Shuffling, she slid off the edge of the bed to be beside her on the floor. “Is he still nervous about you going away with us on spring break?”
Some days, he wanted her to go. Other days, he didn’t want her to go. Whenever he’d have a hard interview, he’d fall back to the latter. Maybe she needed a real break, he’d say.

“He knows I’ll be safe with you and Rose.” She rested her head on her friend’s shoulder. “I know he had someone check on the security of the resort. He does things like that when he can’t sleep and it’s really weird. But how’s your studying going?”

Sometimes, she shot back to Grey’s old words about thinking about other people. She did care about other people. He had been unfair when he said that. He only wanted her to feel his pain. And now he didn’t have Kylo in his life. Good.

Kaydel’s smile was in her voice. “My stupid Irish lit class is killing me. I have to finish this paper or else I’m totally done for. And I know that the mid-term tomorrow will be brutal. I had the same prof last term and he picks the strangest things for essay questions. I feel like I’m studying blindly and won’t have a clue what to write about. I really, really hope I don’t have to have him next year. He’s horrible.”

“I think my art history teacher is going to hate me by the end of the term.” She swallowed. “Kylo said it would be okay. If she still smiles when she sees me, she doesn’t hate me.”

“Yeah, I get that. I don’t think this prof just hates me. He hates all of the students. It’s like, pick another job or something.” Kaydel shifted to stretch and Rey had to sit up. “Want to talk about Friday more? I can’t wait to get out of here.”

Her birthday was that weekend. They’d spend it on the beach in Mexico. Their flight left on Friday night and Rose would fly there on Saturday morning. She was looking forward to seeing her friend again; Christmas felt like a lifetime ago. They talked more about the trip, what they would do and it was mostly relax. They would share a room so it would be cheaper. It was nice to end her talk with Kaydel thinking about something completely different than school or how far away he was.

And she was already promising herself that she wouldn’t be moping around the entire time, just thinking about Kylo.

He texted late, well after she was back in her room. But she still felt like she could sleep. They were short words, but he was thinking about her too.

When he called at six a.m., she was already awake but could hear in his voice that he hadn’t slept. “Hey.”

“Hi,” she said, pouring the boiling kettle water into her teacup. It had been a gift from Christmas, one from Kylo. “Is something wrong?”

“I’m flying to Virginia today. We…I might have found something and we need to discuss it.” The dull sounds of the airport came to her ears when he was quiet. “I didn’t want to tell you and make you worried but then I…”

She sighed. “You stayed up all night feeling bad about it. Kylo, I’m not always going to understand some of the forensic stuff…”

“I think he’s taking kids too. I think he’s coming back and taking them.”

His voice was flat. She stared at her teacup. “What does that mean?”

Kylo exhaled. “George would have been angry with me if I kept looking at it all night through ViCAP, but I looked up newspaper articles instead. I still have database access through the
university and they don’t seem to care. I’ve already checked with Hux but…Rey, I’m sorry you had to teach him that game, but we really might need it one day.”

She didn’t even want to think about it. Never. No. “Kylo, you have to find him. We can’t let him be gone. We can’t let what happened to us happen to him. He’s so…”

“He’s so perfect.” She could hear Kylo bite his lip. “If this checks out, we need to find where he’s taking them. I’m not…I’m not that good at geographic profiles. It’s going to be a relief to be with Owen and George. They know what they’re doing.”

He was always angrier at himself when he hadn’t rested, spending most of the night staring at the ceiling or at the wall. “But it will still be you who put the pieces together, Kylo. Don’t think bad about yourself.”

Sitting down on her bed, she watched the steam rise from her teacup. Her midterm notes were out and she suddenly didn’t want to read through them again. But she couldn’t let herself be fully dragged into his world. “Kylo, should I cancel my trip? I don’t have to go.”

“No, Rey, maybe…” he exhaled. “It looks like a nice place. And it will…I’ll be busy at headquarters or somewhere else. It’s probably good that we didn’t make any real plans. I would have just had to leave you alone again. That would have hurt more. I’m boarding soon. I…” he paused, and she could imagine him closing his eyes and letting his head fall back. “I forgot to ask how midterms are going.”

“It’s been…okay. We’ll get the grades on our portfolios next week.” She ran her hands on her page of notes. “I have one in a couple of hours.”

He groaned to himself. “I should have waited to call.”

“It’s…it’s okay, I think. I’ll do what you tried to teach me. I’ll focus on the stuff I really know and read through the rest. It still sucks getting a bad grade but I do like learning. Most of the time.” She’d highlighted some parts, parts that she didn’t really feel like rereading suddenly. “You’re doing something so important and what I’m doing is…silly.”

“It’s not if it’s something you care about. You don’t always have to listen to my stupid opinions. I’m wrong all of the fucking time.” Kylo shifted his phone and she heard a distant call for boarding. “I need to go. But while you’re studying now, picture yourself already in the classroom that you’re going to write the exam in. Imagine you’re already writing the exam. You’ll be less nervous when you write it.”

“Can I imagine that you’re here with me?”

“I like thinking that you’re here with me too. So, yes.”

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There were too many marks on the map. The headache from the smell of the markers pressed on
him harder and he put the last two dots on it. He’d at least made it home to change into a fresh suit, have several cups of coffee, and then made it to the office. But not sleeping suddenly felt like the least of his problems.

“I really stopped believing in coincidences a long time ago,” Owen said, shifting to stand at his side. “How many match up exactly?”

Kylo glanced at George, then back to the board. “Eighteen.”

“Christ, that makes thirty-six.” Owen let his head fall back before grunting. “How were we missing this for so long?”

Kylo bit his lip, instantly angry at himself again. “I didn’t go deep enough into the background information about the neighbourhood. I only went five years forward or backward. I took it too personally and only saw the victims from when he was killed. It’s my fault. My reports weren’t…”

George lifted a hand and glared at him into stopping. “It might have been an oversight on your part, but we missed it too. None of the other cases were sent to us either so there are still problems with our local police liaisons and regional offices. Maybe they were never seen as kidnappings and didn’t fall into our purview. Not everyone goes snooping around in ViCAP and finds a pattern, Kylo. But now we have to move on from that fact and keep working with what we have.” Stepping back, the senior agent folded his arms across his chest. Kylo took a deep breath and stilled himself as George started speaking again. “He’s highly mobile with a great deal of means and motivation. Coming back years later tells us a lot about him: he’s mission-oriented with a revenge motivator. But he must have a base somewhere. We all know that there is a comfort zone somewhere for him that he might not have been active in yet, or maybe has been minimally active. We have some clusters here. It would be where he doesn’t want attention, trying to get us to look elsewhere. We’ve only been looking at the eastern seaboard so what I want us to work on today is looking for more of these overlapping cases. There’s a geographical profile here that will guide us to him. We are still profiling these as disappearances and possibly kidnappings, remember that again. We need to find where he might be taking them because we don’t have bodies. How does he transport them? How does he go unseen? Kylo, you looked through all of that regarding how they seemed to vanish without a trace. Don’t forget that. You went through and made sure that all of these cases didn’t have bodies. But if we look at behaviour, we know that we wouldn’t have found these traces of him if Kylo hadn’t made us think about this in a new way. Even if he is highly organized and revenge-oriented, there are mistakes that he’s made here somewhere. He hasn’t left us bodies. They have to be somewhere he feels the most safe.”

He exchanged a long look with Owen before they both nodded and went to their desks. He didn’t even feel the sun starting to go down as he kept making his phone calls, double checking things with Owen, and running to other floors or to George’s office to confirm other things. They also had a witness they would need to talk to again when they had their pieces put together. Another round of interviews, looking for people with fresher memories, would be less frustrating.

When they finally stood beside the board again, it was almost a relief to only find four more coincidental disappearances. And an even greater one that they didn’t extend beyond Pennsylvania.

But the only state that had only one case was the one that had started all of this; time seemed to move forward and backwards as he stared at the clean outline around his state: a little boy had vanished the next block over from their old apartment last year.

No wonder their interviews there led nowhere.

“George, can I say something without sounding paranoid?” he asked, staring at the map as he
stepped back.

But George already had his head in his hands. “If he’s making this about you, he’d want to take them to a place significant for you.”

Owen looked between them but shook his head. “We had that house destroyed. It’s been an empty lot for almost fifteen years. If I can be the devil’s advocate here, he couldn’t really be this… simplistic. After years of planning, it could be another diversion.”

Clearing his throat, George’s eyes fell on him and ignored the other man for a moment. The long and sorrowful look made him take a deep breath. That house was where he’d been taken into hell. It might have been in ruins but the nightmares still came to him. No matter how far away from it he got, no matter how many people he’d helped and loved, it was still the place where he started losing so much of his life to terror.

And that’s also where George had been two weeks too late to find them.

“I don’t think so. We should have been looking there all along.” The older man seemed to be reading his thoughts because his head fell before he spoke again. “But I think we should at least stop at your parents’ for dinner before we start hunting another monster.”

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Stretching out on her towel, Rey looked over at Kaydel and smiled. “I’ve never taken a vacation with just friends before.”

They woke up late and ate birthday cake they ordered from room service. She almost never used her money to treat herself but she was gradually feeling the same power that Kylo must feel every time he could just fix something for his friends. Now, she could do the same for hers. She turned down champagne but didn’t say no to her friends splitting a small bottle.

Kaydel lifted her sunglasses and sat up. “I’ve only been on road trips but we never stayed anywhere overnight. It’s mostly just fun to drive and listen to music. We’re so tired by the time we get back.”

Beside the pool, she thought about her previous vacations. And realized she had lied. “I guess I’m not counting the camping trip with Finn.” She didn’t think that the trip up to Luke’s could be a vacation, even if it was just her and Kylo driving for days. All of the trips with just Kylo were different.

Kaydel sat up and glanced at Rose. “I thought we weren’t talking about boys. At least, during the day. And I don’t like even thinking about him at all.”

Shaking her head, Rose nodded. “But he did try to apologize, Kay. He used to be our friend for a long time. It just hurts when a friend does something like that and kind of…ruins everything. We used to have fun together. But, I mean, even if he tried to apologize that never should have happened.”

Rey felt her face flush and sat up too, thankful for her own sunglasses. Kylo had called early that morning, saying that they might have found something crucial to the case. And it was back in Connecticut. It made her heart hurt when he explained that they were back looking around the area
of the first town, the first house he’d been taken to. Even though she told Benji the story about him being brave, he had been so afraid. Almost twenty-two years hadn’t erased many of those ingrained dreads and haunting memories. He’d also forgotten his own birthday when he’d called and had apologized when she reminded him, promising that they’d celebrate when she got back. But she should still enjoy her day and know that he missed her very much and hoped she was having a good time.

And it was good. They were all together. The texts and calls from home also reminded her of all the people who cared about her. The one from Paige and Hux brought a jolt of anxiety about what Kylo had found. But if he was close by, he could protect them.

The one she didn’t want had been a text from Grey, complete with its careless misspellings. She’d forgotten to delete his number and instantly and angrily blocked and deleted it. He couldn’t get to Kylo so he was trying to reach out to her.

The rule about not talking about boys extended to him.

But the hope of being able to see Kylo the moment she was back made it easier to relax and talk to her friends. She was with her favourite people from high school, from childhood.

She fixed her bikini strap and spotted a lingering scar on her elbow. It was so faded, like the ones on her legs and stomach, that she was probably the only one who could see it. The worst of Kylo’s scars had also shifted and vanished beyond regular sight. The one on his thigh and the one on his collarbone still stood out. His wrists had even turned into pale white lines that he almost didn’t have to hide anymore. She had the same hope for his face, but that one might remain for far longer. She couldn’t fix every part of him, just his heart.

How was it almost fifteen years ago that they escaped? In the depths of her nightmares, the ones from the hardest nights, she could still smell it: the dank, bitter, and moist odour of death and filth. The shapes had changed: Snoke’s face had morphed into a ghostly figure that still emitted pure terror even if it was just a blur. She couldn’t hear the words anymore: only some of the screams remained as distant echoes of hurt. But the stench of that house could still hit her at night when she was alone, clutching a quilt that smelt like her lilac skin scream. The memory overwhelmed the gentle notes and she thought for a second before her eyes opened that she’d wake up there instead. She’d sometimes go down the hall and curl up next to Kaydel, who would sleepily hug her until she fell asleep again. Other times, she’d text Zorii or Brianna. She’d sometimes text her friends from class. August never seemed to sleep and would reply instantly. Getting to know him had been a relief. He’d leaned over in class one day and asked if she had the right sketching pencil. He gestured to his and it was almost worn down to a nub and was broken beyond the repair that a sharpener could do. She loaned the pencil to him after taking a giant leap of trust; she honestly didn’t expect to get it back. When he handed it back when they were dismissed, all sent running in different directions to other parts of campus, he thanked her. He was gentle with soft blond hair and glasses and could talk about everything, well, everything except the deeper personal things she couldn’t let out into the world yet. Her other friends Deni and Johanna were from the dorm. They’d been playing charades one evening and she’d stopped at smiled at them until they spotted her and asked if she wanted to join. They were in the theatre programme and were excited to know she used to dance.

The world had really blossomed beyond the terror of Snoke’s house.

But Kylo was still chasing after it.

“I think…I think Finn thought I was stronger than I really was. Or that I was better than I was.” She bit her lip, trying to think about something other than Kylo searching for something he might never
find: an answer. “I talk to my therapist and to Han and Leia. And to Kylo. I didn’t lead him on. I said no. It took me a long time not to blame myself but part of that started when I talked to him. I was afraid then. I was also, like, worried about making him upset. But I hope he’s okay now. And he found someone who was more ready than I was.”

The part she always left out was Kylo holding her in the bathtub, feeling her body in a healing rather than intimate way. In her darker moods, the ones that meant she couldn’t go to class and spent most of the day on the phone to Leia, she thought about what would have happened if he hadn’t been there. They may not have spent every day of their lives together, but Kylo was there when it really mattered. He saved her. And every day that she loved him, she kept saving him from himself. She was the one that got him away from Grey and his murky intentions.

“I don’t really talk to him,” Kaydel said. “Rose?”

Sighing, Rose swallowed. “We text sometimes. I’m still mad about what he did to Rey. I really am. But like maybe once every other month, he’ll send me some joke. I just say thanks and don’t really say anything else. He hurt you, Rey, so I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay.” Rey tried to smile. “It was almost four years ago. And he has apologized. People can grow up and change a lot in four years.”

“I hope we’re still friends in four years.” Kaydel was frowning, looking at the pool and the glistening blue ripples from the breeze and the splashing from swimmers on the other end. “We’re never going to live in the same city again and that’s weird to me.”

It was on Rey’s mind too. She was almost done her first semester. That meant only three more semesters until she could try to find a job in Virginia. She’d be twenty then. And Kylo would be thirty.

She sometimes thought about asking about her real birthday. Maybe she was older than this. But it had been her birthday for so long that it might undo some of the connections that she had with her family. For all she knew, her grandfather was long dead. He’d never wanted her. She had to keep telling herself that when she dwelled on her parents. She still wanted to go to California again and put flowers on her parents’ graves. It wasn’t their fault that Snoke hurt them too.

Maybe it was because Kylo was going back to the start that she was thinking about this more. She needed to shift her thinking. “We might. Kylo might take a different placement when George retires. By then, he might be able to choose where he goes.”

Rose looked at Kaydel and then gave her a small smile. “It’s worth thinking about. When we’re real adults like he is. I want to go swimming now. It hurts sometimes to think about the future and I want to forget about it for a while.”

Rey had to agree, following her friends into the water. The past hurt just as much.

There were other families and some other young people in the pool. They’d picked the resort because it wasn’t really popular for spring break and they wouldn’t be overwhelmed. Their other friends had made other choices. Maybe next break she could go skiing too, like some of them did. It had been too long since she’d been skiing but remembered liking it.

That was another time when Kylo had been away, working with George at the FBI.

God, she thought to herself, surfacing in the water to smooth her hair. She’d come there not to think about all of this. If the case was moving forward, he was almost close to being done with it. His
calls would be exhausting but for another reason. Because maybe this all was going to lead nowhere.

They messed around in the pool, mostly laughing and cooling off until they needed more sun. They ate lunch and made plans for the afternoon.

There had been better birthdays but by the time they sat down for dinner, she was more comfortable with where she was in the world. She was with her friends. She got to see another country.

And Kylo was going to be home when she got back.

=-=

He’d never been back to that town since he left there with Snoke so many years ago, threatened with death if he ran before he fell asleep and woke up somewhere new.

“Do you think people still remember us here?” he asked, aimlessly staring out the window.

The meeting at the police station had stirred up the emotion. Even when he introduced himself, no one gave him a second look. He was used to everyday people not remembering his name, but some of the people there looked old enough to remember him. George even recognized some of them. He was just a face in the crowd, like he’d always wanted to be. And suddenly, it didn’t sit right.

“Maybe some of them remember the events,” George answered. “But the names of victims and survivors are often forgotten.”

Owen sighed from the backseat. “We’re also guilty of that. It’s easier to label cases connected to the perpetrator rather than those who suffered. It’s not just the media.”

Glancing at the GPS, Kylo shook his head. “I also chose not to speak out. I thought I would forget if everyone else just forgot about me.”

“It’s not too late. There’s still space for your voice and Rey’s when it comes to helping survivors.” George looked over for a second as they pulled up to their first address. It was an abandoned house in a run-down neighbourhood. That’s what they were looking for, or were at least starting with.

He had to hide them somewhere.

His mind went instantly to other basements filled with bodies and had to stop and refocus several times.

Because the day stretched on. And they moved down their list with no results.

They were already talking about moving to the next town when they stopped for lunch. Start from the centre and move outward. It would take more time but Tekka had bought their theory. For now.

Two more houses were left by the time evening was setting in.

Looking around the neighbourhood of the second-to-last house, his mind clicked into place. “The lots are bigger here.”
“Screams carry far,” Owen said, starting up the path. “But this and the next one have a cellar. It… fits.”

Few of the other houses had cars. There were no neighbours snooping on porches. Seeing this sort of poverty made his eyes narrow at the house. Someone had tried to renovate it but had left it incomplete. It would have drawn him in, looking for the perfect killing ground, close enough to the empty grass lot across town to get his point across.

He was stuck in place until George touched his elbow. “I also have a bad feeling about this. We need to look for entrances and exits. We’ll take the back.”

Separating and taking opposite sides of the house, they traced the perimeter. The fence was broken and in disrepair. The grass hadn’t been cut and the bylaw officers didn’t care because the owners couldn’t be found. There were several old notices stapled to the front door, Owen had called to them.

He met George on the other side and locked eyes with him after spotting the broken lock on the backdoor.

It only took a quick hand motion from his supervisor to draw his weapon in time with him.

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They ate dinner on the roof. And she wore a new orange dress, waiting for the sun to set so she could match it. Her skin would be perfectly tanned by the end of the week. Her freckles were already standing out more than her scars.

“We’re treating you to dinner, Rey,” Rose said, distracting her from staring out beyond the pool. “It’s your birthday.”

She was about to argue but sighed instead. “You can put it on the room too but…I think I’d like that.”

Kaydel was the only one drinking at the table and her and Rose locked eyes when she ordered a fruity, slushy drink when they sat down. They both quietly promised to watch out for their friend.

“We can pay for some of this.” Kaydel took a long sip from her drink. “Plus, I feel bad if I’m the only one ordering alcohol.”

“Yeah,” Rey started. “Yeah, you should probably pay for that yourself.”

They ordered from the waiter who Kaydel instantly started swooning over, smiling brightly at him and asking too many questions about random menu items. He wasn’t bad looking but wasn’t Kylo.

There hadn’t been any boys at school who reminded her of him. Even when he was younger, less filled out, the intensity in his eyes and how he moved always set him apart. When her attraction to him hit her hard in the chest, she saw other things she liked about him. As she was eating her appetizer, the memory of having him in her mouth hit her and she blushed hard and had to put her fork down to sip her water. The next time they were alone, she hoped Kylo would have the same pride in himself he had that afternoon. She had thought about trying again several times. It made her warm remembering being close to him, feeling that he wanted her. She was quietly thankful for
“Hey, Rey? Is it not good?” Rose’s voice broke her thoughts and she flushed, deeply.

“I was just…thinking about Kylo.” She swallowed and started eating her ceviche again. “And this is good. It’s spicy.”

“So’s Kylo.” Kaydel added. Her drink was empty and her ears were already pink.

Rose rolled her eyes. “You’re not allowed to have another one if you keep saying stuff like that.”

“Rose! Please. You’ve seen him.” She quirked her head and rolled her eyes. “Okay. I guess. It’s fine.”

Looking at her from across the table, Rose gave Rey a small smile. “You have a very good-looking boyfriend, Rey. And now that he’s ditched that weirdo friend of his, he’s finally treating you right.”

Rey guessed it was time for some confessions. “Grey actually texted me happy birthday. It was still so creepy. I trust Kylo and know he isn’t talking to him but it was still…weird.”

“ Weird and gross,” Rose answered. “If my boyfriend…”

Kaydel’s head snapped in her direction. “So he is your boyfriend now?”

Rose’s face went red and she looked at Rey for help.

“They’re still just friends, Kay.” Rey nudged her under the table. “And now I am so telling Kylo that you called him spicy.”

It was Kaydel’s turn to blush. “Oh God, please don’t. He’d never look at me again.”

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After announcing themselves, it only took breaking in the door for the smell to hit them. Even as the daylight was fading outside and the darkness swept over them inside, there was no escaping what was inside.

Across the house, they heard Owen make entry too.

They still needed to clear the rooms before they could find the source that was instantly clawing at Kylo’s nose and memories. Being pushed down into the basement. Being beaten if he didn’t. He kept his stance solid and called out clear with every room. He heard the same from the two other voices in the house.

“I have the basement door.” He stopped moving, staring at the broken hinges. “Do we go in?”

He never stopped thinking it was strange to see the other two men in a ready stance, George especially.

The house was silent. But there still could be danger downstairs.
But that’s also where the smell was coming from.

He was fourteen again, looking at another basement door. He was about to walk down there for the last time with only the smallest hope of coming up again.

Snoke’s hand in his hair, forcing him down.

Snoke’s hateful fingers scratching his skin before he slashed him with a blade.

Another dying child begging him for help as he bled out on the dirt floor.

The death smell had faded in his mind but this house brought it roaring back.

“We do an initial sweep. We confirm it’s clear. And then this entire house is forensic. But we need…” George’s voice dropped. “We need one body.”

His tone betrayed that he hoped there would be only one.

“Kylo, I’ll take it.” Owen nudged by him and he realized he’d been standing there with his feet refusing to move for too long.

One at a time. Keep watching the exits.

He shook his head briefly, telling George he didn’t want to go down there at that moment. He could watch their backs.

Flashlights lit up the staircase and he was left there, caught between two times. If he didn’t get it together, this would be it. Snoke had already ruined so much for him but he wasn’t taking his career from him.

“Is it still clear?” Owen’s voice called.

He swept the rooms. Nothing. Not a sound. The only good thing about feeling fourteen again was that he could focus on the smallest noises. No one had been here in weeks. There were no cars pulling up outside.

“Yes!” he shouted. “It’s too quiet down there. What did you find?”

Feet on the stairs and then Owen’s flashlight hit his face. “Take a deep breath before you come down there. We’ve...” He swallowed, wiping at his nose. “We’ve found them. And something else.”

Owen’s weapon was holstered and he followed suit, taking his small flashlight out of his pocket in the same motion. His ears would still be on the top of the staircase, even as he moved into the darkness. He didn’t want to tell them that he was slowly slipping into numbness about the stench from the basement. His stomach was rock hard by the time he stood next to George on the edge of the final step.

“We can’t disturb it,” George said. “But I can count at least fourteen unburied. They’re the children. We need to...excavate to find the others.”

He shone his own flashlight on the ground and felt his blood rush and stomach twist at the scene. It rocked him back again, back to how it used to look back there. He didn’t know how many drugs he would need to take that night to sleep but it would almost be too many.

Most were skeletal, almost mummified from warm summers and cold winters. But he could count
the forms. All of them were so small, just tiny bodies stolen from loving homes and parents.

Sometimes shiny in the centre caught his eye as he continued scanning the floor.

“George…”

“I know. I saw it too. We have…we have a long night of phone calls ahead of us. Especially about how it got here.”

In the centre of the killing floor, was the old typewriter from Snoke’s.

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Kylo called after midnight, but they were still awake, watching an old black and white movie that Rose loved. Kaydel was mostly asleep, only half watching from the bed. They let her have one more drink with dessert and she insisted on having a double. Now, she was definitely regretting it.

“Rey, I…” She could already hear that he was smoking and swallowed hard before he spoke again. “We found them.”

“What do you mean?” She sat up and moved into the washroom. Just hearing his tone and knowing that he was stressed enough to give into a cigarette meant that this wasn’t a light conversation she could have around her friend. “Were they…”

“No.” He cut her off and exhaled. “We’re here and it’s…it’s a mess, Rey. We have the locals starting the forensics but everyone else will be here in the morning. Rey, I couldn’t save them but I found them.”

He was outside. She could almost picture what he was looking at. Distant memories of a broken-down house flashed in her mind. “What…what happens next?”

He covered the phone but she could still hear him giving directions to someone in the background. It could have been anyone. “Sorry. I can’t say much more I just…this has been hard for me. I keep thinking about you and Benji and Poe and Snoke and I needed…I needed to hear your voice. Are you okay? Are you thinking about me?”

The sharp voice that had come before faded into pleading.

“T’m thinking about you and loving you, Kylo. In my head, I’m giving you a big hug. You can do this Kylo. I’m safe with my friends. We have the security lock on. We see the hotel guards patrolling the grounds. We’re safe here. Do your job.” She kept her voice strong even though she wanted to cry for him. He had Owen and George. He would be okay. She’d wrap her arms around him again when she saw him and take away all of this hurt. “I love you.”

“I love you too. Bye.”

He hung up before she could answer. Staring at her phone, she felt her lip start to tremble.

She had her friends. They’d understand if something like this, something so wretched and unthinkable, would ruin a bit of their trip.
He’d almost broken down to Rey on the phone. That couldn’t happen again. Snuffing out his cigarette, he turned from his hiding spot behind the car.

They really need the Bureau there. And it wouldn’t be until dawn that they got support.

The locals had the perimeter up and were doing the initial set up. This wasn’t his expertise but he wanted to go back down there and confirm it was the same typewriter. It had to be. Even from a distance, he’d spotted the worn keys. And he felt every strike, burn, and cut when he looked on it. Old, dead words about being worthless, useless, damaged, and broken rose from their grave in his mind. The sensation of being knocked unconscious with the machine came rushing back.

But he’d shown none of that when they came upstairs and split the phone calls amongst them.

He saved all of those feelings until he heard Rey’s voice. And then, they all overwhelmed him.

Now, he had to get back the strange serenity of being right in the face of something so wrong again.

George was clicking off his phone when he stepped beside him. “Good news?”

The older man eyed him for a moment and shook his head. “It’s missing from evidence in California. I wanted all of that transferred to us but we conceded on some things. Phasma is looking into it. She says hello and was surprised to see you in the field.”

He snorted, trying to find a normal way to speak that wouldn’t betray how he was slowly crumbling inside. “I don’t think she ever liked me. I ruin one press conference and I’m a lost cause.”

George’s eyes will still sharp. “I want you to keep up this act until we call it a night. It will be soon but don’t let any of the locals see how this is hitting you. This was your case and we never would have found this without you. Keep that in mind. This is now. That was then.”

Swallowing, he nodded.

By the time they got to the hotel it 4 a.m. and he allowed himself to break down in the shower before getting two hours of sleep.

And then it was getting back out there, leaving his emotions on the worn tiles of the washroom.

“He probably won’t call today,” Rey said, sighing on the phone. “Has he called you?”

Leia sighed. “He left a message on my phone around four. I don’t know why I didn’t hear it. He had that…you know how he sounds when he’s about to lose his mind at the beginning but then finds it by the end. It’s on the news here now. Honey, I don’t know if you should watch this. But he looked better when we saw him. George spoke and Ben just stood there. But he looked like he had it together.”
That part let her let go of some of her worries. “Okay, I…if he calls, tell him I love him. We’re…we’re going on a hiking tour. There’s a waterfall not far from here that’s supposed to be beautiful. I think I need…I think I want to look at that more than the news.”

“That’s probably a good idea.” Leia was nodding. “We’re thinking about you too, Rey. We’re thinking about driving down but he probably wouldn’t like that.”

Rey found a small reason to smile. “No, mom. I think he’d hate it.”

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Frowning at the evidence pictures they were scrolling through on the projector, Kylo took a long sip of coffee. He’d forced himself to eat breakfast and lunch. Both had been quick things to eat so he didn’t have a long time to think about it. “I wish I didn’t understand why he has a mixture of victim types.”

“He put a nice bow on it by including the typewriter.” Owen leaned back and exhaled. “George, what did Tekka say when we sent him the initial findings?”

Rolling his head to crack his neck, the older agent sucked in a breath. “I had a longer argument with the field office than him this morning. They wanted to take it even though they were the ones who didn’t do enough fifteen years ago to stop something like this. I got it upgraded but that only means we get more support in these stages. Thanks to Kylo, we have their names.”

*Thanks to me, they’re also dead*, he wanted to add. But he just sipped his coffee again. “Anything more about the typewriter?”

That got him a look from Owen. He shouldn’t be fixating on it. Even if he looked relaxed, he was giving away too many tells by asking about it again.

George saw it too but nodded. But he rubbed his beard before speaking, making him sit up. “Kylo, this is the point where we need to discuss you staying on this case. This ubsub appears, remember that *appears*, to be targeting people who also *appear* to be proxies or at least…practice for those close to you. We don’t have a full excavation yet and we won’t have dental until it’s sent back. But if all of these things fall into place, combined with the typewriter, you might not be able to continue working this.”

Blinking, he stared at him. “Wouldn’t that make me more suited to work it? I’m sorry, George, but I started this by being alive. For some reason, me being alive got all of these men and boys murdered. I figured out the pattern. I got us here. They can’t take this away from me.” He swallowed hard when he was finished speaking, realizing that his face felt hot and he dropped his shoulders. “I…”

“Kylo, we know,” it was Owen he spoke. “But right now we’re going off of appearances and perceptions. The typewriter points to you. The victims point to you. The location also points to you. But you need to be able to step back and take this in as a *different* case. If you can’t do that, then you won’t be able to keep on it. That’s what we’re saying.”

He glanced from him back to George. The older man’s face was firm but his eyes told him just about the same. “I need to…stop thinking about myself and Poe as the centre.”
That’s all he’d done for too many years. So it would be hard to do. But the pictures were boxed up. He had found another person to fill his heart. He could do this. *You got this, Ky.*

“He may be a victim in this. But you got us this far. And I will fight to keep you on this from beginning to end.” George spoke directly to him and he sat up straighter at the words. “But you need to be able to step up and not lose it at any turn, at *any* turn Kylo, when we’re in the field. We all have tears and pain when we’re alone and we’ll all need to talk to Maz when this is over, but when we’re out there, our minds are on the victims. And finding our killer.”

Kylo could only nod. “I promise, George. This is…I’ve spoken to too many families not to treat this seriously.”

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Day at the site slipped into evening. Evening was nudging towards night. They were tired but Kylo had kept his promise to be focused.

Except for thinking about Rey, hoping she hadn’t seen how the news was framing the case. Over forty bodies. *Forty.*

George nodded to both him and Owen, then sighed. “We’ve done enough for tonight. Kylo, have you heard from Rey?”

He had texted her a half an hour ago, but had been busy with his other phone. Checking it, she hadn’t answered. She was probably by the pool or sitting with her friends in her room. He quietly envied her and at the same time didn’t. They couldn’t take this to headquarters for a few weeks. He wasn’t going to let her go when he held her again. He shook his head and met George’s eyes again. Gesturing at the picture of the typewriter on the table, he started down another line of thought. “I was thinking of…”

Instead of getting to complete what he was saying, his phone started ringing. His personal phone. But instead of her number, it was a foreign one. His eyes went wide as he moved to answer. “I…”

He got his head together. “I might need a trace. How quick can we get that on my personal line?”

Owen was already standing from the table as he answered, raising his hand and quickly dialling a familiar number.

Breathing in, Kylo hoped he could keep whoever was on the line there long enough to get what they needed. “Hello?”

“Kylo, you need to get here right now.” It was Rose’s panicked voice and he stood wide-eyed for another reason. “Someone attacked Rey and we’re at the hospital and nobody speaks English…”

“Which hospital?” He cut her off, standing and locking eyes with George. “Rose, I will get on a plane right away. Just tell me what happened and where you are. But take a deep breath. Keep taking deep breaths. You’re okay. Rey is going to be okay. You have to tell me what happened and you’ll feel better, okay? What did you see?”

He had to level his pounding heart. He had been forced to fight to keep his voice level.

Rose slowly breathed in and out and then started speaking.
The hike had ended with so many beautiful pictures. Sitting in the room after dinner, she watched her friends put up some of them online. Only the back of her head could be in most of them and she went annoyed again about where she’d come from. How could anyone recognize her now, really? No one even knew her name. August had asked about her social media and she had to admit that she didn’t have it. It felt stupid.

“I’m going to take a walk,” she said, standing and fixing her skirt. “I’m still worried about Kylo and I need to think.”

Rose lifted her head from her phone and reached for her hand. “Rey, I’m sorry…”

Rey managed to smile even as she squeezed her friend’s hand. “It’s okay, Rose. I’m just hoping he’ll call soon. I haven’t looked at the news but mom tells me that it’s really bad. I’m…I just want to talk to him.”

She grabbed her sweater and her key card and waved at her friends before leaving the room. Taking the long walk down to the pool gave her the chance to breathe. The pool had lights but was closed at night. She spotted two security guards eyeing her as she walked down to sit beside it on a vacant pool chair. If they asked her about it, she’d say she wasn’t drunk and wasn’t doing anything. She was just enjoying the night air. They disappeared and she was able to relax by herself.

Pulling her legs up under her chin, she shook her head. More people had died because someone hated Kylo. He had hated Kylo enough to kill the first love of his life. He had hated him enough to kill other people who had just looked like him. And now, he was taking kids. That meant Benji might be hurt. Her stomach knotted at all of the games they’d played with him. Teaching him how to hide and be silent. Teaching him how to blink when he couldn’t speak. Kylo had almost known this was coming. He’d always prepared her too, to watch other people. To be able to run when she needed to.

Was Kylo paranoid? People would say that all of the time. But he had been right. Getting that letter wasn’t an accident and he hadn’t sent it. At least here, she was out of the country and safe.

But maybe being close to him was dangerous.

She put her head down and shuddered a sob. How could someone hate someone else so much that they would kill other people because of it? Why did Snoke like raping, molesting, and murdering children? Why didn’t any of these sick people make sense? Her friends upstairs understood what she had went through but they hadn’t felt it all. They hadn’t had a vicious old man between their legs shoving their tongue inside of them, leaving bite marks and bruises in his wake and internal scars that kept her from being closer to the man she loved.

Laughter and music from the restaurant on the low roof made her look up and sigh. The world had to keep turning. Kylo was so close to finding out who killed Poe. Once he had that answer, now that Grey was gone and Liza was a distant memory, Kylo’s heart would be clearer. More of the pain could gone.

Sighing, she looked at the pool again. People always had other lives to live. Kylo was keeping them safe.
And she loved him.

She was in the middle of a sigh when her hair was yanked back hard, slamming against the deck chair, knocking the breath from her lungs.

The vicious hand held hard as she struggled and tried to escape, swinging out her arms to strike back at him.

Scream. The first thing she had to do was scream.

But her throat couldn’t make a noise. Panic rained down on her as she tried to make herself move, to keep fighting back.

It happened quickly. That’s what she knew.

He dropped her hard onto the hard patio, scratching her bare knees. The double stroke of pain finally knocked her into screaming.

The shrill shouts left her mouth as he dragged her towards the pool, hands tearing into her hair.

No.

No!

She planted her feet and kicked at the man. He had to be a man. He was too strong. She turned her head and finally saw him. He was only in black and she couldn’t see his eyes. He didn’t say anything and just pulled at her hair until she felt some of it rip out. It made her cries even louder. She tried to scratch and punch at him, fighting with every ounce of strength in her body.

But he was just so much stronger.

He kicked out her legs and forced her head down under the water. She knew it was coming. She’d managed to suck in a breath before he submerged her.

But he pulled her up again and she called out again. “Help!”

She didn’t get a chance to take in another breath before the man in black gripped at her hair and drove her face into the water again. She desperately tried to hold her breath, fighting hard to knock him away with her hands. She had to survive. She had to get through his. Kylo, Kylo, Kylo.

Suddenly she was let go and shoved into the pool entirely.

Her head was light. Her lungs were heavy. Her scalp ached.

She wasn’t even floating. She was sinking.

She tasted chlorine as her breath gave out.

It could all be over. It could all just end. All of the indecision about the future. All of the arguments and never being able to make love to the man she adored. Never having to deal with the failure that was only ahead of her when it came to school.

Let it all just go away.

Maybe Kylo never should have saved her.
A splash and someone was in the water with her, reaching for her. Maybe it was him again, coming to kill her.

But the body lifted her to the surface so she could breathe.


And before she passed out, she swore she heard Kaydel and Rose screaming for her.

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He didn’t even think about how it was the first time he’d been on the private jet.

He didn’t even think about how he’d broken a water glass during the flight and somehow had the words to apologize.

His thoughts were too twisted to make sense of. They’d found the site but they were being watched somehow. There might be evidence there that went beyond Rey. Even if he had seen the panic in George’s eyes when he told him to go he knew that he had to find a way to be clear headed when he got there.

Get to the scene, talk to the victim, trace the evidence.

Fine, fine, and fine.

Being sent alone meant he needed to do all of this himself.

He sent a quiet dose of love out to Rey and then Poe when he landed.

If he didn’t know fucking Spanish all of this would have been fucking impossible.

He didn’t know where some of the vocabulary came from when the national police met him at the airport. Was this connected to a case? Yes. He didn’t have the evidence for that but he would find it. He could bluff as much as he needed to.

He just needed to get to her. But he couldn’t be short with them. So what if his r’s never rolled correctly. He felt himself leave his body and watched himself being driven to the hospital as he asked good questions. Whatever George had done for him when he was in the air, it was another drop in the endless bucket of what he owed him.

By the time he got to the hospital, he knew that he had to put on another face when he saw Rey and her friends. The one he wore around the cops was distant. But having to repeat again that he wasn’t there about drugs had probably brought that out.

It was hard not to feel his heart splitting in two as he kept talking to everyone around him. Nurses, doctors, cops…His mind was on Rey but if it hadn’t been nights of sweet and soft conversations about anything and everything, watching bad movies or listening to the radio and repeating what was said until it was perfect, he wouldn’t be there. That innocent and sweet moment of asking him to teach him when he was sixteen and they were brushing their teeth…

He turned the sadness into sharp eyes until he finally saw two familiar faces in a crowded waiting room.
It actually surprised him when they both hugged him.

“Kylo, you came!” It was almost morning. But he was there and looking at Rose and the blonde girl. Kacey? Kendall? Kaydel. That was it.

“It will be okay, girls.” He took a deep breath and accepted them being close to him. “I’ve spoken to the doctor. We have the plane waiting. I can take you home now and I think we need to go.”

Both of them clung to him for another long, uncomfortable moment. Rose finally spoke up. “Kylo, it was so scary. We just want to go home.”

He gently, as gently as he could, he stepped back from them. “I’ll need to ask you more questions later, about what you saw. I just want to get to Rey. I’ve already fixed things with the travel insurance and if I’ve forgotten anything, I’ll take care of it.”

And then someone finally came by and said they could see her.

He almost forgot about the other girls and all of the questions that he had. If his heart could stop beating so fast, he might feel somewhat more on his feet.

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Rey had cried in his arms the entire ride back to the hotel. And even though he didn’t want to let her go, he had to.

He had to speak with the front desk before he went up with them to the room. It was almost afternoon. Fuck how long the fucking flight took. Fuck how long Rey and the girls had spent alone and waiting for him.

The few calls to George he’d made had mostly been saying that Rey was okay. And he wouldn’t know more until he got to the resort. Until he talked to the guards and saw the footage.

There was an investigation here. Turning from the desk, he took a deep breath and looked at the three teenagers again and softened his look.

“You’re all safe now, I’m here,” he said, focusing mostly on Rey. “We need to go get your things and you can go home.”

Rey looked at her friends and then blinked at him, You have to come with me. Kylo, I thought I was going to die.

She’d said that the entire time. He had to be more like George in that moment than he wanted to be: emotional but also serious. He couldn’t lie to her. Angel, if he was here, I need to find the evidence. Mom and dad will be waiting for you. I love you so much but I can’t let him hurt you again. I have to find him.

Her eyes glistened. I love you too. Please don’t let him hurt me again.

He had his arm around Rey, leading the rest of the girls back to their room. They were going home. There was no question about it now. His mind was in so many places that it was hard to put himself into where he should be. So he focused on how Rey had her head against him as they walked. He
kissed her forehead. They’d taken her clothes at the hospital and it had made him rage even if it was procedure. She was wearing a loaned sweatshirt and shorts but no underwear. Another strike to his heart.

But his eyes had been forward even as the thoughts churned as he brought his small group of broken but tanned girls up to the next floor.

And he stopped.

The door to their room was open. They couldn’t see it; the girls just kept taking sad steps forward and he had to let go of Rey to stop them, his arms shooting out. When they looked at him with confusion, he had to bring a finger to his lips and gesture to the slightly ajar door. It was just the shadow that gave away how the door was just the slightest bit off.

He stepped back.

He had to get them behind him. They had to go.

Turning, he reached for Rey’s hand. Rey? Angel? Don’t go far. Go down the hall, three doors down. I need to go in there. I love you.

Kylo. She looked up, glancing first at the door then back to him. Tears were shaken loose as she looked at him. Okay.

Quietly, she reached for her friends’ hands.

He heard their feet, their sandals, but tried to focus on taking out his weapon and keeping his eyes on the door. Look for the exits. Look for corners. Look for anywhere anyone might come from. The other rooms. Down the hall. Where they were. He glanced at the three girls, seeing them crouch down. Even in the brightly lit and decorated hallway, all he could see was danger despite the quiet hall in the middle of the day. There was distant music from the outdoor patio, from partying people. Others who had no idea what was going on in there.

Steadying his hand, he took the safety off and stepped against the wall, pressing his back to it.

It was like in training. Check the angles. Stay focused. Listen for movement. And then go in.

He fully expected to be shot when he kicked the door fully open.

Instead, the room was empty. He let himself have a heartbeat of relief before he checked the washroom, the closet, and the other corners of the room. The windows were secure. Their bags hadn’t been touched.

Licking his lips, he set the safety back on and holstered his weapon.

He was about to leave, to call to them when something caught his eye.

He recognized Rey’s suitcase beside one of the beds.

But what was on the bed brought a deeper, harsher rush through him. His stomach tightened and he exhaled sharply.

There it was.

The stolen journal. The one stolen from him when he died. The one that had been hatefully photocopied and sent to Rey all of those years ago. The one that held old memories that he didn’t
know how to deal with anymore.

The motion of his hand made him want to cry and vomit at the same time as memories pounded through his head of the last time he saw the book, the last time he looked at it.

Simple mornings of kisses and I love yous shook through him. First times and soft words slowly faded into a slit throat and a wave of blood.

Breathe.

He had the breathe.

Gloves.

He had gloves.

Pictures. He had to take pictures.

What was the order for evidence? Who should he call? He knew this. Why was he forgetting it when he needed it the most?

Pulling out his phone, he took pictures of the entire room as it was. He could hear his own breathing and finally accepted that he couldn’t do this on his own. He needed to leave. He needed to call George and get help. He’d been in the room. There could be forensic evidence that he was disturbing by being there.

But he had to know.

Stepped forward, with one gloved hand, he opened the cover.

His ring was there. The one from that innocent evening eight years ago.

Closing it, he had to step back and leave the room.

He clenched his jaw and was in the hall again, taking deep and long breaths that didn’t feel quite full.

He’d taken him. He had tried to take her too.

Smoothing his hair, he locked eyes with Rey and was beside her before he could really think again. Pulling her into his arms, he was finally able to really feel his lungs again.

As Owen had said, there were no coincidences anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Violence, mentions of past rape and past violence, descriptions of death, and Grey does some gaslighting.
Thanks again for all of your comments. I know that this chapter isn't exactly perfect but from your comments, I can build on some of the weaknesses or questionable things here. I also have no experience in forensics or investigative psychology or crime scene procedure or how you get an international investigation approved (I'm not even American so the FBI feels almost like a fictional organization to me). I just watch VHS version of Silence on the Lambs on repeat because it's stuck in the VCR.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 56

Chapter Summary

Kylo returns to Virginia but finds that he can't keep his mind on the case. When he goes to Rey, their relationship takes another turn.

Read the tags for warnings!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kylo clicked on the video again, watching the black-clad figure emerge out of the darkness and pause for a moment, his hand hovering just above Rey’s head as she folded her legs up under her chin to cry. He almost touched her, his fingers almost brushing her hair. Kylo could put himself into that moment in both places. He could feel himself looking at the pool and thinking about how different life should be if he was normal, finding himself knowing exactly how Rey felt in that moment. In his other mind, the version of himself that stalked his nightmares, he was the one reaching out and breathing in the rush of being so close to someone who didn’t know he was there.

Then the figure looked right at the camera and waited to strike.

He saw himself in that moment and couldn’t look away.

He’d stared at it so many times that it had stopped giving him chills.

It was mainly knowing and feeling her fear that remained in his chest, pressing on his heart until he couldn’t focus on anything else.

He rubbed his face, absentmindedly tracing the scar as he kept his eyes on the screen. The frozen image was mocking him in so many ways. He wanted him to be afraid. He wanted him to feel like he was the one to drag Rey into the pool and try to end her life before it could really begin. George had told him to stop thinking that way. He was the man to listen to — not this phantom menace. It was a purposeful message, one meant for them that needed to be analyzed that way. There was a profile in how he acted and he had put himself out there to be recorded; the amount of things to analyze was endless.

Since getting back to Virginia, back where he was still trying to make his home, he’d forced himself to think that way. It wasn’t for just him. It was for them as a team now, a task force that his work had started. He’d heard praise from his superiors and it just fell through his fingers like sand. He didn’t deserve to hear he’d done anything right because he couldn’t protect her. The fact that Rey’s attack could be connected wasn’t a priority, but part of the larger puzzle and it made working in Mexico more aggravating than it already was. Grey’s words about being frustrated by a problem he didn’t have an answer to rang in his head again. There were too many people in his head for Grey to still be in his thoughts. It was all about environment; sharing a space wasn’t possible now. He decided that it was worth it to drive to a grocery store further from the house for the few things he needed and that felt ridiculous.
Being back in Virginia put less of a distance between him and Rey but it still felt too far. The time in Mexico had been basically useless. Owen didn’t need to waste his time coming down but Tekka overruled George and sent him down anyway. When he took in the situation, after apologizing that his Spanish wasn’t the best since he’d focused on Mandarin and Cantonese, he spent most of the time giving the power over to Kylo. He didn’t warrant being lead. And all of the evidence had gotten them nowhere. It was a resort. There was enough security but people still needed to have some freedom to move. He’d thought it would be safe enough but the knot in his stomach kept tightening every time he let his mind drift to the idea that everyone in his life was not safe enough.

The black blur, lit only by the dull patio lamp behind him, told him that getting closer would put them all in greater danger.

“I am about to give you a ride home so I know you’d actually go and stay there.” George’s voice made him look up from the screen and wince.

He hadn’t realized everyone else had gone home even though he distantly remembered Owen saying goodnight and knocking against his desk to get him to go home hours ago.

What was the right way out of this?

“To be fair, you’re still here too.” He tried for a lighter tone, but ended up sighing at the end. “I’m sorry, George. This is really the last thing I planned to do.”

Nodding, George took the empty seat at the desk across from him. He was also frowning. Kylo couldn’t see the colour of his shoes and that made him slouch down in his chair even as he turned to meet his eyes. “We haven’t had a chance to speak privately since you got back. Maybe this is a good time.”

Finally looking away from his computer, he tried not to let his eyes fall on Rey’s picture on the desk. The sound of her voice earlier that evening was supposed to settle his thoughts but instead it just pressed on his agitation. She loved him. And he was only putting her in danger. Even if he hadn’t dragged her into the water and pressed her head down into it, he was the one who’d left her open to it. He might as well have done it.

He still couldn’t show that weakness to his mentor.

“Everyone said I handled things well down there so I…” Kylo started but then trailed off when George raised his grey eyebrows. He knew when to take the hint. “I guess you don’t want to talk about that.”

Leaning back, his supervisor folded his arms. “I know you conducted yourself well on your own. And Owen and I know that you didn’t need him but I sometimes can’t control everything even when I want to. We sanctioned sending you down because we had reasons to believe the cases were connected. We don’t make snap decisions like that without having a great deal of faith in what our agents can uncover. Now we have firm evidence and video and a description. Tekka sent Owen there as your equal partner, not to watch or monitor you. I don’t like being overruled and Owen hates it more than I do. But that isn’t why I want to talk to you. The problem we have right now is an agent still taking this personally. So that’s what I’d like to talk about.”

Now, Kylo silently wished he hadn’t stayed late. But his house was just too empty. His bed was too big. The quiet was like the man on the camera, killing him slowly by tempting him into darkness. “I’m really only…I’m only watching this again because I’m off the clock. And I needed to think.”

The silence of the office, other than a distant vacuum cleaner finally told him how late it was. He
should be at home, staring at the ceiling and forcing himself to sleep. But the house was too vacant. And his mind just kept going back to how he’d almost lost another piece of his heart because he let her out of his hands.

She was back on that campus.

*His* ring was in an evidence bag.

He wanted to admit everything to George. The words were about to spill out and he stopped himself from saying how he’d broken down instantly after Owen dropped him off at home when they got back to Virginia. How everything was overlapping in his mind and he couldn’t call anyone to come help him.

He’d sent his partner home; he was exhausted too but was trying to maintain a positive mood about where they had to go from there. Kylo had nodded and smiled before getting out of the car. He had no idea where his car was and would sort it out later. The point was to be home and figure out how to proceed with the case. They had worked well together down south, even if the local police and resort security had given them only as much help as a non-murder apparently deserved. He’d saved his frustration for his arm in the shower, needing to be focused during the day after a moment of bitter release.

And Owen had let him smoke the entire time. Another weakness, but it had helped him find the right people to talk to around the exits and entrances to the resort.

At one point, he wasn’t sure what language he was even speaking. He’d stare at the person he was talking to and lose himself in the rhythm of the words rather than their meaning. It would take a minute to shake it off, but those moments of going blank stirred continued disappointment at himself and his performance. Even if he wanted to argue with George about it, he knew what he’d done wrong.

He still had to return the girls’ luggage. None of it had foreign DNA on it, or not enough of it to matter. The room had been impossible to deal with. They only had one tech and she’d just shrugged at the amount of foreign hair and possible DNA. They’d test it. But it probably wouldn’t go anywhere.

The bigger problems lurked elsewhere in his head.

Because whenever he closed his eyes, his mind would go back to a flash of Snoke burning him with a cigarette when he misspelled something. Seeing that typewriter again made it hard to focus on how to deal with what happened to Rey; he was split into two. He couldn’t only think about himself but whenever he flashed into being in the killer’s shoes, it was all that took over. Snoke had tried to teach him how to kill. And he could never do it. He’d been beaten within an inch of his life too many times to count. Remembering that hateful machine rocked him harder than he wanted to admit. Another time of being left bruised and broken was when he passed out from typing for hours; his hands were cramped and Snoke was screaming at him to keep going. When he slumped off of the chair, he was kicked until his ribs were broken. The constant flood of words was stirring inside of him again, bringing the pain with it. Snoke’s twisted dogma of control and revenge had been kept at bay by learning everything he possibly could until he saw that machine again.

He could control the images in his head. He *had* to.

If he let Snoke roar back into his head, he’d lose every breath of freedom he’d taken. Just because that monster still haunted his dreams it didn’t mean that he had to drive how he thought anymore than he already did. He wasn’t a boy. He wasn’t trapped. The hatred in those words had been
thrown out there to warp his mind and he never let it take him. He had never killed anyone other than his torturer. That had to be the only person he killed. He knew his own mind and memories and those had to be real. His case was within reach and he could look up how he’d been profiled when he was a fourteen year old in a too-big FBI sweatshirt that wouldn’t even fit him today. He could request those endless pages if he had to, the ones he typed until his hands cramped if those morons in California didn’t lose that too. They probably would have to do that, if the case took the turn he suspected it was taking. To truly understand this killer, they had to break down how Ben Solo died. And if they lost the typewriter, they could lose other evidence.

But he didn’t want to think about those words. He wanted to remember doing his physics homework on his bed and have Poe lean over and doodle hearts on his notebook page. He wanted to see him smile and put his head on his shoulder and say he was bored so they would have an excuse to make out. He wanted to loll in the memory of filling the pages of the recovered journal, being seventeen and trying to figure out if he was really in love or not just because he had been inside another person and felt his firm thighs wrapped around him.

This is what a quiet house did to him. Even in its safety, he still had himself and those fucking thoughts to fear.

He couldn’t call George or go over to him on that first night in his big and dark house. He’d be risking his position on the case if he showed how this had truly shaken him. If Rey died, he would lose the last of what made him real. But having to look at the typewriter, journal, and ring made him wonder if he was ever real to begin with. George would understand but he had to make sense of it in his head first. He’d save those frustrations for when he’d figured them out but now that he had that moment, his uncertainty was almost winning. He knew mostly what to say now, he had to tell himself. At least he could start talking through his feelings. More of his worries could go to Maz when he’d meet with her. It was a start.

But when he’d arrived home, in that moment, he let being alone consume him.

He had spoken with his parents and they were checking in but they couldn’t come pick him up off of the floor again. He’d be thirty in a year. He was a federal agent, as his father had reminded him, so he should have more of his life together. Rey was safe with them, safe at home and thinking about going back to class after taking the time she needed to recuperate and feel like the shadows weren’t after her again. It wasn’t fair that her happy memories had been shattered again because of him.

He was the one that got Poe killed.

He was the one that brought that same hatred to Rey.

He could almost feel the static of her hair from the video, brushing his hand above her without her feeling it.

Rey. His angel and life. She would hate that his mind kept dropping into thoughts of lazy mornings on the couch with Poe or letting his head fall on Grey’s shoulder when he was drunk and felt alone. Everything he did was wrong. Even at work he was fucking up; George wouldn’t have stayed late if he wasn’t worried about him.

She needed him to be strong to solve this. She needed to feel safe again and that would take time to understand and work through. Holding her in the hospital, seeing the marks on her face and body from the assault, had sent him into white rage. For one blinding second, he didn’t know where he really was. He just knew she was there and hurting. But he couldn’t fold and give into the anger then. He had to talk to the doctors, nurses, police, hotel employees, and take care of the girls.
Everyone looked to him to start figuring out what had happened and until he walked into their room and saw that journal, he’d hoped somewhere, anywhere, in his mind that this wouldn’t be connected. In his heart, he knew it was the same man. But then it was all blown wide open and he was ripped back in time while trying to keep his feet planted on the ground in another moment. Calling her would just make her want to come to him more. And as desperately as he wanted her there, wanted to hold her and have someone hold him, this was part of what they knew would happen if a case got hard or personal. She had to get back on her feet, back to the life she deserved. Her art needed to be hers. With how he felt, he’d only drag her down if he called her in that state. The distant conversation he’d had with her when he landed would have to be enough.

But it wasn’t. Resting his back on his front door, he was only able to stare into the darkness and hope that no one came out of it.

The list after that was Hux and Paige. But it was the middle of the night. And they were still rattled and worried about their son. Their next child would arrive in June. Just another target. Hux could be patient to a point, still letting him go off the rails when he needed. He’d talk him down but he wasn’t there. He couldn’t sit beside him and talk him through the emptiness. Paige would worry about him more if he called and broke down. She had enough to deal with. He needed them to be safe and not distracted by how scattered his thoughts were.

Thinking about Poe made the ache for Rey burn harder. He could have lost her in the same way that he lost him. Eight goddamn years. Eight fucking years. He should be there or, in the better world that Poe deserved, alive, safe, and in love with someone else who treated him right. Kylo still seemed to be unable to be in a healthy, stable relationship. Still, despite everything, he wasn’t strong enough to resist imagining him coming down the stairs, picking him up and hugging him. He’d take him to bed and hold him before probably joking about how he was about to turn thirty and needed someone to put his pyjamas on for him.

Having the fantasy made him punch the wall beside the door. Bruising his knuckles always worked when his brain didn’t. Fuck fixing the drywall, he might leave it that way.

The thoughts weren’t fair to Rey. He’d worked through almost all of this and he was back there at the start again. He was trying not to think about him but the memories and imagined scenarios kept rolling back into his mind. He hoped that Rey accepted that this house was the one he wanted with him, but that didn’t always mean good thoughts. It was their house when she was there but now that he was alone, it was just his empty house. Thinking about the ring just took him down the path of how things could have been and he didn’t need to re-tread that bundle of pain again. He’d been pushed by a stupid dare but in that moment, the look in Poe’s eyes had told him that he wanted that promise. Maybe he thought he’d calm down and give him more freedom if they were married. Maybe it would have all been okay.

Maybes and what ifs made him turn to another relationship he’d been blind in.

In the darkest parts of his mind, the parts that scared him, he wished he could call Grey. It hurt to think how he’d understand or at least pretend to understand, or whatever his game was. It hurt Rey that he could even have that thought. This was why they couldn’t be friends. This was why they couldn’t speak again. If he went to his house, he’d open the door and it would all just start again. There was no sex there but Grey wanted there to be. Rey had been attacked and it was such a betrayal to even entertain the desperate thought of seeing him again.

But he was alone.

He was so fucking weak. He was a monster who didn’t even need to kill people for them to die.
That first night, he’d passed out by the door and woke up sore and confused around 4 a.m. So he got up, showered, and went to the office to start the day before he could think more about it. He’d mostly kept it together in the week since then. But now, looking at George, he wasn’t sure he wanted to admit many of the thoughts he’d had. There were only a few he could pick from.

“Rey went back to class this week. She’s been…trying,” he started. “I know she can work through it but my parents are worried that she will lose her motivation. I’ve tried to talk to her but it always comes down to how I did things. She can’t let go of that.” He tried to resist the urge to turn his eyes to the frozen screen again. It wouldn’t change what happened. Instead, he found himself fingering the band on his wrist hidden beneath his sleeve, the one Poe had given him all of those years ago. He’d dug it out of the drawer after waking up on the floor, too broken to put himself together again. Loosening the leather clasp to its largest size reminded him how much time had really passed since that birthday. Its pressure almost felt like an encouraging hug from a man long dead but at the same time a spike of betrayal for a young woman who was hurting across the country.

He’d known this would happen and had tried to be ready for it. And, like always, he was failing at it.

“I tried to assure her that it would be for the best to think about something else when I spoke with her. I also told her that I would watch out for you.” George paused and put his hands on Owen’s desk. Kylo watched George glance down to his fidgeting and slowly matched his posture. If he didn’t keep his hands still then he’d probably get a well-earned lecture. He’d been hearing a lot of those lately.

“You’ve been doing everything asked of you and I haven’t had a reason to pull you aside for long looks or when you leave the room when you’re about to lose your temper. The base work you’ve given us has helped with identification. That’s more than we usually have. But the personal element is what I’m still worried about.” George sounded as tired as he felt. This case had opened up old wounds for him too. He’d walked around feeling like he’d failed families before as well, letting his own suffer in the same breath. In his head, his mind flashed to a twelve-year-old Grey, too tall for his age, slamming down a phone and stalking away, not wanting to hear another word about a broken boy named Kylo.

Kylo almost let his head fall but shook it off. “I’m sorry for taking up space in your head.” He couldn’t meet George’s eyes but he forced himself anyway. Better to get it over with.

“You don’t take up space, Kylo. You are an asset. But we always talk about focus. We’ve gone over that video,” George gestured at the frozen screen, making Kylo glance over and bite the inside of his mouth, “We have a basic description from it. There’s nothing more you can learn from it other than give yourself more reasons to torture your thoughts.” Sighing, George picked up a pen from the desk, turning it in his hand. It was almost like he was doing it for him. Kylo fixated on that movement, giving him anything to focus on other than having the other man read his thoughts.

George cleared his throat, knocking him out of his haze. “I need to apologize again for trying to convince you that Poe’s murder was as simple as we believed. I did as much as I could but none of the evidence pointed that it would…escalate. You saw that pattern. We’ve started the review of his case. I can’t let you touch it, but there will be some questions that you might have to answer as a witness. And that is a very tough line to walk, given everything that you know about the case now.”

The sudden tightness in his chest knocked him back to the fountain and meeting him for the first time. In the same swarm of emotions came the same sensations of seeing him again at twenty-one and having to hold his hand during the first interview. He swore if he glanced down he’d see the
same blood under his nails.

Exhaling, Kylo nodded. “George, we have my original statement and subsequent ones after I was… cleared from the hospital. I think those can still stand but...” Objectivity was a serious problem. There were obvious points in the investigation that he wouldn’t be given free access to. Even if he could easily throw himself back into the moment — the smells, the sounds, the *sensation of holding a warm corpse* — everything was still clouded by the march of time. Almost losing Rey reminded him that it could still happen again. The career he had also hung in the balance. The thick feeling in his chest shifted and he wanted to reach under his sleeve again. He finally shrugged and sighed. “You’re right, I’m unfocused. I’ve felt alone and it’s not helping. I brought up all of those feelings for the families and now I have to really deal with the same thing. And I’m worried how to talk to Rey about it.”

Maybe more of Grey’s words landed home than he realized.

And George didn’t need to hear this. He frowned to himself and dropped his eyes, about to apologize and flee back to his empty house so he could drown in it.

“We don’t have to tell everything to our partners. But this shouldn’t be one of them.” George kept him in place with his eyes. George had always been an adult in his eyes but seeing him age over time really only struck him in quiet moments like this. He’d been a part of his life before he even knew he existed. Twenty-two years had shaped him as well. He had been there when he was fourteen, when the pain was in its most raw and brutal form. If Kylo hadn’t seen Rey grow up and transform, he wouldn’t believe that he had changed as well.

And a lot of that had started in that sunny courtyard next to a bubbling fountain.

*Sometimes what can start as pretending will feel more real over time*. He has to live by that wisdom now. It all started with small things and he struggled too often with listening. That’s what George was talking about now, to stop letting the past get in the way of moving forward towards healing.

George deserved a much better protégé. Owen had turned out to be a strong and responsible agent who could balance the rules with practical actions. Kylo was just there, always needing a pep talk.

He felt George put a hand on his shoulder, leaning forward to squeeze gently. It was normally reassuring but now he just stared at the large hand on his purple shirt. “Kylo. You need to focus. You are letting all this...ambience distract you from what’s important. Remember your goals, and priorities. Everything will fall into line after that.”

His hand reached for the band, again running his hand along the worn edges, nodding to George absently. “You’re right. I know you are. There’s just — there is so much. I feel like I’m letting Rey down by thinking about Poe. I feel like I’m letting you down by thinking about them both. I know I can do this but it’s hard to sort out. I miss...I miss talking to Grey. And Rey would hate hearing me say that.”

Scratching his beard for a moment, George seemed to be studying him. “Those are the good parts of your friendship I wanted you to remember. He’s a lot of things but when he’s focused, he is a good listener. We have dinner once a week and he’s...he’s doing as well as someone as emotional as he is could do. He *still* thinks he can get me to give him information about you. Other than telling him that you’re still working, I don’t divulge anything. If anything, losing your friendship has helped our relationship slightly. But these worries about him and Poe, I really think you need to discuss your feelings with Rey. Right now, I can see you falling into assumptions again.”
“She’s still hurting, George. I can’t,” he paused, shaking his head. “I can’t make her feel unloved right now. She needs me and I’m…”

George raised his hand and cut him off. “Can I give you an order right now?”

“Go home and go to sleep?” he asked, smirking.

“Go talk to her. Take tomorrow. Stop the storm before it becomes a hurricane. Sometimes even I underestimate the maturity of my,” George stopped and rolled his eyes, “my girlfriends. She cares about you. You can work through this and be stronger on the other side.” He smiled lightly at him, making him return the look. “And things won’t get easier. But how we react to them does. And I have faith you will sort it out.”

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August kept glancing at her during class. Rey almost didn’t have the energy to look at him. She didn’t want to talk to him. She’d avoided his texts when she was home last week, safe in her room and never having to get out of her pyjamas. Then, she avoided talking to him during the week, ducking out of the classroom before he could stop her. She’d sit in Kaydel’s room until Kylo called or texted. Getting back to class was only leaving her feeling numb and she was going to call Han and Leia when she got back to her room and ask them to come get her for the weekend. She hadn’t made her mind up until that moment.

But she’d made it through another week.

Kylo was supposed to come home soon and they’d be able to really talk. But when that would be seemed like a lifetime away.

His conversations had been short since he got back to Virginia. All of the things he could do in Mexico didn’t seem like enough only because no one died.

Nothing felt right and she didn’t belong there.

How was she supposed to tell people that someone had tried to kill her? Even explaining it to the campus therapist on Monday had felt like she was telling a story rather than something that had actually happened. But around her classmates, she was invisible. It seemed like no one had missed her in all of her classes except for August. The only place she wanted to be was safe in Kylo’s arms. If he could just come home to Connecticut everything would be easier and feel less fake.

Closing her notebook, she tried to leave before August could talk to her.

She wasn’t fast enough. Again.

“Hey, where have you been?” He quickly took his arm away when she jerked herself free from his light grip. “Are you okay?”

She frowned at him and shook her head. Taking a deep breath she tried to find a way to tell him what happened. They had really only hung out and texted late at night before she left for spring break. He didn’t know everything about her, other than what music and movies she liked and that her boyfriend lived far away. And sometimes, she needed someone to talk to. How was she going to explain Kylo to someone who’d never met him before? She wanted to have a different reason to
describe who her boyfriend was to her friend other than he was trying to find the man who had attacked her, killed Poe, and left so many bodies for Kylo to find.

Licking the still-healing split in her lip, she dropped her head. Her tongue had kept teasing it open when she started thinking about going under. She didn’t even remember the man hitting her. The bruise around her eye had faded but if anyone was looking for it, they could spot that someone had struck her. He’d ripped out her hair. He’d tried to drown her. He put her into the water and meant to kill her. If Rose and Kaydel hadn’t come looking for her, she would be gone. It had all blurred so fast during the attack except for the empty feeling of weightlessly falling towards the bottom of the pool, into the darkness that had always pulled harshly at Kylo. She felt like a disappointment for not being able to describe him to Kylo or the other police. He had been so patient with her and she wasn’t able to answer his questions. He’d held her hand before taking out a notebook and talking to her like the victim that she was. No matter how many times he apologized, he couldn’t take that away.

She shook her head and tried to get away from her friend. She only wanted to talk to people she really knew and could trust about this. “I have to get to my art history class. I don’t know if I want to talk about it yet.”

“Did your boyfriend do this to you?” He stayed close by, his eyes filled with concern.

But the tone of his voice surprised her. August wasn’t that much taller than she was and was just as thin. Everyone in high school would have probably called him a nerd or, like Poe and Kylo heard, a fag. But the sudden anger surprised her; she only had to look at him for his face to soften. “No, he’d never do that. But we can…” She trailed off, fighting her own need for peace and not wanting to let another person down. “We can get coffee when I’m done.”

That was all she could think of. She’d avoided going out, eating in her room with Kaydel or by herself on the phone with Leia or Han. Even getting lunch on campus felt like she was opening herself up to danger. Whenever she sat down, she made sure she knew where to run if anything happened. Kylo said that too, stroking her hair before he put her on the plane to send her home. Always find the exit. Always know a way out.

He wouldn’t always be able to come running if there was danger, even if he wanted to.

She’d slept the entire flight, resting her head in Kaydel’s lap. She wished that her friends had gotten to take a private jet for a different reason than a stranger who had haunted their lives for the last eight years had almost killed her. She didn’t want to think too much about it. When she had been home, she tried to sort out what had really happened and how she imagined the rest of her life if Kylo didn’t solve this. Would she ever be able to ride her bike freely down the block? Would she ever be able to take Benji to the park? He’d asked why she had been so sad and she couldn’t find the words. But Hux knew. Hux knew how to talk to his almost four-year-old son.

Four. He’d be four in May.

That’s when her life had gotten its true start.

And then, fifteen years later, someone else had tried to finish it.

August, his eyes kind, nodded. “Do you want to meet at our café at five?”

Weakly, she nodded. She adjusted her backpack and tried to leave as quickly as she could to her next class. Pulling her hood up, she tried to convince herself not to dread both going to class and
speaking with him. At least it was only upstairs in a large-enough lecture hall that she could hide in
the back. She wouldn’t have had the energy to make her way across campus until later, when she’d
be able to collapse in her bed and wait for Han and Leia to come get her. Until then, she needed to
be alone to think about whether or not she wanted to let this break her. There was a part of her that
screamed to just give up; it had been the same voice that gripped her under the water. She could
quit, go home, and be safe. Kylo was back in Virginia. He was working on the task force. She just
wanted to go stay with him. She really could spend the rest of her life in his house and not get
bored. Han was so wrong.

It wasn’t what she was going to do but it felt good to think about not putting herself in danger
again.

Before she could flee, she had to deal with her professor stopping her when she tried to leave at the
end of the lecture. She thought she was going to make a comment about how she hadn’t been
paying attention; she guessed that she would have to review the types of columns on her own but
really didn’t feel like learning about them in that moment. Instead, she’d actually done well on her
midterm. Her prof smiled at her but asked if she was okay. Accepting the paper, her hand felt weak
as she took it. She gave her professor a small nod and then shoved the exam into her backpack,
saying that she had been sick last week but was feeling better.

But if one more person asked if she was okay, she was never leaving her room again.

Dragging her feet, she forced herself to meet her friend.

She sat down and hugged Kylo’s hoodie around her. It was all she’d worn when she was home and
she didn’t know when she would want to wear anything else ever again.

In the corner, in the comfy chairs she sighed at August. “My boyfriend would never hit me.
Someone else did.”

Her mind flicked to Kylo waking up from the nightmare and decided to leave that part of their life
together unsaid. Seeing him tower over police at the hospital or intimidate the people at the resort
reminded her that he was physically commanding. Even when she could hardly lift her head, she’d
seen how other people looked at him with respect that he just demanded from them by being there.
The only other person she’d seen that from was George.

Nodding, he shifted his weight. He saw how sad she was and it was making him uncomfortable.
Still, she didn’t look up much more than she had to. “That…I’m sorry I said that about him. I’ll go
get us some tea. You look cold.”

Lifting her lips slightly, she got him to go away. What was she doing there? She wanted things to
go back to normal but they wouldn’t be that way until Kylo was back with her. She used to like
how he was bilingual. He had worked hard to learn the language and not lose it. There were
moments at the hospital, or back at the resort, when she heard him rapidly arguing in a language
she couldn’t grasp and felt so much pride in him. He was there. He’d come out from nowhere at
the moment she’d felt so alone and then, suddenly, there he was.

Thinking about the hospital made her shiver. Kylo had instantly started arguing with the doctor
when he arrived in her room, demanding that proper evidence taking had to take place. But what
could come from her clothes? They were soaked and she was in a cold hospital gown. She didn’t
know where her friends were. She was aware that it was morning now but nothing made sense. She
just knew she was in pain and didn’t understand what they were trying to ask her.

But when Kylo was there, she was safe.
She sat up and jolted when August sat back down, putting a steaming teacup in front of her. “I’m sorry, Rey. I said I was coming.”

Letting out a breath, she frowned. “I’m thinking about what happened.”

He tilted his head, leaning forward. “I want to know. Things get better when you talk about them. That’s what my mom always says.”

She’d heard that so many times before too and could only shake her head. “I’ve, um, have I told you that my boyfriend is an FBI agent?”

He looked like he was about to laugh but then shook his head. “You wouldn’t joke about something like that. Wow. That’s…okay, I knew he was older but that’s kind of cool. It’s like a job you only see in movies.”

Sighing, she tried not to frown. “It’s what he wanted to do his entire life. He worked really hard and I’m, most of the time, I like what he does. I don’t like it when he gets upset over a case. He’s never shot anyone and he really just sits at a desk most of the time but when he’s out there in the world, I’m so scared for him. When he was a kid, someone kidnapped him and really hurt him for a long time. I don’t want that to happen again.”

Imagining Kylo getting hurt again shuddered through her body. His face would always stand as a reminder that he so easily put himself into danger.

“That’s terrible.” August looked like he wanted to take her hand but she moved back slightly. “Is that why he went to work for the FBI?”

She traced the handle of the teacup. There was a small chip in it and it felt good to feel the small, sharp edge. “Yeah. Sort of. He worked really hard for it. When he was younger, he used to be really angry for a long time. He used to go to school here with his…” She paused, wondering if it was her place to explain all about Kylo in one conversation to avoid talking about her own fear and sorrow. “Boyfriend. They were going to get married and he was murdered.”

This made August sit up. “I heard about that guy! My mom was really worried about me studying here but I heard they found the guy who did it. Mom just said not to go out without a friend and make sure no one is following me.”

“They didn’t really find him.” She stared at her cup as her lip trembled. “He’s the man who attacked me over spring break.”

He shook his blond head. Sometimes, he looked like a tiny, baby chick, bobbing his head as he spoke. “Rey, I’m so sorry. I really didn’t know any of this. Is your boyfriend looking for him right now?”

She sipped her tea and shrugged. “They haven’t found that much evidence. His partner came down to help him. We had to leave all of our stuff there but he’s going to bring it back once they’re done with it. They looked for fingerprints and DNA but it was a hotel room. There’s a lot of things there and they…they need to go through it all.”

But Kylo had the ring back. He had the journal back. He was going to come back and be right back in love with Poe. It would be just like it had been before. Staring at her tea, she felt the tears from the last week start to stir in her chest again. That was the real problem. She’d seen his eyes when he knelt across from her and whispered that it was there. And then he sent her home.

Maybe that’s why his phone calls had been so short.
Deep down, she knew that Kylo still loved her. She’d read what he’d written in every other journal but it still burnt at her why the killer had taken that book. He could have taken any of them but that one had been out for a reason. And now that it was back in his life, Kylo would be back in those thoughts. They just needed to talk for longer than an hour and the fear would be gone. Or, she dreaded, it would only be confirmed. Her heart couldn’t take losing him to his thoughts again; she would have rather drowned.

The thought made her suck in a breath. Maybe it was good to talk about this.

“Look, I know we haven’t been friends for a long time but all of this stuff sounds really scary.” August reached for her hand again and this time she took it. “Until your boyfriend gets back, I can walk you to class or something. Whatever I can do to help, I’ll be there.”

She really wanted to be alone but his hand felt good in hers. Rey squeezed her fingers but shook her head. August didn’t need to know all of her fears. “I need things to get back to normal, August. I feel safe here. My friend lives down the hall from me and I can stay in her room if I’m…sad. And Kylo calls all the time, when he can.”

Maybe Han and Leia were right and she should have waited longer. But missing more than one week of class didn’t feel right. Kylo also thought it would be good to get her mind off of what he was working on. Paige had said the same thing. Rose called just as often as Kylo, telling her that she didn’t want to go back to class either but when she did, time started to move faster. Sitting at home for the rest of spring break had left Rey feeling like she’d never see Kylo again. Missing a week of class had dragged it on further. Now, finally, this week of class had swept by. It was so hard to tell who was right and who was wrong.

But it had to be the same man. He’d found her twice: once with Luke and now when she was trying to live her life again away from Kylo.

Campus security had put a new lock on her door even before she got back. This time it wasn’t Kylo but George who had fixed it. His phone call, when she’d been at home curled up next to Bee on her bed, had helped her start to think about how things could get better. Like talking to Rose, they were people who knew Kylo but also knew how she felt. He was watching out for her too. He was going to keep Kylo focused on the case, he promised, but he would also make sure he didn’t work too hard again. He also sent her flowers, reminding her that he loved her too.

Ransolm also sent her a gift: a book about French impressionists. It was meant for her birthday, and to celebrate finding something she was passionate about, but he also wrote on the inside cover that it was a tool to help her move forward. She had to work through the hard things and not put herself down. This wasn’t her fault. It wasn’t Kylo’s fault either that so many people had died. The problem was outside of them; the only thing she could control was how she felt.

And Kylo was going to find him. She could only hope that she wouldn’t lose him in the process.

She quietly finished her tea and declined August’s offer to walk her home. He lived on the other dorms across campus. He shouldn’t have to go out of his way for her.

But she still looked at everyone twice as she took the short walk home.

About the only thing she could describe to Kylo was that the man was tall with strong hands. She was sure he wasn’t as tall as he was. It wouldn’t be enough to find him, but they did have a video of him on the patio. He must have changed his clothes because there was no one in black seen walking inside. With the restaurant, he might not have been a formal guest. They were still checking all of the names, though. That would mean more time for Kylo to be stuck somewhere
Shuffling her feet, she wanted to listen to music but also needed to be able hear everything around her. The nightmares had been etched with the stranger, the murderer, and the ghost memories of Snoke in her mind. He suddenly grew a gaping mouth that was going to swallow her up and never let her out of the darkness.

She’d have to get all of that out when she met with her therapist the next morning.

Spotting a figure waiting at the entrance to her building, she stopped, feeling her breath catch in her throat. She was about to sprint away when he turned.

Kylo.

Her hands went to her mouth in an instant when he was waiting outside of her building. Standing there in his long black coat, imposing with eyes that betrayed sadness and exhaustion, he smiled when their eyes locked.

“You could have told me you were coming.” Her lip was already trembling as he moved towards her, scooping her up into his arms. “Kylo, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I just found out yesterday night and had to find the flights,” he whispered. “George told me to take a break and I took it. This is…it got to be too much and I couldn’t think straight without seeing you.”

She didn’t want him to put her down and clung harder to him. “I’ve been trying so hard, Kylo. Every day and every night. I know you’ll call but you’ve been…”

“I’ve been trying to make things better. But I still let you down.” Kylo exhaled and finally moved to put her down, even as her arms were still wrapped around his neck. “Can we go upstairs? And I don’t want to ask but…can you let me go?”

She didn’t want to. But she did.

His hand was in hers in an instant.

He kept sweeping the entrance, locking eyes with everyone that looked at them.

“Stop,” she whispered. She didn’t want to meet his eyes to blink and it felt silly to speak. But she had to. She also had to show him that, despite how she felt, she could take care of herself. He wouldn’t feel better until she proved that. “I know everyone here. You didn’t need to have campus security check on me all of the time.”

They had stopped by twice since she got back to make sure nothing had happened. She was careful in public but at least her room was safe. She hadn’t seen any strangers. No one had slipped notes under her door. The fear was inside of her head and it was almost gone now that he was there. Her mind was still a jumble of feelings but this part felt right. She was stronger with him. She had to get the thought of him always being by her side, even when he was far away, back into her mind. The killer couldn’t take that from her.

“Rey,” he said, stopping her in the middle of the common room. Distant voices drifted towards her and she knew he was listening so she shut them out. “I had to. I almost lost you and then I had to stay there and be…be more than I am. And then going back to Virginia, I’ve felt so alone. Let me try to protect you in the ways that I can.”
His eyes were getting wild and she was too tired to stop him from falling over the edge. “Can we just go to bed? I’m so tired.”

For the first time since she got back on campus, she could shut off her brain and let someone take care of her, protecting her as they entered her building. Up the elevator, down the hall. The only thing she had to do was give him the key to her room. That jolted a thought loose.

“We’re not allowed overnight guests who we haven’t cleared in advance.”

He snorted as he opened the door, a brief flash of his annoyance. “I’m an alumnus. I’m a former employee. I donate. I’m also an FBI agent. I’d like to see them try.”

His mouth was on hers the second he had her inside, after he closed and locked the door. Whimpering against his lips, she had to hold him closer. She pushed her hands under his coat and hugged him, breaking away from his kiss to press against his chest. When his hand came to rest on her back, she finally, finally felt okay again. It wasn’t mom and dad’s fault. It wasn’t Kaydel’s or Rose’s fault. Home was just him. Being close to him was going to finally make things set in place and she could really talk about how she’d felt when she slipped beneath the water. The kiss had almost singed away the distant thought of his feelings for Poe returning. He was there. They had tonight. It had to be enough until they were both in the same place again, whenever that would be.

“How much do you donate?” she asked randomly, realizing she could feel his holster at her side. It brought back him breaking down the door, going inside and disappearing for too long, only to emerge wide-eyed and breathing deeply.

What if he hadn’t come back out of that room?

He rubbed her back, resting his chin on her shoulder. The sensation instantly shot warmth through her, her heart starting to beat faster with each motion of his hand. Those big hands. His soft lips. If she’d died, all of her waiting and fears would have vanished with her. Suddenly, those things felt so ridiculous to worry about. The past would always haunt her but it was robbing her of parts of him she wanted to experience.

But Kylo was still talking. “With…with how everything has been going, I’ve been talking to them about creating a scholarship in Poe’s name. It didn’t feel right before but now, once we solve this, I’m going to do that.”

She breathed him in, trying not to get drawn into other worries. But hearing his name made other parts of her fear come out. And she wasn’t ready to talk about them yet. “The cigarettes smell stronger in Mexico.”

He sighed from the back of his throat. “I don’t…sometimes it’s a socializing thing. I need to do everything I can to get people to talk. I don’t feel good about it most of the time. And I haven’t had time to drop it off at the dry cleaners.”

Owen also let him smoke. She knew that. Owen and George would help him. He shouldn’t have to feel alone. Finally stepping back, she took him in. He didn’t look like he was that worn out, like he usually did when he’d stayed awake for days working. He just looked tired, like he spent most of his time worrying about her in between the phone calls. That was fine because she had identical feelings in her heart. She just hoped that other parts of his heart weren’t stirring those worries. His hair still sat in the same way, with the same part. His eyes were the same deep brown that she could lose herself in for hours. Rey didn’t want to stare at the scar that crossed his face but it was distracting; it was redder when he was frustrated.
But it did make her stomach tighten, thinking about how little time they would have.

“When do you have to go back?” she asked, even as his hand cupped her face.

“I have to fly out tomorrow early. We have a task force now and I don’t want to lose being on the case but I…” he sighed, trailing off to frown. He dropped the small bag he was carrying and rubbed his face. “We’ll send you your things back once the lab has finished going through them. The Mexicans just wanted me to get out of there and the resort people didn’t care that one of their guests was assaulted. Rey, I’ve had so much to think about. Can we just…talk?”

Nodding, she moved back. He shrugged out of his coat and hung it up. She slipped off his hoodie and he smirked when he took it, mentioning that it smelt better than his coat. He loosened his tie and started undressing. He’d come with only a small bag. He must have just left without thinking through it. His eyes darted around the room for a moment as he undid his holster.

“The top drawer of my desk has a lock.” She sat on the bed and fiddled with the edge of her t-shirt. If she’d known he was going to show up, she would have worn something nicer: a cute dress or at least a shirt without holes. At least she’d managed to shower that morning. Slipping out of her shoes, she handed him her key ring.

He nodded and she watched him disarm and fix his weapon. He took out the clip and checked the barrel. Setting the gun inside, he looked relieved to be free of the heaviness carrying something that powerful around with him. He put his wallet and badge in beside it before closing and locking it.

“I…” he started then bit his lip. “I want to be here more often. I should try to be here when I have a day off. I can get a safe for your room.”

Folding her legs, she watched him lean against the desk, glancing at her textbooks and sketches. Her room should have been neater but she hadn’t felt like fixing any of it. Kylo seemed to be able to clean and organize his way out of bad moods but this one was lingering hard. She didn’t feel bad about her room until he was there looking at it.

“I want you to be here,” she said. “But I know how bad the case is. Kaydel and I watched George’s press conference.”

He smirked. “Did she call me hot again?”

He made her smile, a real one. “She called you spicy when we were at the resort.”

He rolled his eyes. “Should I tell her that I’m here? So she can see what I’m actually like?”

“No,” she answered, shaking her head. “But I should text her. So we can be alone.”

Kylo pursed his lips. “I’d like that.”

He put his phones on the desk and quietly ducked into her washroom.

Staring at his phones for a moment, she took out her own.

Kylo is here. I’m fine tonight.

<3 what a nice surprise! We can talk when he leaves, okay? Dad is picking me up tomorrow for the weekend.

Ok. Good night! Hugs.

Right back at you!
She sighed at her phone and scrolled down her other messages. *Hi. My boyfriend is here. We’re going to talk. Thank you for the tea.*

*That’s awesome, Rey! I’ll talk to you later.* August’s reply was quick. She should have texted him when she got to her building but she had been distracted. She hoped that he would understand.

Taking a deep breath, she stood up to put her phone beside Kylo’s. It looked silly sitting there. Her pink case and heart charm stood out next to his two black phones.

She hadn’t even thought about what would have happened if she hadn’t left her phone in her room, safe with her friends.

Kylo emerged from the washroom and sighed. He was in his boxers and a t-shirt, putting his folded slacks and shirt on the chair in the corner. And it felt like he belonged there, even if the space was small. “I need to keep the sound on my work phone. I’m sorry if it rings. We’re in the middle of informing families so we can announce the victims’ names for more information. Many of them want to speak with me again and I’m…I haven’t been focused.” The way he folded his arms showed off his biceps, but also a lingering bruise in the shape of a mouth on his right arm. He caught her eyes and his face dropped. “I didn’t…I don’t do things like this on purpose.”

“I know,” she said, flashing to all of the descriptions of self-harm that littered his journals. “It’s like when I want to punish myself by not eating. It didn’t make sense to anyone but me until I talked to someone.” Rubbing his arm, she spotted something else. There on his wrist, was another thing that knocked her back. “Why are you wearing that?”

He sucked in a long breath and he stroked the armband. “Tell me why you think I’m wearing it.”

Frowning, she looked at her socks. “Because you’re in love with him again.”

Slowly, he knelt down beside the bed. He took her hand and kissed her knuckles in slow, small meetings of lips against skin. “Rey, you know that’s not true. Having that journal back has made me confused but it’s like we talked about before. I love you, but I need to be able to think about him to work through all of this. I can’t forget him. And I know you can’t either.”

Warm hugs and a personal nickname. Cuddling on cold mornings. Kind words with sometimes sad eyes. “I was worried, Kylo. I wish he didn’t die and I always feel bad when I think about him or Grey. If….if what happened to Poe hadn’t happened, you’d be with him. You’ve said that. And then, with Grey…if he hadn’t said no to you after Finn did that to me, you would have been with him. I know how you were thinking now but when I started wanting you in a different way, loving you like I do now, it gets messed up in my head. Would you have chosen me over your husband? Or over your boyfriend? Those things feel so wrong in my head and I still think about them.”

Kylo was still holding her hand, tilting his head as he listened to her. “We’ve talked about this. Those things didn’t happen. When I was twenty-one, I wanted Poe to be my husband. That didn’t happen. It probably wouldn’t have happened. We were too young and…I didn’t deserve him. And I feel terrible for thinking that it could still have been that way. That’s why I’m here, Rey. I need to tell you that I’ve had these thoughts and I can’t keep hating myself for having them. Until I find this man, until he’s in prison, I will have to think about him. And I’m going to listen to George and keep trying to think in a different way. And with Grey I,” he paused to take a deep breath, “I’ve missed him. I know he’s bad for me and we are bad for each other. I have problems letting people go. You know that. I was afraid I’d lose you but I still have these fucking thoughts.”

Licking her lips, she nodded. “Did I make you choose between your friend and me?”
Instantly, Kylo shook his head. “He made that choice for me. I can miss him but that doesn’t mean I want to be with him. I miss the friend I thought I knew. And it just shows me that I need to find other friends.”

Sighing, Rey squeezed his hand. “I only have a few friends here. So I think I get it.”

He shifted his weight in the sudden silence.

“Did you eat dinner?” he asked. “I didn’t.”

“I haven’t been hungry but…” She caught the look in his eyes and sighed into a smile. “You might have to put on pants again.”

“It’s college. So maybe not. But I will because I’m not a slob.” He kissed her hand again. “I know where the pizza place is. And I know what you like. Wait here for me?”

She could only smile in return and nod. He pulled on his trousers and grabbed his wallet. She handed over her key ring again and it all felt so normal until his eyes lingered on his gun.

He was always on duty.

“Take it,” she finally said. “Kylo, he could be here.”

He looked like he wanted to argue but he slowly nodded and she watched his routine with his weapon again. The sleek black and silver gun was on his side again, his phones back in his pockets, and he slipped on his cigarette-smelling coat before leaving her.

She was up to lock the door behind him and then exhaled. There was too much to think about when they were alone together.

Turning, she went into her washroom and stripped down. Hopping into a warm shower, she woke herself up more. His shirt was folded on her desk. His tie was hanging with his suit jacket. He was going to stay the night.

If she’d drowned that night then none of this would have been possible.

He had so much more to say when he got back. His eyes held so many more feelings. They went beyond Poe and Grey. They were for her too and those were the ones she wanted to hear. But she still didn’t understand how to talk to him about them without letting some anger take hold. The words from his journals fluttered in her mind; he blamed himself for how he acted with them. But he had still had the chance to feel so deeply for others. She remembered when Kylo had been nineteen and was living at home. He had been bored with what he was doing during the day but at night had both her and Poe to lean on. Reading his retellings of their conversations was hard; he seemed to share more things with him than he did her. Quietly she blamed herself for being too young for him.

Maybe talking wouldn’t work.

She remembered how he looked when she had his penis in her mouth, how she was able to stroke him until he came before the summer ended and they were torn apart again.

And then that man tried to keep her from him forever.

Taking her razor, she went over her legs and under her arms. She quickly washed her hair and used the nice smelling soap she got from Leia for her birthday.
She towelled off and wiped off the fog from the mirror.

She could have died that night. Kylo was thinking about it too. He wouldn’t be there if he hadn’t been thinking about it, even in the midst of his other hurtful thoughts.

Not bothering with underwear, she put on a pink nightgown and took down napkins and glasses from her cupboard. Leaving them on the counter, she grabbed her perfume and lightly sprayed her neck and wrists. Looking at her face again in the mirror, Rey put on a light foundation to hide the redness from the shower. Maybe she was blushing too much.

The last thing she did was put on a slow playlist to fill her time waiting. She turned off the ceiling light and let the lamps on the desk and above her bed set the tones for the room. The fairy lights around her pictures softly lit her wall, faces protecting her even when she was alone.

Kylo texted when he was on his way up the elevator and she had a moment of panic. She quickly went to her closet and slipped on a pair of panties.

She opened the door for him and he gave her a soft look. “I was able to use my old grad student ID for a discount.”

“You sound like Han.”

He smirked, stepping inside and locking the door behind him. “Hux says the same thing. I just wanted to see what would happen”

She took the warm box and let him fix himself again. She pretended not to watch him take off his coat and pants. He had the same routine with his gun. He was so careful with his hands.

And those were the hands she wanted on her body that night.

If that monster, that murderer, came for her tomorrow, she’d never know him like Poe knew him. Like Grey knew him. Even Liza knew him better than she did.

He grabbed his phone charger and put his work phone to charge on her desk. He fiddled with the cable, frowning at it. “I’m sorry I left you alone.”

Shrugging, she finally opened the box. “We needed to eat. It’s okay.”

He sat beside her on the bed and he started talking about how the task force was. He’d never done anything like that before but it was making him think about George more. How it must have been for him in the beginning. Suddenly being a part of a larger team had made him everything to everyone but there were parts he couldn’t touch; he was a leader and a spectator at the same time.

She put her hand on his leg when he started talking about how hard it was not to be able to take control of everything, while also feeling like it was better that other people looked at Poe’s case again. He couldn’t be objective. He was disappointing George. Even as they were eating, Kylo seemed to not be there for a few moments. His fingers went to his armband and he sighed every time he touched it.

“I miss him, Rey,” he said after wiping his mouth. “It’s hard to be here and not think about him. It’s hard to work on this case and not think about him and everyone else this man has taken from the world. Everything reminds me what could have happened to you and I can’t think.”

She put a pizza crust in the box and had to tip her head. “I see him sometimes when I go where we used to go. Kylo, it’s not that I don’t miss him. I do. But…he’s still gone.”
He took a long drink of water and then stretched out his long arm to put the glass on the floor. “He is. And you could have been too.”

The glass clinked against the floor as he looked back at her. And she sucked in a breath. “Kylo, what would you have done if I’d died?”

He was frozen for a long moment before reaching over and moving the mostly empty box off of her bed. Distantly, her song list was playing but she could really only hear his breathing.

Turning, he licked his lips. “I thought I lost you once, on the night he died. Wanting to kill myself…I haven’t felt that way in a long time. But if he had killed you, I don’t know what I would have done. I’m older now and know myself better. If I ate my gun, people would understand but I’d also prove them all right. I’m too unstable to be alive. He would also win. I think he’s trying to destroy me and I can’t tell anyone that without sounding paranoid and self-obsessed. If you died…I don’t know. I might not be able to think again and lose control. I’d never hurt anyone else but…”

His head dropped and he took a deep breath. “I’m afraid that one day I will snap. It’s happened before but now I’m an adult and worse things could happen.”

Taking his hand, Rey didn’t know what to say. He looked so much younger in that moment, echoing the boy he used to be. “I’d want you to go on, Kylo. You’ve worked so hard to have this job. And even if I don’t like it, you can help people. You won’t be alone.”

Kylo looked from their entwined hands to her eyes, he swallowed. “If I died, I need you to keep living for me. George and Owen don’t like how I sometimes act without thinking. They’re going to make me rerun the training course with the new recruits if I don’t stop being so careless.”

“You’re being too hard on yourself.”

“I have a hard job. And I don’t want to fail at it.” He put his head on her shoulder, almost surprising her. His hair was so soft and he hated how it parted. He never understood why anyone liked his hair, aside from her. Reading his recollection of making the doll for her from mostly his own hair had knocked her back into a memory she wasn’t sure was her own anymore. He also remembered when Snoke had cut all of their hair. She didn’t. It wasn’t fair that he kept all of those things in his head when she couldn’t share them anymore. It was like now: she was trying to learn column types in art history while he was breaking down police reports and trying to find a serial killer. She could dip her toe into his world but could never truly understand it, no matter how many journals she read.

Breathing him in, she sighed. All she could do was try. “My friend thinks it’s like the movies.”

He snorted, one of those bitter Kylo sounds that betrayed his deeper feelings. “Most of the time it’s a boring movie. But you have to…” He leaned in closer, sighing. “Sometimes you should be careful who you talk to about me. Just don’t use my real name. Even my house is under a different name.”

He nuzzled against her, taking slow breaths. They’ve had to hide so much of who they were. Without all of the people helping them, their lives would have been even more abnormal. She couldn’t even have her name on her door. Remembering her friends’ pictures made her bite her lip. Even if Kylo and George found this man, would she ever be able to really be like them?

“Remember when I didn’t want to perform in the dance concert?”

He looked up, smirking. “I was proud when you were able to go out there and show what you’d learnt. We don’t always need to take pictures to have memories.”
The warmth of having him so close and the shape of his lips made her lean down to kiss him, lightly turning his face. He sat up, sighing against her mouth as his hands drifted to her sides to pull her closer. She wanted to take away his worries, everything bad that had happened. His job was important to him but she really wished he was with her all the time so they both could be safe. He was there in that moment and knowing how afraid he was of losing was enough to forget some of the hurt she felt about the armband, about how he still wished he was friends with Grey. She could deal with those feelings when he was gone again. He shouldn’t have to be wearing that armband again. He had her and she had to prove to him that she could be everything he needed. She could have died and he’d have to live with the same regrets that were thundering in her chest.

Deepening the kiss, she straddled him, rolling her hips as she gripped his shoulders.

Shuddering, he pulled back. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, but he had to know. “Kylo, I’ve felt alone too since I got back. I don’t know who to talk to either. I wanted to get back to class but my brain won’t let me focus. When I was in the water, when I thought he was going to jump in after me, I thought I was going to die. I was going to die alone and I… I don’t want to be afraid. I want to help you. You’ve looked so sad all night and I don’t know if I’ve said all of the right things.”

His hand trailed up to cup her face. “I wanted to see you to know that you were okay. I also needed to know that I’m not alone. You helped me.”

She glanced at the armband and then back to him. Being on his lap had sent her heart racing. The same fear always followed that sensation. She could help him in other ways. Like that day on the couch, they could help each other. “Kylo, I love you.”

Smiling, he kissed the corner of her mouth. “I love you too.”

They were alone and together. There were more things she wanted to say but kissed him instead. He was so strong physically and she knew that he needed to focus for the case. When tomorrow dawned and he had to leave again, she didn’t know when she’d get to see him again. He was on her bed. Snoke wasn’t there torturing them. The man who’d assaulted her wasn’t watching them. She could push past her fear for him.

Reaching for the hem of her nightgown, her heart beat so hard that she almost lost her nerve. Nudging his hands away, she sat back and took off the soft, pink clothing.

Kylo’s hands fell on her thighs and tightened when he saw how bare she was. He looked from her breasts to her face and exhaled. “What do you want, Rey?”

Licking her lips, she shifted against him. “I don’t want you to die. And I don’t want to die either. And I’m so tired of being afraid. We’re together and I want… Kylo, can we help each other forget what happened?”

He looked at her, studying her mouth for a moment. “I didn’t… Rey, don’t think I came to see you just to sleep with you. You mean more to me than that.”

“But,” she paused, a slight knot forming in her stomach. She wanted to bring her arms up to hide her breasts. Maybe he didn’t want her. Maybe he was still thinking he could be with Grey instead. “Don’t you want me?”

He kissed her in response before leaning back and shaking his head. “I just need to know that you really want this. We can’t take it back if we…if we have sex. I don’t want you to ever be afraid of
me.”

“I’m just afraid I won’t be good enough for you.” She dropped her eyes, toying with the collar of his t-shirt. “You’ve been with other people.”

Gripping her thighs, he swallowed. “It’s different for everyone. It terrifies me that FBI profilers are breaking down my first time right now to figure out what he knows about me. I don’t want you to regret being with me and I don’t want to hurt you. But I know how soft you’ll be. I know that you want to be with me. That matters so much to me, Rey. The other people I’ve been with…only one of them wanted to really be with me. And I used him. Please don’t think I’m here to use you that way.”

The warmth of his hands on her skin brought her back to where she was and what she wanted. Almost losing herself under the water taught her something: her life wasn’t normal and time wasn’t kind. She wanted to let go of all of her fears and have this moment.

“You were here so we both didn’t feel alone,” she said. “And when you leave, I know that you’ll start feeling alone again but I want you to remember that you’re not. Just like I’ll try.”

One of his hands traced up her leg, fingers brushing up her side. “You know I don’t want to leave tomorrow. But…we can have tonight.”

The sensation of his hand on her skin and the tone of his voice drove her to kiss him again, wanting to feel more of him.

She was about to let go when she was under the water. Now, she could recapture that feeling in a different way.

She wanted to get better at kissing and dared to dip her tongue into his mouth and felt him shudder. Gripping her back, he guided her down onto the bed, sending her body into pure warmth and want. She gasped as he stretched out on top of her, pressing her down against the mattress.

The sound made him pull back. “We can stop.”

“No,” she whispered. “Please, Kylo.”

He took a deep breath. “Rey, you need to tell me if you need to stop.”

Running her hands up his chest, she nodded. “I promise.”

Holding her eyes for a moment, she saw the fear he had for himself flash for a moment. He’d never hurt her. She had to remember that. He slowly nodded and moved off of her. For a moment she worried that he was going to back off, but instead he pulled off his shirt. It wasn’t something new but seeing him like that in her darkened dorm room like that made it all more real. How his scars had faded. How he couldn’t seem to see how they’d changed. No wonder Grey couldn’t let him go.

He met her eyes again as he took off his watch and armband. He leaned over, setting them beside the bed, stretching out and taking deep breaths. With one hand she reached up and turned off the lamp above her bed. The one on her desk made the shadow dip but it was never really dark.

When he was back against her, he slowly kissed up her neck, making her shiver with his slow motions. His hands slowly wound down her body and she sighed. It was simple, warm, and comfortable. The usual hurt and confusion that normally started to creep in wasn’t there. It was just him.
His thumbs hooked on her underwear and she wiggled at the rush it gave her. She wouldn’t let panic chase her pleasure in that moment.

But Kylo still paused. “I don’t have a condom.”

Blinking, she quickly shook her head. He knew how long she’d been on birth control. He had written about his fears for her and if her body had been shaped by what Snoke had done to her. This was another worry that she didn’t have time to make sense of. “I got…some from orientation.”

He flicked his eyes to hers. A small smirk emerged. “I got those too.”

*I got those. Not *we* got those.*

“Kaydel made fun of me when I looked in the bag.” She had to smile as his hands were firm at her hips. “It’s the bag beside my computer.”

He looked at her as her heart thundered in her chest. She knew that he hated it when he couldn’t be aroused because of all of the thoughts in his head. But she had felt him getting hard when she was on his lap. In the back of her mind, terror still screamed at her to stop. If this happened, they wouldn’t be able to go back. But if they did, maybe it would fill the empty spot inside of her that he used to fill before he found so many other people in the world. It wasn’t his fault. He needed to live his life. But now that they had one together she didn’t want to live with regrets or dark thoughts any longer. Kylo wasn’t Finn. If she even whimpered he would stop. This was the right thing to do. Everything that had happened to her body was not what she was. The water couldn’t take her now.

Slowly, he moved off the bed and found the flimsy paper bag beside her laptop. That’s how they talked some of the time. Other times, it would just be the phone. How could he not think he was handsome? Kaydel was wrong when she called him hot but how he moved and what he did was a perfect person. His body had changed but not his eyes. And his soul, despite how damaged he thought he was, still shone through it all.

With one hand, he turned off the lamp on her desk.

Focusing on the ceiling of her room, Rey tried not to listen to him shedding his boxers and opening the package. The crinkling wrapper wanted to knock her to other times but she refused to think about him with anyone else. He was with her now and he needed this; they both needed it. Taking a deep breath, she pulled off her underwear, letting one leg take it as she shook free. She was afraid to look at him but not for the reasons he thought she would be. This was her home. And his home was with her too.

On the colourful bed sheets she picked out with Han and Leia, she closed her eyes and spread her legs. This wasn’t Finn. This wasn’t Snoke. This wasn’t the man who’d attempted to kill her.

She felt the man she loved before the bed creaked.

Kylo was on top of her and her body felt like it was on fire because she could feel all of him. Inside, she wanted to look and take him in but it might be too much.

Because it started to be that way when one of his hands traced down her stomach towards her wetness. She wanted him. He needed to feel that. She could die tomorrow and she couldn’t turn back from this. *He* could die tomorrow and she would never have felt this way. This had been building for so long. A spark had been set alight within her heart and she refused to let it be snuffed out by a stranger out for revenge against the man she loved.
“I love you,” he whispered against her neck, kissing her again as he started the achingly sweet motions with his hand. He knew how to touch her. How could she have forgotten that when the water was about to take her?

His warm breath started to fill her ear as she started to let go of all of the old fears she’d hung onto for too long. His broad hand was making her body start to scream for him. She wasn’t locked in a nightmare; he was really there and wanting her.

Letting her head fall back against the pillows, she heard a small whimper leave her mouth. “I think I’m ready.”

His lips met the side of her mouth. “Just…tell me if it hurts.”

He shifted and her eyes were still locked shut. But she felt a different pressure where his fingers once were.

All she needed to do was say no. Parts of her body wanted to scream at him to stop. Her mind was a mixture of want and fear but where would they be without those feelings?

She’d had him in her mouth. She didn’t know if he was big or not but it had felt that he was in that sweet moment. She didn’t want to think about anyone else being in her mouth or inside her ever again.

Gasping, she opened her eyes when she felt him enter her. “Oh, Kylo.”

But she gripped his shoulders and met his worried eyes with a quick shake of her head.

He kissed her deeply, his tongue telling her that it would be okay with its gentle motions, as he moved his hips.

She almost couldn’t breathe. He was there. Kylo was filling her like she’d always imagined. The gentle motion of his hips and the sweetness of his mouth told her that this wasn’t just sex but it really was making love. Snoke hadn’t taken this from them. He was hard inside of her and she was slowly losing all control. It was like going under but not like the man who tried to kill her wanted.

Kylo broke from his kisses to gasp against her ear as he started moving faster and harder. She heard the deep moan build from the back of his throat as he started to make the bed squeak.

She opened her legs wider and wrapped them around him. That got another sound, one more desperate, like when he was lost in a thought.

This was sex. This was it. She let her eyes fly open to blink at the ceiling as he was reaching release. If that day on the couch had taught her anything, it was how he sounded when he was about to climax. She’d read those words. She knew how he loved that moment of being blanked out.

But suddenly he slowed. “Are you okay?”

His voice was hot in her ear and she could only nod, keeping her legs wrapped around him. She didn’t have words for how she felt. She’d sort them out in the morning.

“Keep going,” she managed to say. His cock was inside of her. She was having sex. Her brain was about to haze over when he gripped her back again.

In one motion she was on top of him and had to open her eyes and had to take a long breath at the
feeling. Letting her head fall back, she felt all of him and moaned. It was embarrassing but she’d heard worse through her walls.

Taking deep breaths she had to look down at him. “What do I do?”

He bucked up his hips, making her desire grow. “Whatever your body is telling you.”

She was looking down at his dark hair and eyes in the muted light of her room. She was having sex with her boyfriend in her bed, just like everyone else did. She had to listen to him and followed the urging of his hands. There was no fear here, she told herself again. She was loved and this was safe.

As she moved her hips, she heard him hold back a moan. Covering his mouth in a kiss, she let him release the sound against her. He wanted her to move faster. She could do that. Flexible and fit. Even if he didn’t shape her body, she might have planned it for him. His hands landed on her breasts as she openly moaned, leaning back.

Kylo liked sex. Kylo loved sex. And this was her chance to learn to like it too.

Sitting up, she heard his voice hitch and rolled her hips the same way again.

This night was everything. Let that bastard come and find them now.

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Looking at his coffee cup, Kylo couldn’t lift his head. “She was so beautiful. I know I just disappointed her.”

The night flashed before his eyes again and he rubbed his face. He openly scratched against the scar, wishing it would go away. His coffee forgotten, he wanted to run from the café.

A gentle foot nudged him under the table. “Ky, come on. You’re great in bed. Don’t worry about it.”

Slowly meeting Grey’s eyes, he was stuck in place again. He had his father’s fucking eyes and he was always frozen by the blue depths. “I can’t tell her I’m talking to you again.”

Grey rolled his eyes. “Yeah, well no shit. But you will have to because for fuck’s sake she can let you have friends, you stupid asshole.”

“I don’t know what you are,” he said with a glare. “I almost wish I didn’t call you.”

Sighing, Grey dropped his head. His head was tainted with more silver flecks of hair that had seemed to take over in their time apart. “Can I take back a bit of what I said?”

“Which part?” Kylo narrowed his eyes. This was a mistake. Meeting him in public should have been so neutral. Instead, the world was thundering in his head again. Memories of finding release in Rey’s body ghosted across his mind and he swallowed by picking up his coffee cup again.

It was cold.

How long had they sat there?
Slowly, he met Grey’s eyes and shook his head. “I slept with her. I love her. Why does it feel like I did something wrong?”

Grey nudged him again under the table. “Because you feel that way when you come, Ky. Even a couple days later you just roll in it. You did with me and now you’re actually with someone you love. That’s about as far as I know. I’m here now because you sounded batshit on the phone. But you love this girl so don’t let this bring you down. I see the problems but what the fuck do I know.”

Exhaling, Kylo narrowed his eyes. “I have probably thought too much about what you said to me.”

Shrugging, Grey sat back. “And we’re still here. I didn’t try to get in touch with you. I went to dad’s and I went home. I looked at your fucking house and hated myself. Look, I know you’ve been through some heavy shit and I’ve been trying to be here for you and…whatever our deal is now. I could have decided not to pick up the phone. And I didn’t. So what’s the problem? Do that thing you do and pretend I’m dad so I can decide how much I should hate myself right now.”

“You’re not…” He rolled his eyes at himself. “I’m not the person you think I am.”

Grey shrugged. “Maybe you are. Maybe you aren’t. I don’t care. Everything with dad and the case? I was so fucking proud of you and until you texted me, I couldn’t say shit. Stop looking like you’re already defeated. If there are two people on the planet that hate unsolved problems until they are solved it’s you and dad. So stop thinking about yesterday and get back to today.”

Kylo sighed, but still nodded. “I still left her.”

Grey sat back, folding his arms behind his head. “One day you won’t do that. So stop being in your head.”

He took one long, hard look at him before he nodded.

He really shouldn’t have called him.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings for the standard references but now we have m/f penetrative sex. And then mentions of Grey-

I shall see myself out.
Chapter 57

Chapter Summary

Kylo and Rey deal with the aftermath of their first time together.

See chapter notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He had heard her gasp and felt the pure rush of excitement about feeling the tight warmth that was meant only for him.

It shouldn’t be, but now it was.

It really was.

He was inside her. And he wasn’t hurting her. Her mouth was open, letting out small gasps of pleasure.

Be in the moment.

It was impossibly perfect and he was truly there, loving her in that sweet instance.

Kylo had been put on this world to protect and love her. Everything along the way had just been made up of tragic and reckless mistakes. His body, as dumb as it was, fit with hers in a way that he had hoped for but didn’t expect.

This was the future. It was like the past could finally go and burn.

With every soft moan, with every squeak of the bed, he could start erasing all of it. This was everything. He had finally returned to what he thought he’d never find again — when it had been in front of his eyes all along. Tasting her skin, thrusting inside of her as carefully as he could to not cause pain, he was being pulled deeper into their bubble, the new one that was growing in the empty space of the old one. That one had been built on terror that he had tried to destroy with every soft touch and gesture in that house of hatred. He had saved her and now she was truly his and he was really there; she was saving him. His fear of losing her couldn’t overwhelm him in the moment. Meeting her lips again was like falling into a new world, one that he had discovered by accident because he had been too busy looking for other things. Her shining sunshine was about to blind him in that moment. All of the arguing, all of the pain he had caused her by his damned choices could finally be gone, erased in a blast of light. This new bubble, the one that he’d already almost broken so many times already, could grow into infinity and he could finally be done with the things he couldn’t undo.

It was Rey. He was inside of her, loving her and everything that made her the person he wanted to be with the rest of his life. Her art. Her heart. The way her hair fell on her shoulders when she didn’t have the energy to shower on those down days. The way she knew every scar on his body
and didn’t have to search to find them. He hadn’t expected the turn almost a year ago but now he welcomed it. He heard her soft gasps as he moved his hips, finding a momentum that made his heart catch up to hers. He had felt her steady pulse with every nip at her neck. When she wrapped her legs around him, taking him in fully, it took over every other moment that had come before. The smooth sweetness of her skin, finding the most delicate places to touch and kiss, let him discover more parts of her to love.

Maybe he hadn’t been in love before. Maybe it had only been obsession.

In that sweet moment, he understood Rey’s jealousy about his previous lovers as a pure and true stab to his heart. He kissed up her neck as an unspoken apology for not understanding that this could happen. His broken and misshapen feelings had always led him down the wrong paths. He should have waited for her. Had all of the pain been worth it to have other people in his bed? She only wanted him and he’d only made mistakes. Looking at her, feeling her, he could have waited to feel this sort of completion, avoiding all of the hurt along the way.

But she kept closing her eyes.

It was only a flash, caught in the blink of an eye.

He couldn’t fall into their kindness and fully lose himself.

Something was knocked loose in his heart and he shuddered.

He tried to kiss her with as much force as he dared to.

Burrowing his head against her ear, he desperately tried to stay in control.

But she hadn’t said anything. He could be hurting her. He was just taking what he wanted.

The way she was breathing could mean pain. She was so young and smaller than he was. She’d always been there and he was doing *this* to her.

The gasps. The whines. They were rocking him back to being the boy in the closet.

Like every evil thing lurking in his head, those old ghosts started to scratch their way back into his consciousness. He could work out for the rest of his life, meet as many therapists as the world had space for, and they *always* found him.

The delicateness of the moment: he was about to shatter it. He felt the panic rising and fought against it harder than he ever had before, driving hard to focus on the physical bliss he’d felt only moments ago. Her first time was supposed to be perfect. He was ruining another thing for her by drifting into old souls, words, and hurts.

*No.*

He was making love to her *now*. That old place, that *dead* place, was supposed to stay deceased. But the typewriter was there, corporal like Snoke rising from the grave to taunt him: he was a molester and paedophile. The journal was *back*. His ring was *back*. He’d lost him. He’d nearly lost her too. He was taking her innocence just like he’d taken his. But he wasn’t her age. He was so much older and she was still so young. Snoke had violated them both and now he was just like him. No, no, no, *stop*.

The moment was escaping him, sand falling through his fingers as he desperately tried to tighten his grip.
He hoped the change in his breathing hadn’t frightened her. He had to know. “Are you okay?”

The words hung in the thick air and he slowed his motions, trying to put every thought out of his mind as he was enveloped in her tightness.

He kissed her cheek, still trying to show her that the world wasn’t made up of the awful pain he felt returning to his head during what had been a perfect moment.

“Keep going.”

*Everything* thundered inside his head with the soft words from her beautiful mouth. She felt it. She had to. He was losing it. If he didn’t come, she’d be ruined; she was beautiful and moved her body in the perfect way to give his body pleasure but his mind screamed at him that this was wrong. She was a teenager. He had known her all of her life. And now he was fucking her like the monster he was meant to be. He had tricked her into loving him. Like everyone he’d ever loved, she deserved better than him.

Fuck.

He couldn’t break down in that moment. Her legs tightened around him and he fought back a sob, biting it back as harshly as he could. He gripped her naked back to put her upright, to ride him. *Stay hard.* Feel how she was. Feel and *know* who she was. The world wasn’t falling apart even as his heart raced towards that cliff. The bed creaked and he was knocked back to the day that he first died; he couldn’t let it destroy this moment too. He wasn’t dead. She wasn’t dead. She’d fought through all of the abuse that she’d endured to take him inside of her without true fear. She couldn’t be troubled or hurting in that moment. But maybe she was and she was just forcing herself through this for him.

He could hold it together and not collapse now. He had to. Everyone else he’d slept with knew him that way: a spoiled lover who demanded to be coddled, forcing them to soothe his tears about how even if it felt right it still felt wrong.

But the noise she made was joyful, he told himself. It wasn’t pain. “What do I do?”

Her words brought him back to the moment even as he fought for control. Seeing her eyes told him that she didn’t feel any discomfort. Now he could see her. The flush of her cheeks in the dim room and the firm wetness that enveloped his cock told him that she still wanted him. But what if she was just doing this to make him happy? No, no, no. Stop it. He found his voice and control over his body, denying the panic its place. “Whatever your body is telling you.”

*Please fuck me hard,* he wanted to say. *Just take all of the pain away.* *Kill* the anxiety that was rushing through his body, making him useless as a lover.

Rey kissed him and her body found its pace, one that was comfortable and perfect for her. Maybe that’s where he had started to go wrong. He shouldn’t have been on top when they started. That’s how monsters were, looming above their prey.

She grinded against him, taking him in at the angle that gave her the true choice to stop. He embraced the sensation and tried to find the warm spot of pleasure again. He traced up her body and cupped her breasts, running his thumbs over her nipples until they hardened and focused on giving her pleasure even as his mind was racing into panic.

Her trim waist. Her thin, strong thighs. Her elegant neck and supple lips. *Focus.*
Her hips rolled again and he buried his head against her shoulder and moaned.

Her breathing was getting quicker.

She was getting close.

Desperately, he thrust up inside of her and forced himself not to lose his mind in the wrong way but in the right one.

He wanted all of her but his head kept eating away at his body’s desires. He should have stopped the moment the dread had started. He was scrambling with his thoughts and couldn’t bliss out. He’d lost that part. Where had it gone? The bubble burst for him before it could fully form and he hated himself in that repulsive second.

Hearing and feeling her sudden climax, her heated breath against his mouth, made him come with a shudder. His body, capable of inflicting so much hurt, found release even when every other part of him was warring against it. He could cherish the sound of her voice pitching even if his own orgasm left him instantly feeling guilty, like the broken man that he was.

Even as he hugged her closer, whispering how perfect she’d been, he only wanted to apologize.

He couldn’t cry. He wouldn’t.

He focused on her eyes, kissing her gently as he remained inside of her. “I love you.”

Her smile could have conquered planets. But inside, all he could think was: no, stop loving me, I don’t deserve you.

When he slowly gripped the condom as she shifted off of him, he kissed her forehead before leaving for the washroom.

He couldn’t look at himself in the mirror.

If he told her now, she’d think everything she’d done was a mistake.

Resting his hands on the sink, he dared to flick his eyes up.

All he saw was the scar staring back at him, reminding him that they could vanish from one another’s lives in an instant. She could have been drowned by that bastard. Had he said enough? Had he done enough? Why was he never enough?

He turned on the tap and shed the condom, staring at his hands as he moved. Wash off. Get clean. Don’t lose the smell of her from his skin but maybe he’d earned it.

A lipstick heart with words in the middle, drawn by her hand in the corner of the mirror, stood out for him: You’re not alone.

Putting his hand over his mouth, he muffled a cry, certain that he’d broken another person by giving in to need. And he had no idea how to talk about it.

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Kylo left his tie behind.

It was a gentle reminder that he’d really been there.

There had been thousands of mornings when she had woken up in his arms but this one was the most surreal. Even before he left, stroking her hair and whispering soft words as she listened to his heartbeat when she woke up to see him watching over her, it felt like it had all been a dream. The soft, lingering scent of sweat clung to their skin. She hoped it hadn’t only been in her imagination: the way his muscles flexed, the way he sounded, his hardness…

There was also the soft way he kept asking if she was okay. Before she fell asleep, his hand traced down her side, following the curve of her waist to rest on her naked hip, checking that she was fine. And in that moment, she was closer to ecstatic.

*I only want to be with you,* he blinked in the soft light from her wall as her eyes started to drift shut.

Under the covers, in the light of morning, still feeling shivers throughout her body, she didn’t really want to move. Kylo kept kissing her forehead while also glancing over at his phone. He didn’t want to go, but he had an early flight. His eyes held so many apologies; he hated leaving her behind. It was the best he could do on short notice and hadn’t really thought; he just took the first flight he could. He mumbled that he wanted the case to be over. He also knew there was so much more to go. The part of him out in the world always had to be someone else.

He put his head down before sighing and hugging her tightly. He needed to get up.

And then he asked if it was okay to use her shampoo. It was another silly question that made her smile until he gave her a shy grin in return, dipping his head and disappearing into the washroom.

He showered early in the morning, letting her rest but she ended up just staring at the ceiling. Wrapped up under the covers, the warmth in her body made it hard to get back to sleep, like she had planned on doing on Saturday. He was leaving to go back to work. But he knew she was safe there; he’d made sure of it. The main things he said were asking her if she was okay, when she needed him to come back. Her stomach fluttered at the thought of having him in her space again. She wanted to keep going on with her life, to have the fun road trips and not be afraid when she left her room, while also being able to see him on the weekends. It would be like it was when she was younger, but this time he’d be in her room; it wouldn’t just be being in a guest room until she had a nightmare or a dose of bad thoughts.

They were more equal now, especially after last night. There were things that she still had left to learn from him in that way but she could help him more. They used to be able to share all of their strengths. Maybe she hadn’t been ready for the weaknesses that his past relationships brought out but she’d had more time to think now and could be there for him. And he could be there for her, like he was last night.

Maybe that’s why her life didn’t flash before her eyes when she was under the water. Maybe there was so much more of it left to live with him.

When he came out, showered and dressed, he sighed and ran his hand through his damp hair. He really didn’t want to go. He had to return his rental car. It was early but she hadn’t felt him wake up during the night, she was sure. The only thing she’d felt was him caress her stomach early in the morning. The touch made her roll over and put her head on his chest, breathing him in.

He didn’t want to leave her alone and feeling helpless. But the sensation of his gentle hands would keep her strong, she assured him. There were so many other memories to go over. She didn’t want
to rush herself into feeling all of him again. She’d tried to study the curve and length of his penis with her eyes but embarrassment overwhelmed her every time. It was better to think of it inside of her.

And the last thing she wanted was for him to put the armband back on.

That part made her bite her lip hard, holding back the question.

He wanted to let go and was still rolling in the past. He’d come there to check on her and he still fell back to those old thoughts. She had fought back her frustrations before and tried to help him. And he’d been there in the moment and he still put it back on.

When he lingered by her door, resting his forehead against hers, she softly asked about the future, their future. Kylo promised again to try to take time to see her, to be there in her room and not just taking up too much space in his controlled, confusing world. But there was a lot of work to do; he didn’t know what he was going back to because things changed every day. Finding out who was out there, threatening them, made it hard to close old aches in his heart. The biggest one, the one that still hurt the most, was the ghost that she also saw on campus, the one that he wore on his wrists.

But the other spectre of their past had crept into their life from an unseen corner.

Why couldn’t both of those aches finally go away? To leave them alone, like Grey and Liza had? The world kept being so cruel and every step forward she made, something kept dragging them back. And, most often, in was Kylo’s inability to let go.

She didn’t remember a lot about the typewriter. It had been there, in some distant and dancing memory of being downstairs in that rotten house but it used to be sharper. Now it was only what she’d read in his journals: it had been a hateful and hurtful thing that Snoke had tried to use to destroy his body and mind. There were many times when she read his words that she couldn’t reconcile the Kylo she remembered when he was a boy with the one that he described. Her boy was always protective and caring. He never repeated anything he’d heard from Snoke even when he’d promised him that he’d instruct them into following his words. He’d lied to protect them, telling them to listen to him and everything would be okay. Maybe he’d thought that would save them. Every day for him had been terror and he tried everything he could but he was only a boy.

She remembered the journal more. She tried to recall that autumn from a different perspective now: it was the only thing she hadn’t been able to read about. How had he really felt after his first time? Maybe that’s why he wanted to use a condom? Until she asked him, that’s the only place where that answer was. But he couldn’t be thinking about that in the moment; he wasn’t, he promised. He had touched her body and found new places to kiss with every motion. She should have asked but the time was too special to stop.

All of the old ghosts had brought up so much pain for him. If she could help him, she could put aside some of her own worries. She was safe on campus if she kept her head up. She had friends if she put effort into talking to them. If she could just keep going to class, their time apart wouldn’t seem as endless. Her life wasn’t on pause as he struggled through the jumble of agony he’d thrown at her last night before falling into her body.

The water hadn’t taken her but she had to keep this rush from drowning her.

Still, she spent the day after sitting in her room with her sketchpad. Leia had called and she said she would be fine for the weekend. Wearing Kylo’s tie around her neck, she played with the end as she spoke. She wanted to tell Leia what happened but couldn’t find the words. They didn’t have time to
talk about that. Sometimes, Kylo just didn’t talk. He was thinking and would come back to her.

She ate cereal for lunch, staring out her window at the campus, wondering why she didn’t feel really different as the day wore on and the space between them grew.

There were things that had changed. Maybe those were the most important ones.

There was a constant shiver when she remembered Kylo’s lips and the feeling of him thrusting inside her. He hadn’t put all of his weight against her. His arms were strong but also kind. There was so much of him to think about in the moment; she hadn’t paid attention to it all. His words had been kind and careful. He was so worried about hurting her. That thought had bothered her too for so long but it hadn’t hurt. There were no painful memories flooding back to her at the time nor afterwards. Maybe waiting had been good to get to that point. She’d been ready and he’d been so careful. Maybe some of those fears were finally gone? Yes, there were other problems to solve but this part felt almost right.

Still, there had been a strange look in his eyes even when he told that her he loved her and he loved what had happened between them before he left her room.

That part settled heavy in her chest as she sat down on her bed, feeling the part of the mattress where he had slept for any lingering warmth. She still hadn’t made the bed and might not feel like it until Monday.

He’d texted when he landed but after that, there had been silence.

She knew how much time he needed but she hoped it wouldn’t be endless. He had come there to comfort her so it was only fair that she could try to take away some of those worries. The rush of taking off her clothes ran through her body and she hugged his hoodie around herself again.

Returning to her drawing, she tried to think about what to have for dinner rather than calling him. He’d been good at keeping his promises to call. His surprise visit had almost washed away all of her remaining anxieties from how the trip ended. If she could get through the black cloud fully, the rest of the semester wouldn’t feel like punishment. Her therapist had pointed out that it would make understanding what happened to her even harder to work through if she put all of it on herself. It wasn’t Kylo’s fault. It wasn’t hers either. It was someone out there who was truly troubled and dangerous.

And Kylo was going to find him.

That gave her so much hope. Once that was over, once he could clear his guilt there, then maybe Poe could just be a happy memory rather than a tragedy that kept getting dragged up every time she thought it was really behind him. It wasn’t the same thick hurt that rocked her when she thought about him anymore; but she could see in Kylo’s eyes that the reminders had put him back into the painful feelings she’d read in his books. Even though those thoughts were always inside of him, he hid them at many times. The past had to stop chasing them at some point, right?

A soft knock on her door reminded her that, in her wait for him to call, she hadn’t texted or called any of her friends, like she had promised. Her stomach was growling angrily and her knees ached from being folded on the bed for several hours. Blushing, she answered the door after the normal half pause to check through the peephole.

Her RA, Tim, stood on the other side, holding a bouquet of flowers.

“Hey Rey. These came for you at the reception desk.” Tim grinned as he handed her the bouquet.
“And I was reminded to tell you that campus security hasn’t seen anything suspicious other than someone stealing a wheelbarrow from the Ag building last night.”

Well, then they must have missed a rogue FBI agent using his old grad school ID to buy pizza.

She felt her face burn a little hotter as she accepted the neatly paper-wrapped bundle. Tim, tall with olive skin, had looked at her with confusion during their first floor meeting about why he and his parents had gotten a visit from the FBI. That distant memory from January had felt entirely embarrassing then but now just left her a little more secure.

“Thanks, Tim. I hope…I had a guest last night. I hope it’s okay.” She licked her lips, quickly trying to sweep the tie under her sweater.

Tim leaned against the doorway, raising his eyebrows. “As long as we’re not getting raided any day soon, I think it’s fine. Just check with me next time. I know…look, I’ve seen a lot of weird things in my three years here. But some of the other girls and even the guys don’t understand who your boyfriend is. And he can give off really aggressive vibes. So maybe get him to call ahead next time? He’s got my number. And that’s still weird for me to think about. Like, am I on a watch list if anything happens to you?”

She managed a light laugh when, inside, she didn’t really know what would happen. “I think you’re safe. But I will try to make sure to do that. He sometimes…it’s hard to know how he thinks sometimes.”

Like right then, she didn’t expect Kylo to send her flowers.

Thanking Tim, she shut and locked her door, eyeing the card. It wasn’t his neat handwriting, but they were his words: You are not alone. /K.

Sitting down, she opened the paper and was silently thankful that Leia gave her one of grandma’s old vases as her own. Her room was filled with love even when he wasn’t there.

She was looking through her mini fridge, trying to decide what to make for dinner, when Kylo finally called. Smiling, she answered after only one ring. “Hi.”

“Hey,” he said, sounding relieved. She wished she could have answered faster. “How are you doing?”

Looking at the flowers, she thought through her day. The sketch was of him, how he looked when he slept, how he looked in her mind. His eyes were softer. His nose was still the same, definitely broken at some point but still looking so much like Han she didn’t believe that it had been damaged in a more severe way. She’d kissed the tip of that nose; that memory made her settle more into the conversation. “I think I’m okay. I haven’t really left my room but I don’t know where I would go. Thank you for the flowers.”

“You got them? I wanted them to call me when they were delivered,” he said, making an annoyed sound in the back of his throat before he sighed. “I hope you like them. It’s the colours you like but it’s March and I couldn’t get the ones from summer. I want to do more things like this but sometimes I don’t think. You know I want to. If there’s a dress you like…”

“No, Kylo. Just…it’s nice to know you’re thinking about me.” Sitting down on her bed, she studied the flowers on her counter: pink and purple petals with hints of white buds. “Is everything okay at home?”

“I checked the cameras and there was nothing. I just want a day when I don’t have to do that. I get
in my head and worry about everything.” He let out a long breath. “I don’t think I told you how much you mean to me. And how scared I was when I got that phone call. I just needed to see you and...I thought about it on the flight home. What we shared, it means a lot to me, Rey. And I hope I didn’t do anything that made you feel uncomfortable. I get caught up in the moment and my head…” His voice dropped. “I hope you still love me.”

He was keeping himself locked in his mind again. Had she done something wrong? She felt her lip tremble at the words. “Why wouldn’t I love you? I thought it felt right, Kylo. I still feel warm and...it only felt weird right after but when you held me, that felt so right.”

“What felt weird?”

“I don’t know.” She felt herself blush. “When...when it was over.”

She heard him take a slow breath. “I thought...I mean, that’s why I wanted to use a condom. It gets...messy without one.”

“But you don’t like condoms.” His written words were always easy to find in her head.

“I don’t but your first time...I didn’t want you to worry about things you weren’t thinking about. I haven’t been with that many people but there are...there are still things I know,” he said. She wondered where he was in the house, what he was looking at. “I miss you. I’m tired and know I won’t be able to sleep. I was...I was afraid that I’d hurt you. It wasn’t the same as it usually is because I know I’m better now but, I was more scared that I’d lose it and you’d blame yourself.”

Lose what? she was about to ask but tried not to feel embarrassed when she realized what he meant. It was a thick realization and she shut her eyes. He had been hard but she had been too in her own head to think about the wealth of emotions he had about sex. Her own need had taken over. “We’re together, Kylo. I...next time, you can tell me if you’re feeling...that way.”

He was quiet, breathing for a long second. “It’s still...” His voice wavered for a second. “You were perfect, Rey. I haven’t felt something like that in so long. And I’m sorry I was with other people before you. Maybe I wouldn’t be so messed up if I hadn’t been with them. I did...panic for a moment. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you right away. I was wrong again. Don’t think I didn’t want you but my...fucking issues stop me all of the time. I love you. If I lost you, I don’t know who I’d be.”

She licked her lips. His silences made more sense now. “You made me feel so special, Kylo. I wanted you to feel that way too.”

“I did,” he answered. “I still do. I keep thinking about how...free you felt. I can’t believe I made you feel that way. I’m just sorry that I almost ruined it.”

Shaking her head to herself, Rey closed her eyes. “You didn’t. It’s...good that you told me. It’s still special to me. I’m sorry you had...that you had those thoughts. I wish you didn’t have them but I want to help you.”

“You did. I want to help you too.” He exhaled. “Do you...are you still thinking about what happened in Mexico? Did I...did I help you start to forget it?”

She found herself shaking her head again. “I think it will get easier now. Really. I won’t let him keep hurting me. I can’t wait to go back to class on Monday and even studying tomorrow doesn’t feel so hard. And I know I can talk to you if I’m worried about it.”

“You can tell me anything,” Kylo said. “And I’ll do everything to keep you safe. I have to go...I know you’re safe. And I didn’t hurt you. I might be able to sleep.”
“You didn’t hurt me. You need to sleep more. Thank you for the flowers, Kylo. The next time you’re here, we can talk a little bit more. I need…you can tell me if you’re having bad thoughts. I want to hear them.” She started toying with the tie again. “I’ll miss you tonight.”

“I’ll miss you too. Goodnight, Rey. I love you.”

“I love you too, Kylo.”

He softly said goodbye and hung up and she stared at her phone until it went dark. He didn’t tell her those things to make her feel guilty, she told herself. He was being honest, after he worked through what he thought the problem was. She knew how he wrote about his breakdowns about sex but had a hard time imagining him pulling away and losing his mind, weeping on her shoulder like he’d described happening so many times.

Knowing him in such an intimate way, maybe that was what was different about her. Next time, he wouldn’t be afraid of hurting her, wrapped up in thoughts of losing her. Next time, she wouldn’t be focused on how to move her body. He was giving her time to learn, she hoped.

It was going to be okay. Like Leia had told her when she was younger, it was all about learning how to love her own body and how to listen to her partner. And she would have to figure out how to do that.

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“So, how’d it go?”

He’d heard Grey open the door to the deck and didn’t feel like looking at him, turning his head towards the sky instead. He’d left Grey inside to make the phone call. If anything was out of place when he returned, he would know that the real evidence of his misplaced trust would be harder to ignore.

The stars hadn’t changed, uncaring as always. “I kept trying to tell her how I really felt but I couldn’t get it all out. I don’t want her to think it was her fault. At the time, I thought I was going to…yeah. You know. Freak out or whatever it is I do when I fuck up sex. When I lose my erection, when I have to pull out and catch my breath, when I start thinking I’m a monster…” He shook his head. For all the stars cared, he could go to hell. “It even happens when I think I fuck up sex.”

He flinched away when Grey got closer, making him again rethink why he wanted to talk to him. He’d shut that door in January and walked away. But this panic, this fear, made him do something desperate and he had instantly regretted it until he realized that Grey was the only one who could understand. He needed someone who knew this side of him.

It was hard to feel both aggravated and relieved in the same breath.

Leaning against the railing, the other man shrugged. “Yeah, it’s a freak out and it’s fucking scary so I get why…yeah. You didn’t want her to see that side of you so quickly. But Ky, she already knows that part of you so you freaked out in a different way. She would have done what I did and what he did. She would have held you and you could have sobbed until you were exhausted.” He ran his hand along the cold wood, scratching at it with his short nails. “But I’m guessing you didn’t say anything about calling me?”
He just stared at his hands.

“You’re a fucking moron.”

“I know. But I didn’t want it to be…too much. And I haven’t figured out if we’re friends again or not.” He turned his head to glare at him, trying to keep him at a distance.

He rolled his eyes. “You’re a shitty liar.”

“No, I’m not,” he countered. “During training I beat the polygraph 89% of the time.”

“Big fucking deal. I did that when I was sixteen and dad let some loser straight out of her ten-week course use me as a guinea pig. Bitch thought I was a sociopath by the end of it.” Grey sighed and tilted his head. “But you know that’s why those things are so sketchy and aren’t allowed in most courts. And you know that I’m not lying now when I tell you that you should have called her before you called me. I don’t mind and I’ll come pick you up at any airport in the world if it gets you out of your head. Okay? But call your girlfriend first. Hey, maybe the words would have come out wrong but it still would have been the two of you talking.”

Chewing on his lip, Kylo shut his eyes.

“Christ, they came out wrong anyway? Fuck.”

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me right now.” Kylo tapped on the railing before folding his arms to step back and look at his darkened yard. The trees would start to bud soon and spring could fully take hold after a bitter winter. “Yeah, I don’t…I don’t know. I went through the list in my head of people to call and…” He trailed off and swallowed. “I still hate what you said to us. Rey hates you because of it but I…missed you. And that makes me a selfish fucking asshole.”

Rey had every right to abhor Grey. The declaration made him want to carve out his own heart and throw it out into the night. If he had only been able to resist his bodily urges that summer then there would be fewer problems in his life. If he hadn’t been with anyone other than Rey, so much of his sadness wouldn’t be there to haunt him in that moment.

But he wouldn’t have felt love either. And he’d never deserved any of those caring people and achingly sensual pleasures.

He never should have kissed Poe back in that hotel room. He’d still be alive if he’d just pushed him away. If that had never happened, then he never would have turned to Liza, almost ruining his best friend’s wedding. And without those times, he wouldn’t have been enticed by Grey’s hard mouth and frustrating words in the kitchen that morning.

Still, his brain kept rushing back to seeing the typewriter in the beam of his flashlight whenever he turned his thoughts away from holding and loving someone.

The rush of images was making it hard to hold it together and he suddenly wanted to be alone. The rising feeling returned that it was wrong to talk to him again. He’d been toxic. They were wrong together.

Grey swallowed before he sighed, shuffling his bare feet on the cured deck wood. And he was still talking.

“Ky, I get the asshole thing because that’s what I am. I’ve been trying to work on it but…yeah. Whatever. We’re both assholes. I never meant to fall in love with you and blow everything up. I fucking missed you so much and dad wasn’t telling me shit. I’m glad he didn’t because that would
make him an asshole too and I think I’m satisfied being the biggest one in the family now. Having these few months to sort my shit out…it’s what I deserved.” Grey stayed where he was, not closing the distance between them and keeping his head low. “But you don’t deserve to feel like shit because you were afraid of ruining her first time. You should have been able to say stop without worrying that she’ll blow up at you and blame you for everything. You have those thoughts. You let your partner know eventually. Easier said than done but you’ve gotten through the hardest part.”

He swallowed, rubbing his arms. He needed to go. He’d told him too much. He couldn’t break down in front of him right then. “Yeah, I think…I have a full day tomorrow and I might be able to sleep tonight. So thank you.”

Grey licked his lips again. That silly tell always gave him away, but it did look like he believed him. He was not a terrible liar after all. “I want to apologize again for kissing you.” Oh, great, now he wanted to talk about that. “And for all of the shit I said. I was fucking drunk but what I said crossed a bunch of lines so it’s no excuse. I was a fucking moron. You’ve had such a hard time the last few months and to top it all off, that asshole tries to kill your girl. And my shitty attitude is still rattling around in the back of your head so I’m…sorry.”

Cold, Kylo gestured with his head to go inside. “I need more time to accept that apology but it’s…a start.”

Grey followed, lurking a few paces behind. He had told him off earlier at the airport café, reminding him not to touch him. At least now he was respecting that. If anything, Grey was trying too. His dark hair was flaked with more strands of silver than before and it stood out when they were back in the light from his high ceiling. But this was enough for now. “You’ve got to start somewhere. But hey, if we’re going to hang out, you need to tell her. Give her the chance to accept that we’re just friends and I’m not up to some shady shit here.”

Was he really not up to something underhanded? He was almost too tired to think about it. Rubbing his face, Kylo sat down on the couch. He’d let him back in and now he had to deal with him. “I need more time. Grey, I have a lot going on in my head right now. I will tell her. I promise.”

He really meant it. But he had to figure out what to say. Getting the words off of his chest to his maybe-friend-again had really been a start to sorting out his feelings. Now that Rey knew why he might have been nervous, he could unravel more of his thoughts.

If he could stop the burning urge to erase every moment he used to cherish with his previous lovers, times before he knew that Rey could possibly feel that way about him, then he would be able to possibly sleep. But everything was pointing away from any rest that night.

Hearing that she wanted him and the way she kissed him was everything he needed until his fear snuck up on him. If he had broken down, she would have comprehended his fear but it would have also jaded something that should have been perfect for her. There was always part of him that wouldn’t give up control. That was the part of sex that he’d been searching for in her body and he’d blocked himself from it.

The way she kept her eyes closed made him already start to feel like she might be afraid. The sound she made when he penetrated her had almost made him want to stop, despite the hot rush it gave him into her perfect tightness. It was only when he looked back that he realized that it might have hurt and she could have been too worried to tell him. But he was showing her that her body should feel more pleasure than pain. How could it be wrong? The feeling of her legs wrapping around him had given him a pure sensation of bliss; his body was there until his mind betrayed him. His two sides were always battling for dominance and right then, back in his house, he was just tired.
It always kept fucking happening. He loved her. He wanted her. It shouldn’t be a problem anymore.

The damned typewriter burst through his memories again. The sight of the journal on the bed trailed after it. He shuddered, forcing the vision away.

“I think you need to go home,” he looked up and said. “I need to think about this…if it’s worth talking to you again.”

Stepping back, Grey stared at him. “What the fuck am I supposed to say to that?”

He rolled his eyes, not wanting to get pushed so quickly from sorrow to anger. “You say ‘yes, Kylo. I’m going home now. I understand how it is.’”

The other man snorted, the defiant sound cracking some of his resolve. “You fucking asshole. Fuck you. I’m not fucking going anywhere. You’re jerking me around again and I’m saying no this time. You tell her and she freaks out? Fine, then I’m fucking gone and you can learn how to deal with your shit alone. You can go take her to a bathtub and work out your feelings or something. I hate how I keep coming back to you and I don’t need this shit to keep going. I care about you so fucking much but you need to figure out what the fuck you want. I want to be your friend, especially now that there’s some psycho out there threatening someone else you love. You need, I don’t know, to relax about being perfect with her. To stop worrying that your past has made you totally broken and unable to really love someone. Things worked out better when you weren’t in your shit.”

Putting his head in his hands, he groaned to himself. “Don’t fucking talk about her assault that way. Just fucking stop it. I hate when you bring that up.”

He felt the other side of the couch dip. “Ky, I had to listen to you mumble and cry your way through how you wanted to stop having sex and…”

“Stop.” He lifted his hand. “I get it.”

“You shouldn’t be afraid of being yourself around her. That’s all I’m saying.” Grey just kept pushing him. “Did she get mad that you’re wearing that arm thing again? Christ, imagine you showing up wearing that ring.”

He dropped his head lower. If it wouldn’t set Grey off into another rant, he’d take the fucking thing off and throw it across the room. His heart would ache but he could fucking do it. “I’ve tried. I’m going to keep trying but I keep doing shit like this. She almost died and I’m stuck in my own feelings and I can’t stop thinking about that fucking typewriter and how much I miss him and how I missed you. If you weren’t here, I don’t know what I’d do. I want you to leave but I also don’t want you to go. It’s all fucking messed up in my head. I don’t know how to feel about everyone I’ve ever slept with before her. I really loved him and he helped me figure out a lot of things about myself but now it just feels like he died for nothing. I’m still broken and useless. I used Liza, sure, but she fucking did the same thing to me. We could only have sex when I was drunk so that says a lot. And you…yeah. Then there’s you and that weekend. And then me running to you again. And now we’re…fuck. Every time I think I’ve gotten through it…”

“Yeah, you go back to it. I get that you’re regretting every time you ever fucked before her but you couldn’t live like a fucking monk until she turned eighteen. You were in that bathtub with her and didn’t take her to bed and fuck her because you are not a monster. You got hard and I hold that over you because I know it bothered you and it took you time to admit to her that it happened. It’s like even before you were dating, you were afraid to tell her this shit. You aren’t like that ghoul who raped you, asshole. I’ve heard enough about Poe to feel like I know him and I wish you would give
me Liza’s number because I would love to have a conversation with that dumb bitch. But you did
learn to like fucking most of the time and you would’ve been a different person if you didn’t work
on that. I get that it’s all fucked up now. You had to run down there like a hero and get all of that
shit sprung on you. It hurts not to be able to talk about it so I get why I’m here.” Grey’s leg started
bouncing and he let out an annoyed snort. “You are a good person but you make weird choices. I
guess that’s why I can’t stay away from you. I’ve been talking to dad more and working with my
shrink and I want to be better, just like you. Life is less boring with you around. It’s not me reading
kids’ books in funny voices until I want to scream.”

Part of him was weakly proud that Grey had stayed at his job. He didn’t know how to settle that
thought in his head. Before they got home, when Grey forced him into leaving the airport, he’d
started talking about how hard the months had been for him. He’d been looking at grad school
across the country. It would be good for him to move on, but he also needed him there. Push him
away, accept him back. He didn’t know what to do with him. Everything was still a push pull.

Rey had almost died. And the thought was too painful to deal with alone.

He tilted his head to eye him, his mind getting dragged through the worst possible outcome if he
failed to find the man who kept trying to destroy everything he loved. “I don’t like being
unpredictable but I still am and…How mad would you be if I just ended it all if she was gone? If
she’d died down there? I know I’d lose it and I still don’t know what I’d do.”

A pained look crossed Grey’s face; it flashed for a moment, surprising him. Shaking his head, he
folded his arms, shifting his long legs under his gaze. “I don’t think I’d ever be able to forgive you.
I’d spit on your fucking coffin because I know you’d blow your fucking brains out without thinking
twice so I wouldn’t be able to spit on your stupid dead face. And it’s all dad’s fault that you have a
gun so there goes that relationship. But I know you’d feel like the world was over. Don’t think I
don’t get you, Ky. It’s that weird fucking falling feeling that just screams at you that the only way
to stop it is to give in to it. I’ve listened to you tell me how you felt in those moments and I…hey,
I’ve been there too but I told myself that pain can’t win every time. You’ve been wallowing in one
death for eight years but you’ve done good shit in that time too. If she was gone, I’d hope you’d
just be pissed off and go after the bastard harder. Blow that fucker away and then think about
whether or not it’s worth it to be a corpse and to be really dead rather than just feeling like it every
now and again.”

Resting his elbows on his knees, he focused on his hands. “She told me she’d want me to live for
her. I’ve already been doing that for nineteen years. But if I couldn’t see her face…it got me
through so much. It got me through everything. And…I don’t know.”

“Ky, she was scared of almost dying. She wanted to sleep with you because she loves you and
thinks you’re hot but that fear was also there. You’ve also got her through the last nineteen years.”
Grey sighed. “Yeah, okay. The beginning can’t really define the end. She still needs to grow up a
bit. Maybe that’s why you were worried about telling her you were going to freak out. Or maybe
I’m just trying to help you not look so fucking broken right now. I wasn’t in a relationship when I
was nineteen because I was busy fucking everything that moved, but you were. Maybe think a little
bit more about how you were rather than who you were with.”

He started biting at his cuticle as Grey was speaking. He had also started college after turning
nineteen. But he thought that he had more of his life figured out, whatever it was. He also felt a
great deal more expectations on his shoulders than Rey had but he wasn’t sure if that came from
himself or others at this point. He had tried to be a good partner yet had his weak moments of
anger and emotional breakdown all of the time. Going to class and getting into his course work had
been so important because it was the future. And even if they argued and it hurt to the bone, he
was never afraid to tell Poe things, even if he would stubbornly internalize them before revealing his thoughts. And Poe would do the same. There were times when Poe would go quiet or not text him back for a time, but that would only be a few hours. He was never cut off for days or weeks like Rey had done to him…

“Maybe that’s what I’m afraid of,” he said aloud, looking at the redness at the end of his finger. “When I get cornered, I’m not myself or the person I know I can be in a relationship. I mean, I did mess up a lot but I could talk to him without feeling like he was going to shut me out forever. He would be fucking angry but would tell me that…that I was enough for him. I still wanted to get better and be better for him. But at the end, he was frustrated with me too. He should have left me and I begged him to stay all of the time. I never want Rey to feel like she’s been followed or that I’m too much…Christ, I don’t know. Maybe I’m making the same mistakes all over again. If she asked me, I’d buy her anything. And that doesn’t fix things.”

Grey shifted closer, meeting his eyes before gently and carefully swatting his hand from his mouth with a flick of his fingers. “I would have grabbed you to make you stop but I’m trying to listen and not touch you. It hurts to know that you think you have to close this part of yourself off from her. You’re talking yourself in circles right now. Maybe sleep on it and when you call her tomorrow, tell her this shit. This…I don’t mind listening to you but it sucks to hear all this stuff about someone else when I’m sitting right here. I don’t get why you’re doing what you’re doing. You wanted to sleep with her, you panicked and wanted to stop but you still went through with it because you didn’t want to ruin it. And everything you’re saying…it’s also pretty fucking personal so…yeah. She’s going to be pissed about that.”

Moving away from him, Kylo kept the distance that he needed. “I’ve told her it’s okay to talk about me to her friends. That’s important. I controlled everything he did and she needs to talk to people her own age. And for fuck’s sake, everyone is always telling me to talk more. Your dad told me to go to her. I don’t know what my parents would say. Owen would listen but he’s my partner. I can’t have him further in my head. And Hux has been a bit of a dick to me lately so who else could I talk to? I already know I’m doing everything wrong. So, thanks for that.”

Angry eyes bore into him for a long moment. Grey sat in place for a long moment, his hands curling into fists. The silence between them stretched on and Kylo wasn’t going to be the one to break it. He could hit him if he wanted to. He’d earned it.

“No problem. Anytime.” Sliding back to his side of the couch, Grey finally pursed his lips, glaring before the look softened into an exhale. “I just want to know what you want from me, Ky. I can’t walk around on eggshells, waiting for you to call me out of the blue again, because you want it both ways. I’ll do something stupid again and I hate living with regrets. Because you know, if she shut you out and told you to fuck off forever, I’d be there for you however you wanted me.”

Silently looking at him, Kylo could only shake his head.

There was still too much to think about.

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She blushed when Kaydel asked how her time with Kylo was when she came by on Sunday morning, still wearing her backpack after being dropped off by her father. She put down her bag of groceries and studied her for a long moment.
Of course, Kaydel didn’t miss the change on her face and looked at her with wide eyes before pulling her into a hug. “Okay, I’m never going home again. Oh my God, Rey. How do you…how do you feel?”

Pulling away, Rey gripped her hand, working through what she could share with her friend as she squeezed the warm palm. The answer had grown in the hours she’d spent alone. Having sex with him had made her feel beautiful and strong. She could still feel his hands on her still, caressing and holding her. Being in his arms, kissing his chest, and feeling all of him against her had been a rush that she wanted to use to erase every hurt that remained in the back of her mind. Every bad thought she’d ever had might finally be able to be put away forever.

But if he was struggling in his thoughts, even a little, they still had things to work on.

Sitting on her bed, Rey gave her friend a small smile. “It was…it was amazing. He really is everything, Kay. He always warned me that it would be awkward or something but when I stopped being nervous about being naked around him like this, he just loved me. His hands are so huge but so soft. He was so careful and I could just lose myself in him. But he…” Now came the hard part, making her tongue heavy. “There’s a part that I’ve been thinking about and I don’t know how to feel.”

She wondered how every other person who’d been with him dealt with those moments. The words she had were his own view of the moments or days after. How had Poe held him so he felt safe? What was he thinking then? He’d made Kylo feel so much so he must have done something special, she thought darkly. He was still so perfect somehow. How had Liza done something to him that he had called her again? Maybe she just didn’t care and had said what he wanted to hear so he’d end up turning to her again when he felt alone? Thinking about the other woman’s curves compared to how Kylo’s hands had cupped her breasts made it hard not to feel the return of shame about her body. And Grey…why couldn’t he just be his friend? Why did he have opinions about things he had to right in knowing? She hoped that he was sitting somewhere alone and really feeling it because Kylo was hers now.

She could figure this out but it wouldn’t get easier if she didn’t talk to someone about it. She’d have to ask Kylo to read his journals again to remind herself of how Kylo had had difficulties with everyone he’d slept with. She hadn’t done anything wrong other than try to love him. She didn’t care about the mess and he could come inside her without being worried. She was going to show Kylo that she could be everything he needed but she had to figure out how to deal with the depths of his feelings.

She looked at her friend as she sat down beside her. Pulling her knees up to her chin, she sighed. “He called me the next day and said he almost panicked but didn’t want to tell me. He’s always…he has trouble with sex. Sometimes he can’t get, you know, hard or sometimes he thinks too much and loses it. I know it’s not my fault but it hurts to know he was scared to tell me. It’s like he’s afraid again and I don’t know what to do. I thought it was okay but last night I started thinking about why he thought that way. We were helping each other and I want him to feel safe around me and like I’m enough.”

“You’re enough, Rey. I know how caring you are and how much you love him.” Kaydel stroked her arm, making her look at her. “He’s sort of complicated. I mean, he’s more than complicated. I just can’t believe he was in here and was, like, naked and everything. I want to ask about his, um, like how big he was but I don’t even know how big they can be. I’ve only made out at a few parties. But maybe he was worried about disappointing you? He, like, always tried to be perfect at school too.”
Maybe she should call Rose. She’d gone further with the boy she was dating. Maybe she would know more or at least be able to understand what it was like to feel the bittersweet sensation of satisfaction being overtaken by regret.

“That’s the problem. And I don’t know how to fix it. He used to be able to tell me everything and I thought we were there again.” Frowning, she looked at the flowers. “It’s not fair that he can’t just be with me. I think I know what he wants and then he finds something else to worry about. I’d be able to fix him if he was here more often. He said he was afraid and worried that I almost died and I just wanted him to feel better and fix some of those fears inside me too. And he couldn’t let go.”

Sighing, her friend followed her eyes. “It sounds so hard. I can’t imagine what would have happened if he didn’t come help us but he really did look freaked out when he came out of our room. I can’t believe it’s the same guy who killed Poe. He was so nice to us when we were kids and I keep thinking that something worse could have happened. I wish none of that happened. You could have died and he just sent us home.”

Shaking her head, Rey frowned. “He was doing it to protect us. It was his job, I guess. I still don’t know what being a federal agent really means. I just want to spend more time with him. He’s going to try to come here more often but he’s got a lot to do. He talks about the case sometimes and I can see that he’s frustrated. The stuff they’ve found has really made him upset.”

Kaydel nodded. “That guy is really going to regret hurting you when Kylo finds him.”

She never wanted Kylo to have to kill anyone ever again but after everything that happened, all of the pain he’d caused in their lives and the hurt he’d spread around the world, the man truly deserved to die.

“I don’t really know, Kay. He’s had so much to do and they still have other cases to work on at the same time. I want him to be here and I know he will try, but he doesn’t know why all of those people had to die either. And I know he blames himself.” She rubbed her arms. “I don’t like watching cop movies but maybe I would get it more if I tried watching them.”

“We could watch them together?” Kaydel offered. “My dad asked me about how you were doing. I have some cookies from my mom for you too. But he is still worried that the government is going to send us a bill for the plane ride and that I’ll never get my stuff back. He says…Dad was glad that Kylo was there but he still calls him Ben Solo with this weird voice. I don’t get it at all.”

Rey hadn’t thought about the people back home since December. With what happened not that long ago, it was hard to realize that other people were still out there living their lives, with their own opinions. She managed to smile. “Kylo will bring it back soon. And I don’t think we’ll have to worry about any bill.”

Still, when her friend left, she looked through the news on her computer. It was strange to read George or Owen being referred to as agents even though that’s how she first knew them. Kylo would stand there at a press conference but he was never named. They were being careful with what they were telling the media and she didn’t blame them.

Pausing the video, she thought again about how many different roles he had to play in life. He cared about his parents and they’d taken care of them both for the last fifteen years. She still wished she could take back all of the times she was angry with them. Maybe when she was home soon she’d finally get her license. If she had her own car, she could offer to take her friends out for small trips when spring had really settled in. She could go home more often and Han wouldn’t have to drive so far just to pick her up.
Staring at the frozen version of adult Kylo on the screen, she sighed and remembered who he was ten years ago so they could be the same age. The memories, like most of the images in her head, had changed over time but they were still hers. She had been so happy when she saw their apartment for the first time. It seemed like everything would be perfect there for them. In the beginning, Kylo didn’t even question that they’d come home or she would stay with them. It was where she belonged.

But had Kylo even asked Poe if that’s what he wanted too?

She put her laptop down and looked at the picture he’d taken of her in that old guest room, not that far from where she was sitting right then. She was holding their cat, smiling. Fingering the glossy sheet, she bit her lip. It wasn’t fair that Kylo was wearing that armband but he should be able to think about him without her feeling like everything was going to fall apart. Kylo always went back to thinking about him because there was no real end to his story. He’d been sure for so long that it was someone else and now dozens of other people were dead too.

Again, she tried to remember if they were acting differently after the first time they slept together. But Poe was always smiling at Kylo, brushing his hand or just sitting next to him on the couch. He had been nineteen too when Kylo had proposed…

The thought made it hard to look at her screen again. Even if she had a world of feelings for him, he was still holding back things from her. There was a different look in his eyes when he left her. It held love, but not the same devotion he’d shown him.

She tried to tell herself that they hadn’t been together for as long as Kylo and Poe had been. It hadn’t even been a year yet.

And Kylo, with his complicated heart, always needed time. She’d have to be patient.

Sighing, she closed her laptop and grabbed her art history textbook. The boring column types couldn’t wait another day.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: Sexual content, emotion cheating, Grey.

Also note that 57 has been divided up into three chapters. That’s why the chapter count has changed. It’s meant to be read as one. So there will be a longer note at the end of 59 that I hope you will take the time to read once you get there and not before.
There were fewer people in the office on a Sunday. Even on a normal Sunday, only a few people would be roaming around. He knew who would be there and when and had quickly staked out a place to be alone. He could lurk in a currently unused corner cubicle and go through his notes about when the victims were last seen, comparing to the estimated time of death for the fourth time.

Well, for those they could narrow down within a specific time frame. He stared at a picture of a jawbone without blinking before flipping the page of the coroner’s report.

Whatever took his mind off of the last almost two days.

The problem of why they were chosen still stood out to him. The older victims had brought him to the children, yes, but other than vaguely resembling his long-dead lover, what had made them different? He had more than enough notes about who they were but the day they vanished would always be a mystery until they found who had done this. Part of the meeting the next day would return to their victims and he could get some of those thoughts out of his head.

It was hard not to hear the families’ voices as he went down the lists of names. Boys and men, their lives snuffed out by a knife. It was always a knife. No obvious gunshots. There were some possible suffocations and post-mortem mutilations but the causes of death were mostly the same. At least their killer was consistent in one way.

Even with splitting the calls, he’d made too many of them but that part was over now. He had been the one to build the initial contact so it was only fair that he informed them that their sons were bones and dust in an abandoned house. They had been overlooked in so many ways and it always brought out a familiar feeling of betrayal. The remains were starting to be released for burial and he’d heard from at least a few families, asking if he wanted to attend. What could he say? He had made promises. They had felt a renewed hope, only to have it end with empty, partial closure. Saying no and that it was unprofessional was only a partial lie, but it was the best one he could come up with. Someone else would have to attend and watch for anyone suspicious.

They were going to find him, somehow.

At least focusing on that part of his thoughts was something he could move forward on, with the help of the current people he was avoiding.

He had been able to move his notes and computer from his regular desk to one away from the members of the team that had to be there. He had gotten there before George again, not wanting to look at him after going against his advice by talking to his son again and coming in too early. He couldn’t evade him all day. It was only just after 8 a.m. and someone was going to track him down
eventually. He wanted a cup of coffee but didn’t dare go to the machine. If he could just make it through the next few hours alone he’d be able to talk to them.

About the only thing he looked forward to was going home at the end of the day and calling Rey.

He’d woken up hard that morning, reliving their time together in a dream that glistened into fantasy that she was really there. It made him leave the warm bed for the safety of the couch. Mornings like that had been rare and always bled off into confusion.

It had been sweet and innocent and he cursed himself for how his mind had wanted to fight against his want when he shared her room. The more he thought about her body and how it felt both under him and on top of him settled warmth in his chest and he needed to focus on that. He was the one who was wrong to think that she wouldn’t understand but the fear remained. Being in his head had caused his previous partners such agony. He wanted to spare her from it. But that was a mistake. Grey was right. She already knew all this. How else was she going to learn that he truly cared if he kept hiding things from her? If he had lost her, there would be no taking it all back again.

The bigger problem would come when he finally told her about Grey. Maybe he could lighten the blow by doing it in person if he got a weekend free soon. If he had called her panicked, like he had wanted to before caving and calling Grey, he wouldn’t be able to take that back. He had to lose his fear and trust that she wouldn’t cut him off for being scattered in his thinking. She loved him. That mattered so much. She was growing up. Grey kept saying that she needed time to develop and it would be different this time. Now, they were in a relationship. Before, they were just in a bubble.

He had someone who loved him with all of her heart. He had to focus on that rather than the lingering feeling that always followed him after having sex, knowing that soft dreams could turn into twisted nightmares at any moment. Even when he went to sleep exhausted, visions mixed with memories and reality was warped in the process. His brain kept pulling him towards the thought that his physical desires were sickening again. Rey was young but she was an adult. She’d said yes and he didn’t hurt her. There was nothing wrong with wanting her.

But the memories of how her sounds of pleasure reminded him of the whines of horror that he’d heard over fifteen years ago. The aching bewilderment refused to settle in his heart. Having Grey at least left him able to sleep but that part also made him a fuck up. Once Grey had proven himself as a true friend, he would let her know. She had trusted Grey once and if Grey could apologize to him, maybe he could convince her too?

Spacing out, he stared at his computer screen, hoping some sudden answers would come to him for all of the problems. If he kept letting her down, he was going to lose her. He would be cut off and wouldn’t be able to take it. If anything happened to her during a silence, forgiveness would be hard to find. She’d tried to run away once and could do it again.

Maybe she should run from him once and for all.

Gritting his teeth, he randomly started scrolling through his report, looking for typos.

One problem at a time.

“There you are.”

Glancing up at Owen, he tried to shrug into the jolt he gave him. “I’m not hiding.”

Maybe he said that too quickly.

His partner smirked.
Definitely too fast of an answer.

“I didn’t say that, but you did admit it. Tell me how your part is going. We can fold it into mine before the briefing tomorrow.” He leaned over to glance at his computer screen and raised his tawny eyebrows. “You don’t have to do the rest of the timeline yourself. I already told you that. We’re almost there and you’ve already done enough.”

Again, he was doing something wrong. But he couldn’t show it. “Yeah, I know. I guess I just wanted to work ahead. A little.”

Stroking his beard, Owen stepped back. “It’s more like a lot.” Kylo heard his partner sigh and flicked his eyes away. “George wants to talk to you.”

Looking at his laptop, he let his eyes blur. He’d known it was coming. “Now?”

“Yes, now.” He could still feel Owen’s stare as he spoke. “I don’t think you’re in trouble. We have a visit from California. But Kylo, what’s going on? Why are you sitting here in the dark? Give me a quick run down before you see him.”

Leaning back, he forced his eyes to focus again. “I’m just tired. Rey and I…I went to see her on Friday and I’m still thinking about it.”

There was much more to it but that was the best answer he could give that was short and relatively painless.

Owen sighed, shifting his weight. “We need to talk then. Come find me at our desks when you’re done in there. Okay? I’m going to force you not to eat lunch at your desk today.”

He had to nod. Owen gave him one last serious look before he walked away.

Fine. Fine. Whatever.

Gathering his strength, he forced himself to take deep breaths and find his centre. Still, he went the other way to cross the floor of the office. He swatted at one of the tiny American flags on Gerd’s desk and left it knocked over. Fuck him for not being in today.

Owen knew him too well and wasn’t sitting at their desks when he finally reached their side. But he did catch George’s eyes on the other side of the glass wall of his office. He had to pause when he saw another familiar face in there, along with a strange one that still set off some distant buzzing in the back of his head.

He straightened his shoulders and took a deep breath as he approached the open door.

“Owen said you needed to see me,” he said, knocking softly on the open frame. He hoped his face was blank enough to avoid showing everything he had just given away to his partner. He stood, trapped in the doorway, setting his face in a tight line.

George’s look softened, silently telling him to stay balanced. There were guests. It was like dinner with his parents when he was small. Behave. Ben Solo had been a brat but he was an even bigger child when his emotions were in tatters as Kylo Ren. He had to be in control. “Yes. Come in. I knew you were here even if you weren’t at your desk.”

Swallowing the slight admonishment, he met his supervisor’s eyes. He finally nodded before looking to the familiar, yet older, face that also turned to look at him as he strode into the room. Faking confidence in the place of his discomfort was the best thing he could do at that moment.
“Hello, Phasma.”

He couldn’t remember the last time he saw the woman but when she stood, he had to shudder back feeling fourteen again and hating everything about her: her haircut, her trousers, her blouse. The scent of her perfume. Seeing her made the room smell like those sterile and hatefully endless days at the hospital. She hadn’t helped him like George had but over the years he’d come to understand the position she was in. He was impossible to deal with then; now, he was just as stubborn but in a different way. He kept his eyes on her, not letting his curiosity show about the man standing up beside her. He was sure he knew him from somewhere but couldn’t place the exact source. That rarely happened and it knocked him off his already shaky focus.

“Nice to see you again, agent,” Phasma said. She smiled at him, extending her hand. He tried to concentrate on her rather than the questions that were bubbling up in his chest. “I couldn’t call you that the last time we spoke. I can’t believe how much you’ve grown up.”

He shook her hand, unable to escape politeness. “It’s been a long time.”

“I think maybe ten years? The last reunion I went to. Christ.” She sighed as she released his hand. He finally could turn and face the stranger as he followed Phasma’s gaze to him, still trying to unravel why he was familiar. “This is Dr. Erso, he’s here to answer some of the questions we all have had about how that typewriter ended up getting stolen from our evidence.”

Kylo tried to hide his instant and grating disgust when he faced the high-cheekboned man, holding his eyes for a long moment before extending his hand. This was his fault. He knew rage briefly flashed across his face before he could find a calm expression again. He forced himself to keep his hand steady even though he had no interest in touching the other man. “Agent Ben Solo.”

A firm hand hit his. “Dr. Galen Erso. It’s wonderful to finally meet you, Agent Solo, despite the circumstances. I had already explained to SSA Jinn that I take full accountability for the typewriter disappearing from evidence. It’s been in our care for so long and we lost it on our end. I apologize for whatever you’ve been thinking about since then.”

Finally able to pull his hand away, Kylo swallowed and took the empty chair directly across from George, putting Phasma between them. He probably moved too quickly but he had to sit down. They’d been waiting for him, talking about him and taking up the two other chairs there. They hadn’t been sitting on the couch, like they would if it was a casual conversation. He looked away, focusing on his hands for a brief moment before he caught the colour of George’s shoes under the desk. Brown. Okay. “I just want to know how you lost it and when. That would answer a lot of questions. Something like that isn’t a file or a book or even a DNA kit. It weighs thirty-five pounds. How could he just walk out without any of your people noticing?”

George was still standing and Kylo felt a slight glare of rebuke before he sat in the big black chair behind his desk. He folded his hands and Kylo tried to suck back his bad mood. “We have it now. And…” The tone of his voice made him look up. There was always a routine about how he wanted to be addressed. Even if George wasn’t pleased with how he’d just responded, he still knew how to draw the boundaries: how to try to get him back on track through something expected. His blue eyes flicked to the stranger and then back to him. Kylo managed a nod, not wanting to think twice. He just wanted to get it over with. “Yes, Kylo, we can look at the video here or in the conference room.”

He kept his hands planted in his lap, resisting scratching the scar. “I…” For what felt like the millionth time, he wished George understood the blinking. Why are you springing this on me now? Who is this man really? And finally: Am I the last one to know about this? “We have the screen here. Go ahead.”
The two chairs beside him were occupied and he saw George raise his eyebrows. *Calm down. Pretend to be okay and you will get there.*

George could read his body language even if he wasn’t blinking words at him. He did know him. He would probably forgive him for talking to Grey again too, he hoped.

Finding another reason to feel guilty, he licked the front of his teeth and nicked his head. George turned his monitor so he could see what he guessed everyone else had already viewed. Maybe hiding in the corner hadn’t been the smartest idea if he wanted to know everything that was going on. Sulking never helped but it felt *good.*

Like with the video from Mexico, someone in black, wearing a dark hat, ducked into the camera view of the evidence room, the face obscured. To him, it looked like the same person. He handed over an ID and signed the paperwork. Whoever it was stood there, waiting, not moving. There were no betrayals of nerves or agitation. There was only a distinct show of confidence in the shoulders, waiting for the clerk to go back and fetch what they’d asked for. When the young clerk brought back the clearly heavy evidence box, Kylo wanted to punch the screen.

*You moron. You idiot.* The credentials must have been faked. Could the clerk identify him? Have they spoken with him? They had more of a description now if he could give them more details. He was obscured from the camera but they could still get *something.* His eyes darted around the screen until he caught the date.

“This was six months ago.” He didn’t mean to sound so bitter but his eyes shot to Phasma in an instant. “We should have had this the entire time. Why did it take so long to find out when he took it? What are you people doing out there?”

“Kylo…” George started.

“It’s really my fault,” Dr. Erso interrupted calmly. “I was the one that insisted that it stay in California.”

He had to look at him in the eyes again and it made Kylo’s agitation spike. “What are you talking about?”

His words were flat. His tone was icy. But inside, his thoughts *burnt.*

Red tones bled into the corners of his eyes as he glared at the man. He’d come to his office with excuses. He was the reason he had to deal with seeing that hateful object again. It should have been tossed in the garbage but for *some* reason they’d kept it. Life was already painful. He didn’t need to be reminded of the seven-year gap in his life every time he came into the office now.

The quiet of the room finally hit him.

George’s steady breathing brought him back to where he was and how he should behave but it almost wasn’t enough.

He’d just been staring for too long.

George tapped his desk, knocking him back to the moment fully. He was almost thankful when he started speaking, breaking the constricting silence. “Dr. Erso wrote his dissertation about the… Snoke case before joining the Bureau. He’s been the main source of ideas into his methods and reasoning and has been a true asset to understanding this case from a different angle, the one that comes from California. Kylo, we know what we know but there are always other sides to a story than our personal feelings. You know this. We can’t let these families suffer because we get stuck
in our old memories. We have this viewpoint and we have to consider it. The suspect used his old USC credentials, posing as him.”

The name and the words finally rocked him. That’s where he knew him. Distantly, faintly, he saw the face in some vague memory. He had read his work, that’s where it was coming from. He’d highlighted the parts regarding the ‘survivors’ and integrated them into many of his essays and theses. The distinct face sitting in that room was on a book jacket in his house and knew exactly what he would be reading that evening, after hours of pure anger on his treadmill and probably even more than a few glasses of wine. He’d have to stop biting his arm at some point as the weather got warmer. Even then it was almost more comforting to wear a long-sleeved shirt to keep his other source of release hidden from others.

But George’s eyes tried to force him into being steady when he snapped his head towards him.

Taking a deep breath, he nodded before slowly looking over at the interloper. “So at least we know it isn’t you?”

He had seen the video. It wasn’t the same slim frame of the neatly dressed man sitting just beyond Phasma’s broad shoulders. But it still could have been. Disguises were easy to come up with when they were necessary. He needed to read the clerk’s report now and wanted to demand to see it.

But his words had been too sharp. Still, only two of the other people in the room reacted to how he spoke.

“They were stolen at about the same time,” Dr. Erso answered calmly. “I have an office at USC and occasionally teach there. I was out of the country at the time and didn’t notice until you discovered the typewriter on this coast. That was how we narrowed down the timeframe. I admit that I thought I just lost them. So, I take full responsibility for the breach. I’ve already explained that to SSA Jinn that it didn’t occur to me that it would still give anyone access in this way since I also have my FBI credentials.”

Kylo took slow and steady breaths, reading the same energy from George when he looked over at him. Silently, George was giving him permission to be angry within reason. He quirked one eyebrow and Kylo dared to open his mouth again. “I’m sorry if I don’t accept that as an excuse.”

The man smirked, annoying him further. “I believe he just told me the same thing.”

Phasma cleared her throat. “I don’t think arguing about this is getting us anywhere. We have the description from the archive room officer. He’s been reprimanded. We’ve re-canvassed USC campus security about the breach there. But there are bigger things to talk about. How can we help from our end? George, did you get the files I sent you? I know he’s not active on our coast but…”

The words blurred into a high-pitched whine and he could only narrow his eyes and hope that the meeting ended soon. Knowing how tense he must look, he tried to lean back, putting his right ankle on his left knee to try to at least appear like he wasn’t screaming inside.

Erso’s hazel eyes followed him in the motion.

Kylo snapped his head in his direction and narrowed his gaze, fully tuning out what George and Phasma were discussing. The man gave him a tight smile. He glared before turning away, clenching his jaw. He kept catching small looks from George, telling him that whatever was going on in his head, they would discuss later but if he had a feeling, he should follow it. Kylo hated this man for a reason and if they could talk through it, they’d all be better off. It should have calmed him, having George on his side like he always had him, but his heart was slowly climbing into his
And every time Kylo caught Erso looking at him, a distinct dread made the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

He managed to add some things to their plans for moving forward but really couldn’t shake the heaviness that settled in his thoughts regarding him. Inside, he knew he hadn’t been paying attention. It piled on with his other shameful thoughts.

He copied George when he stood, hoping he could be quickly dismissed. He gave Phasma a nod and turned to leave but was stopped by a gentle voice by the doorway. He wasn’t running, just like he hadn’t been hiding before.

“Agent Solo, I just wanted to say again that it’s a pleasure to meet you.” Erso took two steps to catch up to him, meeting his eyes. “I have to admit that I haven’t really been following your career as much as I followed your academic work.”

Kylo planted his feet on George’s office floor. He distantly heard George and Phasma talking but knew he had eyes on him. “We’re the FBI. We should be good at keeping secrets. And we shouldn’t lose evidence.”

Erso gripped his bicep slightly, pressing on a hidden but still-fresh bruise. “Let’s work on figuring out why that happened together.”

Anger was snaking through his entire body and he had to fight from jerking his arm free. “I guess we will. If you can excuse me, I have work to do.”

He had to slow his strides but he knew he walked heavily, fury about to sweep over him. He returned to his dark corner to gather up his work. He brought everything back to his regular desk. He had to hold back dropping it all in a heap and storming off.

Owen glanced up, green-blue eyes instantly turning to concern as his computer hit the desk with slightly too much force. “How did it go?”

It was all about to explode out of his mind if he didn’t keep it together. “When did you see that video? Or meet that man?” He whispered through clenched teeth. He took one long angry breath and winced, dropping into his chair. “I’m sorry but…I need someone to talk me down right now.”

“Right.” Owen sat up, levelling his eyes at him. “It took time to narrow down when it happened. When we can speak with George privately, I think that you will not be alone in how…suspicious it looks. But I also think he’ll tell you to calm down. I’ve dealt with Erso over the years, especially when it came to reviewing your application four or five years ago. However long ago it was. He had some insights and was positive about your abilities and mental state. Still, I didn’t like him then either. But we will have to get along with him.”

Keeping his hands on his desk, Kylo was finally able to let his shoulders drop. He could still see him in there with George and Phasma and had to tear his eyes away from watching them. “I didn’t need this. I can’t control everything and I feel like it wouldn’t have happened if I had more power.”

He flicked his eyes to Owen and saw the other man sigh. “Let’s go have a cup of coffee in the cafeteria. It’s terrible there too but I can tell you’re on an edge that I don’t want you to fall over. Come on.”

He followed, not wanting to talk. Just listening would be a good change.
Owen took tea rather than coffee but tea just made him think about Rey. The soft way she’d open the tea bag and lightly tug on the string when it was almost done. Or the fancier teas she had that needed a proper metal strainer. How she’d blow on it was too warm, wanting it to be perfect. That’s why he had to be better.

Drinking his bitter Quantico coffee, his eyes refused to focus.

“Is he going to read my journal too?” Had he already read it?

Owen just sipped at his cup. “It’s evidence. He’s a psychologist and a profiler and a good agent even if he gives off creepy vibes. Accept it and move on. You understand what we’re trying to do here. You have to remove yourself from the role of a victim as long as you have that badge on.”

He was about to argue about privacy before he remembered that he’d done the same thing in his Master’s thesis and lost any firm ground to stand on. “Thank you.”

“George is going to tell you the same thing.” He wrapped his hands around his mug and leaned forward. “Tell me about what’s going on with Rey.”

He blinked at the change in subject, but understood Owen’s thinking. He’d come into the office already upset. It had been obvious. “It’s been hard since she was attacked. I felt so helpless before you got there because now we know that it’s all connected. I just want to know why. I can’t have him get her too, Owen, and he almost did. I was worried about her and went to talk to her but made it all about me. She needed me to be there to listen. But she also needed me in a different way and I almost panicked when things got…intimate.”

His cheeks were hot and he looked at the off-white table as Owen took a deep breath. “You have an appointment with Maz this week. Don’t brush it off, especially if you’re feeling this way. She is younger, Kylo, and you both have a great deal of trauma left to deal with. Silla keeps me level but we have our problems too, so there are other parts of relationships that can be rough without having so many worries. I can’t tell you more than to just talk to her. Your feelings are only wrong if you let them overwhelm you. And like George says, things get better over time if we start by pretending that they’re not as harsh as we imagine. The main thing is that you didn’t lose her.”

“I’m afraid of losing her in a different way now.” Nodding, he picked at his still-raw fingernail. “I’m just afraid she’ll leave me for good if I don’t show her the right things. I keep fucking up. I’ve had…I’ve really only had one other real relationship. And even though he could get pissed off, it’s all like every angry thing he ever said to me gets clouded the more I think about it. I just want to stop thinking that any of what happened between Poe and me was perfect in any way. It wasn’t. But with her…sometimes I can’t talk to her because we’ll just get into an argument and I’ll be forced to bottle everything up inside…”

Owen leaned forward, making him look at him. “You know why you’re thinking that way. You know why it’s feeling harder now. You’ve had two major stressors.” Owen raised his pointer finger. “One, you have been informing families that their children are dead. You have done excellent in that role but I see you every time you hang up the phone. I put the cigarettes in your desk drawer for a reason. You are remembering him again and you need to keep framing him as a victim. You could do that once so think about what’s changed now. And two,” a second finger went up. “She was attacked. Think about what you just told me. I was there with you in Mexico and know how determined you were and I’m still thankful you were there. One day, when we get a case that focuses on Mandarin and Arabic I will be more useful to you. But she didn’t see that side of you. You can be open and confident I’ve only known you a few years but just being aware of your story gives me a greater perspective than most people. Talking is crucial thing and you might be pushing her away because you don’t want to be hurt again. Recognize that and deal with it. And
you can talk to me rather than turning to others.”

So Owen also must have figured out something was going on. “I know Poe is a victim. I can frame him that way when we’re here but at home…it’s different. Losing her like I lost him…I wouldn’t be the same. That confident person you know would be gone. I want to talk to her more but I don’t want to break her and…Am I a bad person for reaching out to Gregor again?”

“So, I had a bet with myself about why you were hiding in a corner.” Owen shut his eyes, his hand curling into a fist before he sighed and looked at him again. “I’m not telling George. This stays between us until he figures it out too. I like Gregor. I’ve known him since he was a teenager. But he stopped being good for you a while ago. You can outgrow friendships, Kylo. Especially if they turn out to be, I don’t know, whatever you two have when no one is looking. You know this and you’re doing it again. Silla would castrate me if I started being friends with my awful rugby teammate again. He broke my jaw and made me believe it was my fault. It’s your life. It’s your relationship. But I will send my fiancée over to your house and she can scream at you in Norwegian for an hour if you don’t figure out what you’re doing is wrong right now.”

He wanted to defend himself. He wanted to defend Grey; he had talked him out of being in his head. Instead, he just nodded and took a long drink of the cooling liquid in his cup. “She’s a good person. And so is Rey. I guess more people have to yell at me for being an idiot.”

“Kylo, don’t.” Owen’s voice was firm. “I don’t play those games. If you had a problem being intimate, then it’s a thing you can deal with in talk therapy and with your girlfriend.”

It made sense. But at the same time, it didn’t. He could see both sides. Just like with the case, he knew that when he pulled back, he could see how the pieces fit together in both contexts.

He thanked him for the talk, accepting a kind hand on his forearm. Maybe he should have called Owen rather than Grey. Another mistake. Owen handed him a pack of cigarettes and gestured towards the elevators. He could take more of a break. He needed to have ten minutes to himself.

The last thing he wanted was to spot Erso outside of the building when he had ducked into the spring air to smoke, an excuse to stop himself from showing everyone how annoyed he was. His shoulders were already tense and it was a dead giveaway.

But there he was, leaning against the wall with a cigarette in his lips.

It made his back rigid.

He tried to flee but was spotted by the sharp eyes and he was called over. “I’m actually trying to quit. If you can believe that.”

It was an offer of openness. Because he really shouldn’t be smoking either.

Fine.

One step at a time. He’d already made enough mistakes by being driven by emotions and judging people.

He was a senior Bureau member, there to help them. He had insight in the case. He couldn’t treat him like someone on his level. He’d behaved poorly in the office to the degree that Owen had to get him off of their floor. He couldn’t operate on snap judgements of anger. The discomfort back upstairs had come from being reminded that he couldn’t control everything. And maybe if he hadn’t been so distracted over what happened with Rey, he wouldn’t have missed what had clearly been under his nose for a while. He needed to stop hiding in dark corners.
“I think we got off on the wrong foot,” Kylo forced himself to say as he walked over. George was going to tell him to get along and apologize anyways, he was sure. Even if he thought more like Owen, this was still a colleague in one way or another. He could do something right for a change. “I want to apologize for coming off as…cold.”

Erso nodded, his eyes narrowing for a moment, before offering him a light. “No, I understand, Agent Solo, how triggering the discovery of the typewriter has been. I’ve been through the tomb of writings that man left to try to understand him. I’m guessing that you have read my work before?”

“I’ve read quite a bit of what you put out there. I’m occasionally accused of being obsessed with myself and they’re not wrong.” He searched his memory about something to comment on from the books when another thought snapped into his mind. Now, fully, he remembered everything as the thought hit him. “You were on a podcast I was listening to. You thought Snoke was abused as a child.”

The hatred flared in his chest, evaporating his best intentions in an instant. Apologizing had been a mistake. He should have trusted his darker instincts about who this man was. And he could only strain his neck so hard before it became clear that he was giving in to his anger.

Erso didn’t seem to be phased by it.

“Oh, he was. The head injuries can explain a lot about his actions. Being the youngest of twelve children and getting beaten by his preacher father also makes him almost sympathetic. You know that. I read your Master’s thesis. Your advisor almost convinced me to be your opponent before you said you weren’t interested in getting a PhD. Have you considered rewriting your thesis and submitting it as an article? You had a very convincing methodology.” Erso didn’t react to the glare he was giving him, flicking the ash off of the end of his cigarette. “I’ve always wanted to interview you about this subject. It will be good to get the chance now that we’ll be working together.”

“What are you talking about?” He attempted to hide his disgust by taking a long drag, punishing his lungs when his arm wasn’t available.

“I’ve been asked by your superiors to aid in helping the work in crafting the profile of our current killer. It’s good to have more help at this point. I have a different perspective since I wasn’t in the FBI when the Snoke case broke. I haven’t lived it. The typewriter going missing was my fault so I do owe you.” He dropped the finished cigarette onto the ground, snuffing it out with his polished shoe. “I hope that you’ll give me a chance. First impressions can be forgotten.”

Taking a deep breath, Kylo shook his head. He wanted to reach out and smack the smirk off of his face. “I don’t think you deserve a chance now. I have spent so many years of my life trying to forget that damned thing and you kept it in California and then it is your fault that it got stolen. That is the impression I get from you.”

Leaving him behind, he stalked off, swearing under his breath.

-=-

“I just hate him, Rey.”

The entire Sunday evening conversation could be boiled down to those words.
Rey sighed. “What does George think?”

“I haven’t spoken to him directly yet.” She could hear him shaking his head. “But Owen thinks I’m right to be angry but I need to work with him so I have to get over it. It feels impossible and I wish you were here.”

Her small kettle started to boil and she shifted her phone to add the water to her teacup. It almost didn’t feel like a mistake to ask Kylo about his day when his tone finally softened at the final words. “I miss you too. Are you...can you come here next weekend?”

“I don’t know yet. But I promise I’m going to try my best. It will depend on how much work I can do this week.” He exhaled. “And it will be hard to focus. I will talk with Maz this week so I hope that will help. It has to help.”

“Is it,” she paused, steadying herself. “Are you still worried about us? Or is it just this man?”

“I, Rey,” he started before she heard him stand up, to start walking around whatever room he was in. Probably his office. “I miss you. I still think about being so close to you and how wrong my reaction was. I...” He groaned to himself. “I’m sorry. I lost focus. I was talking to mom and dad before and they let me complain for an hour and I’m still going. What classes do you have tomorrow?”

She could hear him sit down and take a deep breath.

“Kylo, it’s okay. I know you miss me. We can talk about your problem.”

He sighed. “I think this is why I love you. You really mean that. You...I wish I had told you right away that I was having a problem when I was there. I need to stop underestimating you.”

She smiled at the words. “Just let me try to understand, Kylo. I didn’t fall in love with you because you’re perfect, but you’re perfect to me.”

He needed to hear that. He needed to feel better about him, especially if this stranger was making him uneasy. Working hard to get that job was important to him. Even though she wished it didn’t take up so much of his time and mental energy, he needed something that complicated. His thoughts would always get darker and heavier when he was bored. The worse pains would come when he didn’t have outside things on his mind.

She just wished that he would think about her more.

“I’m...I sometimes don’t understand how you can think that way when you know everything about me. But I want to be perfect for you and I know I can’t be. I’m just going to try to be me. And sometimes that means I’m not a very good person.” He paused. “I know I haven’t been there for you enough. And it makes me nervous that you’re helping me more than I’m helping you. I’m older and I should be...more mature.”

Shaking her head, Rey wasn’t sure what to say. All she wanted was him to be there in the moment. But he was at least thinking about her in the midst of a further problem at work.

At least now he sounded calmer. And despite what he’d said, he helped her just by hearing his voice. It was not as much as it used to be, but maybe she could help herself.

“Kylo, I wanted to...apologize for getting mad about you wearing his armband again. I know that it’s hard to talk about him but if it really is the case making it harder...I’m sorry I got jealous again. It’s like he has such a bigger place in your heart when you’ve been thinking about him.” She
licked her lips, trying to get the courage to ask him what she’d been thinking about most of the day. “You wanted to marry him once. Even if I hated it, I remember how happy he looked that morning. I know it was a long time ago but...you love me too, right Kylo? Do you think you’ll ever want to marry me?”

The silence on the other end made her instantly regret her words. He really was only going to tear up her heart, wasn’t he?

“I’m thinking, Rey. Don’t get worried or upset. I,” he paused, taking a breath. She could almost hear him grinding his teeth together for a moment. “I want to be with you for the rest of my life. Believe that, okay? I’d like to talk about getting married one day but, angel, you have to understand that I get panicked too sometimes. You’ve shut me out before and I keep thinking that if I make another mistake, you’ll stop talking to me and I won’t be able to protect you or know how you were feeling. Those months after I proposed to him were hard. The year you were with Luke was even worse. When you weren’t texting me this summer, I had a hard time dealing with it and I made myself sick. I want to be better for you but you know I go crazy when you don’t talk to me. That’s something I have to work on too.”

Exhaling, she stared at her teacup. “I guess you make me crazy too.”

“We’ll talk about this the next time I’m there.” She heard him shaking his head. “I have to go. I need to try to sleep tonight. I miss you.”

“I miss you too.” There was hope when there was smile in his voice as he said goodnight, but he also had the sort of fatigue in his tones that betrayed his heavy thoughts.

Silence filled her room as she clung to his words.

None of it was fair.

At least he wouldn’t be sleeping either.

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He got to work five minutes late, exhausted but only a little hung over. Late for him was still early for everyone else so he’d have a few minutes to drink coffee and stare at his email. His hair was getting too long again. That was about the only thought he allowed himself to have when he’d looked in the mirror that morning.

Looking at the picture of Rey he had on his desk, he really wondered when he’d let everything normal slip out of his grasp in his life. Once, long ago, that was all he thought about and bitterly fought for. Then, time combined with his choices had turned everything into this.

He couldn’t look at her at the moment and flipped the picture down. He’d pick it up later, when he was done thinking about all of the ways he’d disappointed her.

From the outside, he had everything he ever wanted. And he’d lost focus of so much.

An early morning nightmare had rocked him but he didn’t want his agitated state to fully bleed over into his workday. He could have some semblance of control over one part of his life even if he’d woken up on the couch, feeling pushed closer to the edge by the reality he’d created.
Rey would be back in class today. She’d be seeing her friends and getting back to putting what happened on the trip behind her. He hoped that she still cherished their time together and his flailing over the last few days could fade into his usual inability to figure things out. Rey was right to ask him about their future, how he thought it would go. He’d already shown her that he had wanted to get married once. It was a fair question. He couldn’t keep blaming Hux for making him ask the question but he still wanted to. Poe had only been nineteen then too. And if they’d actually been able to talk about it, he knew they would have both decided to wait until they were older to tie everything off. He’d have to tell Rey the same thing.

But it was on the table now and had probably been there since she fell hard for him. His memories of Paige’s irrational excitement over her wedding rattled in his head. Hux had wanted everything to be perfect for her and he wanted to do the same thing for Rey. Even the look in Liza’s eyes during the ceremony, when sweet words of devotion were exchanged, forced him to think about how girls had certain ideals about weddings and marriage. Rey was still a teenager and probably didn’t remember the endless headaches that planning a wedding entailed.

Anxiety constricted his chest and he took four deep breaths.

Checking the day planner on his desk, he underlined the appointment with Maz on Thursday three more times. If he could make it that far into the week without saying things he couldn’t take back, he’d be able to think about having some sort of weekend with Rey.

There were simple things he just wanted to do with her at that point. He wanted to take her to dinner or a café, just resting his hand on her back as she ate dessert. He wanted to go for a walk with her and hold her hand, not thinking about a dark figure emerging out of the darkness and swallowing her up. If he had slowed things down when he’d been there, they could have taken the time that he needed to settle into really being with her.

Grey kept reminding him of that. They’d grown into their friendship over coffee, wine, and just hanging out. Even in the quiet moments with Rey, he’d always been in his head about something. Having so much of a past together always made him think that they knew one another too well to ask small questions that came with a new relationship. He kept forgetting that she had new interests now because she’d been able to see more of the world.

Maybe if he went there on Friday night, they’d be able to spend Saturday together and he could come with a clear head and not make her so worried about the future. If he left everything in Virginia, he’d be able to talk to her about what he thought about her art, hearing what she’d learned so he could stop thinking so much of art was stupid. Going to the movies had always been his favourite place for dates; it needed to stop being off limits.

George finally appeared, slowing at his desk. He tilted his head and Kylo met his eyes with a nod, following him to his office.

He left the door open. “I wanted to apologize for how I acted yesterday.”

Shrugging, George put his briefcase on his desk and toed off his shoes. “You were agitated. I also noticed that you left early. So maybe you took my advice or listened to Owen. Tell me what you were thinking during the meeting yesterday.”

He licked his lips and sat down. “I don’t like him. I know he has some good ideas about the Snoke case but I disagree with a lot of the profile he has of him. Some of it goes against the one we…I mean, you and the old team, created right after we were found. I know evil can be explained but it’s like he was trying to make excuses for him. He looked at the evidence wrong.”
Sitting down, George reached for the black shoes and Kylo sat up straighter. “Or he looked at the evidence in a different way, with more hindsight. He took a different approach. I think we need that right now.” With strong hands, George tied his shoelaces. “Even though I don’t like him either.”

Kylo was glad his supervisor’s eyes were down because he smirked. Quickly, he shook off the look. “I saw the brief. The description doesn’t remind me of anyone I remember from the case. I always thought…”

“I know. A parent or a reporter. I looked at the sketch when it came in and would have come to you earlier if it looked like anyone we have on our radar. I didn’t…” George sighed, turning in his chair. “I need to stop protecting you in these little ways. I gave you extra time off when other members of the team need that too.”

He shook his head, agreeing. “I talked with Rey and…” Tell him, you moron, “Owen and I’m feeling more centred about my personal life. I think that I’m more annoyed about Dr. Erso being here and having to work with him.”

Maybe George was tired too because he didn’t pick up on the lies he was putting out there. Or maybe he was ignoring them. Which was worse? Instead, his supervisor latched onto the latter part: the truth. “It’s another thing we all have to do at some point. He’s here until we have a solid profile. The interwoven aspects of the cases mean we need help on both sides. This is a very unique situation. It’s not exactly a copycat. But it is someone with knowledge of the case, who knows things about you and Rey. So I’d actually be more worried if you weren’t tense.”

Exhaling, he picked at his nails. “She needs me to spend more time with her. I don’t know how I’ll be able to do that.”

“Call her as often as you can. See her when you feel able to. That’s about as far as we all can go at this point.” George was looking at his hands and he stilled his motions. “I’ll try to get you a little more time when we can. That’s about all I can promise for now. Your partner is here. Go and finish your part for the 10 a.m. briefing.”

“Yes sir.”

Kylo tried to shake the colour of his shoes as he went back to his desk. He forced himself to greet his colleagues without letting the feeling carry over to the rest of his day. Owen’s eyes were brighter than his and he tried to feed off of his energy.

About the only person he didn’t say good morning to when it came time for the briefing was Erso. But the man didn’t seem to notice or care. He must have left a solid impression yesterday and hoped that it would mean he wouldn’t be bothering him at least that day.

The new dose of evidence and the new face in the conference room actually gave them more angles to pursue. It should have been a good feeling. It should have been a great feeling. The regional agents in Connecticut didn’t just have a description of a man in black; they had a face now. The video analysis lined up with the resort security cameras. At least in height and body shape, there were enough consistencies to have a loose idea that it was the same man. It mainly came down to the height: just under six feet. So now they had him concretely in two places at certain times. What they needed now wasn’t just circumstantial; they needed something to place him at the house of horrors in Connecticut.

And the mounds of DNA and fingerprints found there hadn’t given them much to work with.
So far.

One step forward on one front and a near standstill on another.

The biggest thing that he and Owen were able to contribute was their timeline. When the victims were last seen, combined with what they could piece together from their estimated times of death gave them the impression that they weren’t held captive there. And if they were, it wasn’t in the same way that he and the other children had been. It’s easier to transport a body rather than a living or drugged victim. If they’d gotten to this sooner, they could have looked at rental cars. At least they had him in one rental car.

When the meeting ended and they were back at their desks, Kylo found himself going back through the movements of the victims before they were taken. The children had normal lives and were only taken to get their attention down the line. But the earlier victims, the ones that started being taken a decade ago, were mostly young men also living their lives. They had apartments on their own or resided with their parents. Some had jobs, some went to school. Some were at that in-between stage of life that young people went through. They went to the store, they took vacations, they had neighbours and friends…

Leaning back when his screen started to blur, he rubbed his eyes. “Has my witness seen the sketch?”

Owen blinked out of his own reading. “We sent it out to our agents there and to the canvassers in Connecticut. We’ll know when they have spoken to them. We’ll also have people at the funerals. I know they keep calling you but that might just scare him off. We did just go over this an hour ago.”

He winced. “I think Erso moved his coffee cup when all that was brought up.”

His partner rolled his eyes. “I’m heading over to the lab. I’ll leave you alone to think about why you shouldn’t let that bother you.”

He had to listen to him, even if he didn’t want to.

There were always phone calls to be made. There were other cases coming in and he spotted Tekka in George’s office twice before noon. He could always leave his desk to ask questions elsewhere in the office, finding another team member to query or to ask for a certain file. If he kept moving, his mind would have time to think about why he still couldn’t find his focus.

He also kept falling into his conversation with Rey. Wondering how she’d look in a white dress and promising her forever would give her the dreams that she wanted and the ones he knew were right for him too. But he had to slow those thoughts down. Her state of thinking had made her feel ready for sex and she didn’t regret it. His coursing thoughts had locked him into wanting it but now he wished he’d had more time. He didn’t regret it happening, no. The feel of her body and the joyful noises she made had to stay at the forefront of his mind; he’d been able to give her a perfect moment until he went back and wrecked it. His body had needed it too and it was his brain that kept leading him down the wrong path. The timing hadn’t been right for him and it made him feel like a selfish asshole for not being able to be there fully for her.

But she knew now. They were talking about it. He turned up her picture again, hoping that he wouldn’t let her down.

He took five minutes to look up evening Friday flights when someone cleared his throat over his shoulder.
“Agent Solo? A moment of your time?”

He left the screen as it was as he turned to face Erso. “Of course.”

Keeping his voice level made his stomach tighten.

“Can you come down to where we have the evidence set up? I have a few questions that you might be able to answer.” He tilted his head, focusing his eyes on the screen. “I thought we had our own booking service for flights?”

He clicked off the site, back to his email. “It’s for personal reasons. I’ll meet you there in fifteen minutes.”

Turning his back to the man, he waited until he heard his footsteps drifting away before he grabbed a pencil and broke it in half.

He made his way slowly to the downstairs evidence room. Pictures said a lot during the briefings but having the physical objects in the same building that he was in was another source of frustration. Purposely taking a detour to the cafeteria, he moved without purpose for once and took the stairs rather than the elevator. At least the ache in his legs would be a distraction.

He showed up five minutes late and waited another two minutes before knocking at the open door.

Looking up from his small desk in the corner, Erso smiled lightly at him. “Welcome to my little cave.”

Stepping inside, Kylo took in the dark and mostly empty room. The few filing cabinets had always been in there. The only change was that someone was sitting at the desk now. “We don’t have a lot of space for outside people. We have our office and the BSU has theirs. Terrorism takes up more space than they need and white-collar doesn’t have enough...” He was rambling, wanting to talk about anything else other than being there. “What are your questions.”

He kept glancing at the long table across the room, illuminated by the stinging fluorescent lights. Erso handed him the box of evidence gloves and gestured with his head, following his gaze. “It’s just something I noticed when we re-examined the typewriter when we got it here. If you would humour me.”

Snatching two gloves, Kylo followed the short distance to approach the object again. Forcing down the sting of screams and agony that it gave him, he sucked down a breath and snapped on the gloves. “I don’t have anything new to add that isn’t in my original statements. I’ve also been told not to taint this investigation with why I think it was there.”

His voice held warning and Erso finally reacted. “I’m aware of that. And I’ve read them. I just have a few things to ask you about that I didn’t see in that report.”

He finally had to face the typewriter. And it was almost more comforting than facing the man across from him at the table. It was still the same. It wasn’t at a distance now. It was sitting right there.

But he wasn’t a child.

He had a badge and a gun.

He wasn’t being screamed at to type until he passed out. He wasn’t hearing threats against the other children if they didn’t listen. He wasn’t caught in the panic that the machine could crush his
skull if Snoke dropped it on him the wrong way. He’d broken his arm with it. He’d shattered his knee with it. The blood from his nosebleeds would stain the pages and he’d have to start over again.

Shaking his head, he reached out and ran his hand along the keyboard.

His hands were so much bigger now but still felt small when he touched it.

“The… the apostrophe key never worked,” he said, absently pulled back into memory. “It would always stick and I could never fix it.”

Erso nodded, hitting the key. The thick clunk of the key jamming made him shiver. “There is a dent on the side that I wanted to ask you about. We have the photos of when it was recovered but it’s hard to see if it’s the same damage.”

Turning his head, Kylo slowly let out air through his nose. “It…it doesn’t look like new damage. He dropped it on me after hitting me with it. I think that’s where it came from. But there were other times. He’d shove it off the table if I typed something wrong and would take my head and…” Running his fingers along the dent, he trailed off. He stood up straighter, taking his hand away. “I can look over the forensics report and get back to you. It’s inappropriate for me to be here.”

Stepping back, his eyes caught the copied pages from his journal pinned to the wall. The distant echo of the sheet Rey had been sent ghosted across his mind and he swayed. The room was getting warm, making him dizzy. It was because he wasn’t breathing. He forced himself to take two steady inhales and met the other agent’s eyes.

“He brought it across the country to get your attention,” the doctor said. “He knows what it means to you.”

He forced a shrug. “It’s been described in books. There’s still that fucking blog out there. *You* wrote about it too. We thought the case was over. There was no point in holding back that information from the media or other investigators.”

“How many of them knew that you were the one typing and not him? That would help us narrow down the suspects to a great degree.” Erso leaned against the table, eyeing him.

“How many of them guessed and we never commented on it.” He kept his eyes level and his hands at his side. “It’s in the same book that accused me of murdering the kids as well. It could just be someone who doesn’t have that information who is *guessing* that I typed up all of his fucking rants. I never let them get to me. He could rape me, torture me, make me help him hurt others but those words couldn’t stay in my head. It felt like it happened every day and I…” He snapped his mouth shut, catching the look of focus in the other man’s eyes. “I don’t want to talk to you about this.”

“Agent Solo, we really are on the same side here. Both the typewriter and the journal are pieces of a bigger picture. I was brought in because I *can* analyze how he thought and how you write. You were young in that journal and many of your thoughts there *do* show some influence. If our suspect has had that book all of these years, he knows what points to put pressure on. You’ve never really discussed why you think that specific journal was taken.” Erso stood and glanced over at the pages and then back to him. “I’ve read between the lines of your academic work. How many other journals do you have?”

Ice replaced heat and he sharpened his gaze. “It was therapeutic. And those are personal.”

They were so private and he’d hoped that showing them to Rey would fully open up his world to
her. For a brief and shining moment, they had come together.

And then work came between them.

And then Grey came between them.

And then she was attacked and he’d lost control over who they were to one another again.

“I respect that. But he does have ideas about you from when you were seventeen.”

“And twenty-one.” He couldn’t hold back. “He was following us. And he has found us again, more than once. There is a journalist out there that won’t let this go. I’m only one person and I can’t protect everyone.”

Swallowing, the other man nodded and shifted his weight. “Can I ask how Rey is doing since the incident down south?”

“No.”

He turned and left, not giving him a second look.

Stalking through the halls, he didn’t know how he got to Maz’s office, but he was there after only a blur of walls and doors. He vaguely remembered nodding at coworkers as he moved. So maybe the rage hadn’t been that blinding.

Sucking down breaths, he knocked on her door.

The soft voice allowed him entry and he bit down his anger again, at least to force looking only a bit annoyed.

“I know we have an appointment on Thursday…” he started instead of greeting her. “But do you have time to talk now?”

Maz tilted her head. This wasn’t her session room but her working office. He’d hardly been in that part and had to take in the filing cabinets and large ferns in every corner. Maz adjusted her glasses, watching him turn his head. “Do you want this talk to replace your upcoming session or should we just count this as bonus time?”

Rolling his tongue over his teeth, he nodded. “There’s a lot to talk about. So, I need more time. But I…I just need to hear that I need to do something good for myself or someone else right now. I need to do something for Rey and I can’t go to her.”

He latched onto that thought. Because even if the typewriter brought back the darkness and had put him back in that house, she had been there too. She had been upstairs, waiting for him. She needed him to protect her; now, she needed him in a different way. The world wasn’t just death; it was about life and love too. He always lost perspective on that.

“If you know what you need, then you shouldn’t need someone to tell you.” Maz gestured at the chair across from her and he sat down, gripping his knees. “Can you talk about what’s going on?”

Blinking, he couldn’t meet her eyes. “Can we talk about the personal matters today? I want to try to figure out more of the work part for Thursday.”

Nodding, Maz adjusted her glasses before coughing lightly. She cleared her throat and planted her elbows on the table and gave him a sharp look. “Tell me why you’re sitting like that. Or why your
thoughts are clearly racing when you know how to control them.”

He held back from putting his head in his hands. He was already giving away too much. “I’ve had…a lot of things to think about the last few days.”

The time since Friday felt like a decade ago by that point. And it was only Monday.

Weakly, he looked up. “I just want to know what to do.”

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Kylo couldn’t come for the weekend. But he had another idea for Saturday night: one that he only admitted had come from Maz when he called her on the planned evening.

“I’m not going to talk about the case,” he promised, turning his computer so it sat at the right angle on his kitchen counter. “I want to talk about anything but the case. Stop me if I start…ranting. That’s a rule Maz told me we had to stick to.”

Smiling at the screen, she moved her own laptop. “We haven’t cooked together in so long. I think I’ll be able to stop you from talking about sad things for a while.”

He did know how to cook. But he still looked at the screen with raised eyebrows. “Okay, tell me how to start.”

It felt like she was there in his large kitchen rather than in her small dorm kitchenette. But maybe that was the point. She didn’t have an oven so when he’d texted her the idea the previous day, her choices of recipes limited what she could do. She could have gone home, but maybe next weekend she’d do that. There, she could make anything and walk in his old footsteps as she moved around the kitchen they had shared when things were simpler.

“You can peel the carrots.”

He stepped back, smirking into the camera. “I think I can do that without screwing up.”

He looked more relaxed with every ingredient, only slowly sipping his wine and meeting her gaze every time she started speaking. It was her eyes that kept glancing at her own image, making sure her hair still looked like it should. He would catch her and didn’t say anything, quirking his lips before moving on to the next vegetable.

It would just be soup. But at least it would have homemade noodles.

She was lost in his voice, hearing him describe how he found a dead bird on his deck one morning and how it made him miss the cat and everything he used to catch, and nicked her finger cutting a tomato.

He went silent when she hissed and put her finger in her mouth to stop the small bead of blood from trickling out.

“Rey?” The concern from his voice bled more than the small nick.

“It’s okay. It’s just a tiny cut.” She pulled back, examining her skin before turning it to the camera. “I’m going to wash it off and get a band aid. I’ll be right back.”
She left her computer where it was, taking the short walk to her washroom. Really, none of the last few months would have been possible if she had gotten a worse room. She’d seen August’s now. He had to share the showers and was only allowed a microwave and a fridge. It seemed criminal that everyone couldn’t be the same. Kaydel had the same room as she did but her kitchenette was mostly covered in take-away boxes.

The cut was really nothing but it would sting if she didn’t cover it up.

He was texting when she got back to the computer and put his phone down the second he spotted her. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“It’s just a cut, Kylo. Ready to keep going?”

He nodded. “But I think I’m allowed to be afraid of knives. Just a little.”

She laughed, even though she could hardly see the scar. “At least you’ve learnt to be a little more careful. What did you do with the bird?”

Her hands stayed in motion, dropping the cut vegetables into her small pot. The noodles would be next, but they wouldn’t need to put them in until the end. Kylo was following her motions, but slowly drew himself back to his story.

“I buried him. And ordered those stickers for the glass. It was stupid that I didn’t think about that before.” He shook his head and poured himself more wine. He was looking at his own range, stirring his soup. “I just hope it was an old bird and not a young one. Every day is just death and seeing that bird…”

He kept his eyes down before snapping them to the screen. Sometimes, it truly was like he wasn’t real, like she’d watched her entire life on a screen. Someone pretending to be him would step in at times, making things harder. These moments with the real Kylo held the promise of a real future.

But he was also edging onto sadness again.

“He probably didn’t feel anything,” she said, pouring flour into her mixing bowl. “You can add about a cup of flour and then a little salt and oil. And then water but if it gets sticky, you can add more flour.”

“You’re probably right.” He turned to his own task, mirroring her. “How much oil?”

He actually measured what he was doing, taking out a tablespoon and teaspoon. She’d learnt enough to eyeball simple things like that. Kylo caught her watching him and softly sighed at her before smirking. He just wanted to do things the right way.

There was something so simple about making soup. And they were doing it together, so that mattered more.

“So classes are still okay?” he asked. He was mostly talking to cover up mixing the dough with his hands. She could see how his forehead knit in mild frustration.

“Add more flour.” She had her own small ball of dough done and waited until he took the bag. “They’ve been fine. I think if you hadn’t come by, I probably wouldn’t have wanted to go. They got, I mean, they’re not boring but I had trouble thinking that week. So thank you for being here for me.”

He slowed his hands and licked his lips. “I want to be there more but things are…they are how
they are right now. I will probably have Saturdays off for a while, but if we find something, I
might have to go awhile without a day off. But I am really going to try.”

“I just want you to try, Kylo. That’s all I want.” She didn’t want to talk about what they spoke
about right after he left. She knew that it was his job keeping him from her. It wasn’t his fears of
failing her in bed. And it was hopefully not the idea that wouldn’t let her find really peaceful sleep
that week.

Rey told him how to add the small bits of dough to the boiling pot. He still watched her first before
duplicating her motions. He looked impatient for it to be done, admitting he had skipped lunch and
worked out instead. There was always something going on under the calm to worry about.

“You can talk about work, but maybe not the case.” She sipped at her water bottle before shifting
her computer. She sat on the bed, keeping an eye on the stove. “Are you still having problems with
that guy?”

Kylo sighed, moving himself to sit at the table. “I am trying with him too, Rey. He just asks me
these questions that seem pointless for the case. And they’re things I don’t want to talk about with
him. But Maz helped me this week. I’ve been…about what we talked about last week…”

Rey sat up and swallowed, trying to get an answer out of his face before he said anything. “Kylo, if
I said the wrong thing…”

“No,” he said, dropping his voice. He took a slow sip of wine and met her eyes. “I want to be with
you for the rest of my life. And I want to be a good husband. It’s just right now I’m not being a
very good boyfriend. So maybe figuring things out and giving it a little time is the right idea. I
want to be able to be there for you and do more things like this. And we’re not going to have a
chance until you’re done school and we…we solve this case or it goes cold.”

She chewed on the inside of her mouth. He was blaming himself when it was her fault that she
wanted to try something different and be away from him to study. “You’re always going to be older
than me. It’s like I’m never going to catch up. I know that I need to finish school and then things
will be better. But what if something happens to one of us? You thought he was ready at nineteen
and…”

“We’re not talking about how it was for me and him.” His answer was firm and it made her narrow
her eyes until he shook his head. She should be allowed to ask why he was treating her this way
and it hurt to hold her tongue. “It’s not that I don’t think that you’re ready. But maybe I need a little
more time.”

Sighing, she had to nod. “I think our dinner is ready.”

“Hey,” he said. “Don’t be sad, okay? This is important to me and I don’t want to screw it up.”

She couldn’t look at the screen for a moment. Her thoughts were hard to put in order. “It’s just hard
being so far away from you.”

Kylo sighed. “It’s hard to go to sleep without you.”

Finally looking at him again, she watched him picking at his fingernail. “I think we can eat now.”

Her words got his attention and he quirked his lips. He set his hands apart as he nodded. “Yeah,
okay.”
He finished saying goodnight and closed his computer. He put his head on the table and let out a long groan.

By the end of the call, he’d brought her back from sadness. It was supposed to be something relaxed to do together and somehow, it had still turned into him trying to balance what she wanted with what he was capable of doing. The tightness in his chest had returned.

Draining his glass, he reached for the unopened bottle and twisted off the top. He glared at the dishes and drank most of his fresh glass as he loaded the dishwasher.

Small bits of housework. Stay steady and clean up.

When the kitchen was clean, the bottle was half empty.

Giving up, he stuck his glass in the dishwasher and just walked around the house with the semi-sweet remnants. Double-check the garage. Lock the door. Set the alarm. Make sure the motion sensors were activated.

Going upstairs, he looked at the empty side of the bed and sipped on the bottle.

Everything he did was wrong. He ruined every quiet moment he had with her because he couldn’t stay focused on her like he used to be able to. He deserved the headache he’d have at work the next morning.

He knew he finished the bottle. He was less sure that he brushed his teeth. It mostly blurred together and his last thoughts were filled with running his hand on the vacant side of the bed.

Time wasn’t any kinder to him when he started the next week with the hangover he deserved.

And his other headache, the one with sharp cheekbones, would always find some way to corner him. It was for the case, he had to keep telling himself, but he always dreaded the times when there would be more questions for Agent Solo. Answering questions about his past brought renewed, terrifying nightmares. Losing limbs. Losing teeth. Being trapped in a sinking sea of blood and grime. Being beheaded and having to see his own headless corpse still attacking a helpless child.

He’d write about them, staring at the words and praying that Erso never got a hold of these books like the one in plastic at the office. Who knows how he’d deconstruct the images. He’d mention them to Rey, trying to get them out of his head and into the air. It just left him feeling guiltier, seeing how he upset her. So he’d have to find another way of dealing with them.

There was the task force. But there were also other cases. Their time had to be split. If he didn’t have nightly phone calls to his parents or Rey, or coffee with Owen or wine with Grey, all of it would have been too much. Video calls with Benji made him happy, but he also wasn’t there for him either. He’d wander over to George’s some evenings, just to sit and stare at the night to not feel alone. They’d sip whiskey and George would make sure he went home feeling better about himself than he did before he got there. It worked for about half the walk home. He had seen how Erso was wearing him down and the other agent had been pulled aside a couple of times.

Those days he could breathe more even if they left him feeling embarrassed. He was still getting special treatment that he hadn’t earned.
Maz’s sessions became a staple of every Thursday afternoon. She warned him not to let his attention be diverted from the ultimate goal. He had always been able to focus on what he wanted before but everything was starting to scream at him. He wasn’t able to be there for Rey. He wasn’t finding solutions at his job. There were so few moments of nothing, the blankness of just being. Maybe Maz wasn’t helping him as much as he needed.

But she did remind him that everyone had moments like that in his or her career and personal life. Rey knew what he did for a living. She knew that he loved her and he could show it by calling or sending flowers. Or having more computer dinner dates. Or calling and being himself. Those were the nice moments. Those were the instances he had to remember when his sleep was disturbed.

He would calm himself in the evening then lose it at night. And then he let himself be worn to a nub during the day.

And the cycle kept repeating itself.

And every time he had to tell Rey he couldn’t come for the weekend, his world slowly got smaller, focused into a pinprick of burning guilt.

He was going to lose her.

He could see her frustration with every video call. He’d tried to smile, enjoying their time together but he would also just stare off at nothing at times. And that would leave her feeling self-conscious. He wanted to hold her, have her, but he really was failing with everything. Inside, he wondered if she regretted kissing him. He wasn’t giving her what she needed. Even when he tried his best, his thoughts would loop back into constant worry. He wasn’t alone but as long as they were apart by distance, he couldn’t get through to her that he did care even if he had a hard time showing it. More gifts were sent. He had to do that. Those things might remind her that he was thinking about her.

When he went to bed at night, he’d just stare at the ceiling and drift into the worst thoughts.

How was he going to keep her? How was he going to keep her safe and love him at the same time?

-=-

Rey opened the door with a smile, tucking her hair behind her ear. “Hi, I just need a few more minutes.”

“Hey,” her blond friend greeted before nodding and stepping inside her room. “Sounds like a plan. We’re not going to be late or anything.”

August invited her to a party with some of his friends from the theatre programme on Monday. By Thursday, she finally decided she wanted to go.

Especially when Kylo said he couldn’t make it that weekend.

Again.

In the month since seeing Kylo, he had called every evening but as the weeks wore on his frustrations at not being able to keep his promise to see her were more than clear in his tone. He
sounded like he wanted to throw his phone every time he brought up another annoying thing he had to do. That expert from California was still there, giving him more than a hard time. It would be anger or it would be a blank expression when he was thinking. Those two sides of him left her wondering what she was doing wrong.

But he wanted her to go to the party after she explained who August was and how she wouldn’t be drinking. She trusted her friend to keep her safe and could always call Tim or Kaydel if things got out of hand. If things got really bad, Han could be there in less than two hours if he sped most of the way. And he liked doing that anyway.

Fixing her dress, she nodded. “I don’t have to bring my debit card or anything, right?”

Her small clutch purse still sat on her desk. She’d been deciding what to take with her when he showed up, five minutes early.

He frowned for a moment before shaking his head. “I’d just bring your phone, keys, and some cash for a cab if you need it and are worried about walking home. I have the number for the safe ride people too. I’ll probably leave with you but if you want to leave early… I don’t want there to be a big problem or anything.”

Walking around her room, he smirked at the flowers hanging in her window. She’d tied off the two bouquets from Kylo and they were drying upside down until she got a chance to do more with them. She had to keep them there for a little while longer, one looking far older than the other from last week. He had sent a sketchbook this week, along with new pencils. But the flowers made her happier for some reason.

“I’ve got some spray sealer if you want?” he offered, gesturing at the fading leaves. August knew better than to touch them. His fingers didn’t even brush them. Kaydel had knocked off a few petals as she was admiring them earlier that day, making her clench her jaw. “It works pretty good. I used them for a project last term and got a decent grade on it.”

Smiling, she finished putting her things together. “I think I’d like that. Can you give me the address one more time? So Kay and Kylo know where I am?”

Taking out his phone, he showed her again. Kaydel had a study session but promised to keep her phone on throughout the evening. It would be okay. And if Kylo knew where she was, she’d be able to fully relax.

Just because he wasn’t there didn’t mean he wasn’t thinking about her.

Grabbing her jacket, she led August out before locking the door, double-checking as usual. Nothing had happened in the last week. Kylo was talking but he was sometimes unfocused. He apologized for wearing the armband again. It wasn’t meant to hurt her. It was nice to hear but she still hurt for him. He really did just have work and most of it was grating on him. All of the families had been informed but processing the forensics was still taking time. Creating a profile was supposed to go faster with the new expert but Kylo didn’t trust him. Kylo blamed him for losing the typewriter. But he would catch himself in a rant and turn back to asking her about class, or just sharing feelings before he drifted off into an odd look.

The world kept turning. They’d have Benji’s birthday in May; that was only a few weeks away. He’d need more of a break then and he’d already submitted the time for it. They’d be together at home and he’d be able to breathe. And the looks could vanish because she’d be there for him.

It was far away but the time would get there quicker if she did more things.
August went through who would be at the party. And that it wasn’t really a party. Playing board games and talking wasn’t like the other things that went on around campus. There were long nights for other people but she was thankful that she found a friend who wasn’t interested in only getting drunk. The memory from New Year’s Eve hadn’t vanished yet. It was hard to forget, given what happened afterwards.

“So I was thinking about, for our still life class,” August started, making her turn. “We can maybe work on the last of our portfolios together? Like, I was looking at the flowers in your room and I’d love to use them for the ‘death’ sketch. I have a bunch of stuff in my room and I know some statues on campus if you want to do that for the ‘monument’ one.”

She folded her arms. She was behind in that. “I think I might need your help with that. I sort of ran out of ideas.”

August kicked at a piece of trash on the sidewalk. “I’m sorry your boyfriend is busy. I’d like to meet him the next time he’s here. He’d probably hate me less if he knew I was…you know, like I am.”

She didn’t have to lift her head so high to meet his eyes. That was a big difference. He’d seen pictures of Kylo so of course he’d be self-conscious. It reminded her of Finn, in a way. He was always nervous around him. At the thought, she looked back at the ground. It still didn’t seem like the real Finn when she thought about it. He didn’t want to hurt her, but hadn’t listened. He’d snapped at Kylo and argued with him, despite knowing what Kylo was capable of. Kylo’s description did not sound like him at all. That was the Finn who mouthed off at basketball. The Finn she had wanted to try to be with was the one who held her hand and picked her flowers. He wasn’t the one who forced his hands down her underwear, making everything blur into pain, giving her a renewed ache in her stomach that lingered for far too long.

But Kylo had been there, the confident one who would do anything for her.

And that Kylo was the one who wanted to make dinner with her over the computer. He wasn’t the one that was drinking alone in Virginia, complaining about some co-worker who she didn’t know and would probably never meet or staring off into space.

“Hey,” August said. His hand suddenly touched her arm. “Are you okay? Did I say something wrong?”

She realized suddenly that she’d stopped walking and he was facing her now. Taking a short breath, she looked at him. There were tears in her eyes and she tried to wipe them away. She had worn mascara tonight and couldn’t ruin it.

“No, I was just thinking about him and my…my ex-boyfriend.” She took August’s hand and squeezed it. His thin nose and wire-rimmed glasses made him handsome in a different way from Kylo’s full face. “You look fine, August. You’re cute and kind and that’s really important. I’m glad you’re my friend.”

He smiled at her as he slowly withdrew his hand. He sighed and then shook his head. “You know, we don’t have to go. You look a little, I don’t know. You look sad and you probably won’t have a good time. We can just go get something to eat and hang out.”

Rey didn’t want to admit that she’d lost all feeling for hanging out with strangers but it must have shown on her face. She trusted everyone in her class by now. She had also really come to depend on her instructors for their advice. Kylo had been right when he said to keep asking them questions. They really did just want to help. But sometimes, a chair would creak or someone would drop
something; her mind would go blank and she wanted to run. Even as she tried to reach for the sensation of Kylo’s hands on her body, now all she could think about was Finn’s aggressive fumbling. No, she didn’t want to hang out with people she didn’t know.

“Would that be okay?” She folded her arms, and looked at her black flats.

August nodded, fixing his glasses. “Of course. I see them all of the time. We can talk about our portfolios and I can show you some of the pictures I took over spring break. I was at my parents’ place in upstate New York and I really wanted to show you earlier but then, yeah. Things were weird.”

She almost smiled as he looked at his own shoes. “I think that would be nice.”

He turned and led her across campus. They stopped to get a pizza along the way and she felt more at ease with every step. She hadn’t been worried before but the second a strange wave from the past rocked her, it was harder to imagine sitting with people she was meeting for the first time.

Sitting in August’s room, she slipped off her jacket and shoes and felt content instantly. His orange beanbag chair was comfortable and his room was neater than she remembered.

“I have some coolers if you want,” he said, opening his mini-fridge. “My brother was here last week and left some for me. I know you don’t like drinking, but they’re not really strong. And I can walk you home after.”

Her mind flashed to both New Year’s and then Kylo sipping his wine alone in his kitchen. Or Kylo drinking hard alcohol with Han. Or Kylo drinking beer with Hux. She wasn’t that angry at the moment. She wasn’t thinking about Grey and his annoying face coming down the stairs.

Maybe she should dye her hair darker.

“I think I’d like to try one,” she answered, shaking off the idea. “They’re sweet right?”

August opened up the pizza box on the bed as he sat across from her. He handed her an open orange drink. It just tasted like pop, but he was sipping his carefully.

“I got so sick after my prom on this. I love my brothers and my sister but they just let me have too much. They were trying to make me cool.” He handed her the box and she quickly looked around for napkins. He smirked, standing up again and snatching a roll of paper towels. “I try to keep it neat here. My mom comes once a month and complains.”

“My mom,” she started, telling herself that it wasn’t a lie, “she always told me to do fewer chores. I was always cleaning up when I was a kid. I still like doing it. Like, Kylo’s house is really big but he cleans at night. His friend used to do it for him when he was away.” She stuffed a piece of pizza into her mouth, wondering why she needed to bring him up.

August took the box and put it back on the bed. He ate his own piece as he nodded. “What’s it like to date someone older? I can’t even date people my own age. I went to prom alone.”

She put the crust in the box and took another piece. “I went with my friends. We decided to make it a girls’ night.” She wanted to keep going, to tell him everything about how she pictured that night, compared with how it really was. She had a great night with her friends. Kylo didn’t need to show up. He would have just hated it. Eating a few bites, she looked at her friend again. “Did you have fun at least?”

He finished a few more bites and nodded. “My D and D friends and I started a game in the corner.
It was so awesome when it was just us. I stopped caring that I didn’t have a date. High school was almost over and I could get out of there and be myself.” And then he paused to take a careful sip of his drink. “And then my siblings came to get me and called me a nerd and made me go out with them. So that…sucked.”

She finished her last piece and put the crust in the box again. “I’m sorry that happened. We just danced all night and took pictures.”

The word made August shake out of what he was thinking about. “Oh, I can show you what I took over spring break.”

He put the pizza box on the counter and grabbed his tablet from his desk. He sat on the bed and started scrolling through the shots he took. It was still mostly winter shots, broken down houses and barns in black and white. Explaining where every picture was taken, August’s voice got faster. He’d gone from being upset to happy. The switch in tones made her drift back to Kylo. He could be the same way when he was himself. And she could make him that way again when he could finally be there again.

She liked the composition of each one, but had to shake her head when he asked to share them with her. She only had email. Again, she only had email.

She felt proud of herself when she didn’t openly complain about the topic. It had gotten her in trouble in Mexico and she did not want to think about being there when she was sitting in the comfortable beanbag chair.

Switching topics, she accepted another drink and they talked about working together for the rest of the semester. Her arms felt lighter and she curled up on her seat, feeling a bit more relaxed. But she was careful to only take a sip when August did. He knew what he was doing. Brianna had been more insistent. She’d copied her too but they had been complaining about Grey so it felt different. It just felt nice to hear someone from her programme talking about what she also cared about without it hurting. Kylo could only do that when he forced himself…

Finishing her drink, she sighed. “I need to pee.”

August smirked and fixed his glasses. “I’ll show you the washroom. It’s not that gross on the girl’s side.”

Following him into the hall, she walked by a few open doors. August stopped to say hi, or at least waved. He kept looking back at her every time he did. She smiled at him whenever he looked back, but kept her head down. At least he knew these people.

“I’ll wait out here.” He stopped outside of the door and she entered the small washroom.

She needed to pee. But also needed to check her phone.

You are not at the address you sent. Where are you?

Are you okay?

It is a dorm room. Are you with your friend?

Text me back.

Text me back when you can.
I am sorry.

I am going to call campus security.

Please text me.

Text me back when you can.

I am sorry.

Why are you not replying?

I am sorry.

It had only been about two hours. Two hours and all of those texts.

She put her phone down and thought about how to reply. The cubicles were empty. She tucked her phone into her clutch and tried to understand what was happening.

She used the toilet and washed her hands before finally calling him.

“Are you okay?” Kylo’s voice was in her ear, breathless, instantly.

“I’m fine,” she answered, keeping her voice steady. “Kylo, I’m with August. We went to his room instead. I didn’t feel like meeting new people and we changed our plans. I’m okay.”

He exhaled. “As long as you’re okay.”

She took a deep breath. “Have you been drinking?”

“No,” he answered. “I just got…in my head. And I know I shouldn’t follow your phone but when you…fuck.”

Shuffling her feet, she looked at herself in the mirror. “Kylo, it’s fine. I don’t.” she swallowed. “Kylo, I’m with my friend. He’s taking care of me. Are you okay?”

She heard him breathing before he replied. “I’m just sorry I can’t be there. Call me if anything happens.”

“Okay, I will. But are you okay?”

A deep exhale. “I’m fine. I won’t bother you anymore. Have fun with your friend. You can text or call me when you get home. I won’t look up your phone anymore. I’m sorry I did that.”

Taking out her lip-gloss, she tried to do something normal. “I know that you’re looking out for me. Kylo, I love you. You can stop worrying about me, okay?”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded and stepped back from the mirror to fix her hair. “I’m sure. Call Owen or something. Don’t sit alone all night. I don’t want to worry about you too.”

“I will. I just…I got worried. As long as you are safe, I…”

She sighed. “I’ll ask my friend if you can have his number. Okay?”

“Rey, I’m not…” He inhaled deeply. “I’ve always told you to have your own friends. I want you to
do that. I don’t need his number. Have a good night. I love you. Bye.”

He hung up before she could answer.

August saw her wide eyes when she left the washroom and he arched his eyebrows. “What happened?”

“Kylo was…following me on my phone. I didn’t…” she sighed. “Of course he’d be able to do that.”

Her friend’s throat bobbed. “He does work for the FBI. Are you okay?”

How many times did she need to hear that question?

Kylo had always kept an eye on Poe. He’d always thought someone was following them. Everyone, especially Hux, had thought he was just crazy. But then it turned out he wasn’t. So it was okay that he was watching her phone. Someone could be out there. It just hurt that he wasn’t there in person. He was sitting on his computer in Virginia. He was too many hours away to think about.

She shook her head. “I have a lot to tell you. Maybe you should go pee too?”

August’s eyes darted around the hallway. “I don’t want to leave you alone but if anyone comes, the guy three doors down is cool and he’s on the football team so he’s big enough to protect you. Just yell for Markus. I’ll be right back.”

He left her alone and she slid down the wall onto the floor. Why did Kylo only care about where she was when she was with someone else? He never sounded that intense when he called when she was in her room. That part started to eat at her thoughts. If she was with Kaydel, would he be texting her like that? Part of her still made her look out to find Markus’s door. There were people walking around, laughter distantly filtered from down the hall. Another girl walked by her to use the washroom as she was staring at her phone. She kept her head down.

“Hey, so, do you want to talk now?”

She looked up and August reached down to help her stand. “It’s personal stuff. About Kylo. I don’t know if I can talk about it.”

His hand didn’t leave hers as he took her back to his room. He offered her some water and then two more brightly coloured bottles followed.

But he still sat on the bed and he let her have the beanbag again. “Why was he following your phone? That’s creepy and weird. Doesn’t he trust you?”

She sucked down three long clinks of the candy-tasting drink. She stared at it, shaking her head. Kylo loved her but never put her in the centre. That had always been the problem and it still was.

“No, August,” she answered, before she sipped at her drink again. “Remember that I told you how his boyfriend got murdered? And it was the same guy who tried to get me in Mexico? It’s like, the FBI have it all connected and they’re trying to figure it out. Kylo tells me how it works but it’s really confusing. There’s all of this stuff about DNA and psychology. Kaydel and I tried to watch, like, movies and documentaries about it but it’s all so complicated and most of it is so sad. Someone has to die all of the time so he can have a job.” She took a long drink. “Kylo loves me. He’s loved me my entire life but back when…back when we were kids we were held captive for years. I didn’t know anything about the outside world until I was four and I never met my real
parents. It was disgusting and awful where we were and we were hurt all of the time. Kylo tried to protect all of us kids and he was only able to save me and he promised we would always be together. If you look up things about Ben Solo, you’ll know who he is. Things used to be just us and then he fell in love and I used to like it but then he never had time for me.”

She paused, taking another drink. “He loves me but I also know that he still loves Poe. He tried to be nice to me but I think he was just doing it to make Kylo happy. There was one time that I was staying with them when they started having sex with me in the next room. I could hear everything and I just hated that he was taking Kylo from me. And then he died and he really did take Kylo from me for years. I thought he was finally better. He got better over the years and I saw another side of him that I just...I just lost myself in him. He was funny, strong, and brave and could look at me like I was the entire world. And he still does that but it’s not as often. I don’t know what I’m doing wrong and I just want to scream at him sometimes. When we had sex, he was so worried about making a mistake or making it feel wrong or something. He didn’t want to hurt me and he didn’t but I don’t know what I would have done if he’d just stopped. He can never get out of his head and just be with me. He likes having sex but has so many problems with it. I thought I could finally fix him but I couldn’t.”

She took a long sip from her bottle and looked at her friend.

“That’s...that’s a lot for me to take in, Rey. I might need a couple of minutes to get it all through my head. He sounds like...it doesn’t sound like he’s treating you right if you can’t really talk about this.” August sighed and dropped to sit beside her. “But if he’s following your phone because he wants to keep you safe, why isn’t he here?”

She rolled her eyes. “Because he’s in Virginia. With Owen and George and some weirdo from California.”

“Okay, I don’t know those people. Who are they?”

Rey liked how her drink was helping her talk more and more. “Owen is his partner. And George is like the dad he wanted? He loves his dad but, in the beginning, he blamed him for him getting abducted. He’s always wanted to be in the FBI and now those people are his life. They’re both in the FBI and they’re so nice.” She stopped staring at her bottle. “I hate George’s son. Kylo slept with him and he wouldn’t leave him alone.”

August’s pale, freckled, hand reached out, trying to take the bottle from her. She jerked back at the motion. “Come on, Rey. You’re upset. I’ll get you home now, okay?”

“No,” she snapped. “Kylo can get drunk whenever he wants. Why can’t I?”

Pulling back, her friend shook his head. Or at least she thought he did. “Because you’ll feel shitty. But hey, give me that and we can talk about what’s going on. Okay?”

She took one final sip and handed over the bottle. “I just want my life to be normal. Kylo gets so hurt whenever I try to talk about...how I feel. Sometimes.”

August stood up, sighing. “Rey, I think that we can walk home and you can talk about this. It’s really important for you. Do you want me to call Kaydel? She can come and get you if you don’t trust me.”

“No, I trust you.” Her mouth was moving without her thinking. “But August, how do I make him just love me? And only me?”
He stepped back, biting his lip. He was blurring in her eyes. “I don’t know, Rey. I’ve never been in love before.”

The next thing she knew, someone was handing her a bottle of water as they walked home. She cried out, asking for her phone and the person told her that it was in her bag. She had everything. Another voice made her look up and finally focus. August. And Kaydel. She was okay.

She got home and couldn’t stop her tears. All she wanted was Kylo. But not him on her phone. Her door was closed but someone was still there. She jerked away, swatting when the person reached for her.

“Rey? Sweetie? We need to put your pyjamas on?”

Kaydel’s voice was soft. Were they there alone?

“You need to call Kylo.” Her voice was warbled, like it came from the past. “Use my phone. Where is it?”

Kay sat her up, kind hands brushing away her tears. “Can you put on your pyjamas if I call him?”

She nodded, not wanting to hear her own voice.

Pulling off her dress, she started redressing as Kaydel turned and made the call.

“Hello, Kylo. It’s Kaydel. I got Rey home. Everything is fine. She’s a little drunk and…” Kaydel paused, putting her hand on the counter. “No, you don’t need to come here. I’m taking care of her. She was upset but I…” Her hand curled on the counter. “I wasn’t there, okay? He didn’t do anything to her. You’re not here. But I am. So I’m going to take care of your girlfriend. Goodnight.”

Rey was sitting there, in her underwear, as she stared at her friend. “He won’t like how you talked to him.”

Kaydel tossed a t-shirt at her. “I don’t like how you made me make that phone call.”

Whimpering, Rey dropped her head. “Why can’t he just be here?”

A glass of water was in her hand. “Rey, I love you. He’s not here. Drink some water and I’ll take care of you. Okay?”

Tilting her head, she tried to focus her eyes. “Okay. I love you too, Kay.”

Her head hurt in the morning but she just curled up closer to the warm body against her, imagining it was Kylo.
Chapter 59

Chapter Summary

The killer strikes back.

See chapter notes for warnings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The last person he expected to see standing outside his house was Uncle Luke.

Slowing his feet, he pulled his hood up and sighed. He’d spotted the strange car from down the block. At least now he could relax somewhat. At least Luke wasn’t there to kill him even though he almost longed for it.

Kylo had woken up long before dawn and couldn’t get back to sleep. In the little over a month since he’d been back in Virginia, he had a difficult time finding real rest. Most nights he slept on the couch, just thankful for being to pass out somewhere. It was easier to have his laptop and notebook stable on the coffee table rather than risk crushing it if he rolled over in the middle of the night in a bed that was too empty at that moment. There was a near-permanent kink in his shoulder from sleeping wherever and however he could. Avoiding nightmares meant passing out in one way or another. Even having his sessions with Maz hadn’t stopped most of the dark thoughts from finding his mind when he had a moment alone.

Sighing, he reached his driveway and stared at the older man. Not having seen him in years had killed almost all of the curiosity he had about what Luke was doing with his life. He knew he was in Nevada now. He’d known that at Christmas. But being there right at that moment brought on more agitation. The feeling crept up his spine and occupied its usual spot in his chest; it had carved out a home there and would only vanish for a few cherished minutes per day.

“You’re up early,” Luke commented as Kylo brushed by him to unlock the door. “Or were you just out late?”

He glared at him, blocking the doorway. “What makes you think I’m inviting you inside?”

It was Saturday at 6 a.m. He didn’t need this on one of his few days off.

“I came all the way out here to check on you. Give me a chance here, Kylo. I’ve been following the case in the news. And it looks like you need someone to talk to.” Luke folded his arms and raised his eyebrows. “Or, I can just go back to the airport?”

Biting his lip, Kylo gave up and let him into the house. “Just take off your fucking shoes.”

Luke smirked, watching him toe off his sneakers and leave them by the door before he finally took off his roughed-up cowboy boots. “Yeah, this floor looks expensive.”
Shaking his head, he left his uncle for the kitchen. Taking a bottle of water from the fridge, he shifted his weight as he glanced around the room. At least he’d cleaned up in the middle of his insomnia that morning before turning to running instead. The recycling on the counter was fine. Only the bottle opener was still out and he tucked that in the drawer, waiting for Luke to come and speak with him. He was going to get his pound of flesh whether he liked it or not. Might as well get it over with.

“So, you’re looking well. That scar suits you with how much you frown.” Luke eyed the quilt on the couch as he crossed the floor. How ever it looked to him didn’t matter. “How’s the case going?”

Taking a long drink of water, he glared. “I don’t dig into your business. Leia doesn’t want me to. Why are you here bothering me about mine?”

Luke took a seat at the table even if it wasn’t offered to him. “Your parents are worried. And it’s about time I tried to get you to think straight again. It’s been a while since we talked. And from what Leia has told me, I should have talked some sense into you a long time ago.”

He rolled his eyes, leaning against the counter. Luke had been his favourite visitor when he was a child. His grandparents were also kind and he didn’t get scolded as much. But Luke had endless stories and could live anywhere in the world he wanted. It seemed like he was always on an adventure. Now, he was just a gruff old man who always scowled at him. “You could have been there for our family when Rey was attacked. We could have used you then. I was stuck in Mexico and Han and Leia had to step up again while you did nothing. I am only one fucking person. I know I’ve made mistakes but…”

“Well,” Luke said, leaning back and folding his hands behind his head. The leather of his jacket crinkled as he moved, making Kylo’s eyes harden. “Catch me up to speed.”

“No.” He eyed him. “Leave me alone.”

“I thought you hated being alone,” Luke responded, his eyes drifting to the counter before returning to him. “Did anyone help you finish that wine or are you hitting the bottle that hard?”

He had a vivid image of breaking the glass on the counter and stabbing him with it.

“I had dinner with a friend. Do you have a problem that I have friends?” His shoulders tensed and he gripped his water. Grey had been there, yes. And Grey had gone home. He’d done everything he promised since his panicked phone call when he got off the plane, since their long conversations. He didn’t show up unannounced and didn’t have keys. Kylo was the one to text him if he felt like everything was getting to be too much. The lines were drawn and he could take back his friendship in an instant if he crossed them. But Christ did he need someone to talk to.

His mother and father were always endlessly supportive. They wanted him to take more time off when he could, but they also understood what it was like to have pressures at a job that kept him from the people he loved. That was a reminder he didn’t like hearing again. He was being too stubborn and if Rey disappeared, he wouldn’t be able to keep it together like they somehow managed to for seven years. It would get easier when she was done with school and could live with him again because then it would be permanent. He’d see them all in May and that was coming at him hard and fast.

Hux and Paige were getting ready for the new baby. When he’d talk to Benji, he was amazed at how quickly the almost four-year-old boy accepted having a new sibling. Those conversations were about the only time he could just talk about nothing. There were no pains or fears; there were
only moments of levity when he answered questions about his favourite types of dinosaurs or how fast race cars drove. Going to his birthday soon would be his chance to make up for being away from him too. Hux didn’t want the playhouse he’d picked out for him but he talked him into it. The backyard was big enough; he’d checked the county guidelines. He’d also reminded Hux that he could hide there himself if the lack of sleep from an infant crying really got to him. At least that made his friend laugh.

Did he really have so few people to talk to back home? Why was he regretting that now? At the time it had made sense. He wanted to be done with high school and leave. If he had worked harder to convince his parents to move to Virginia, things would be easier but he couldn’t uproot his friends’ family.

So that left the people at work. It was a big building and he’d still just shaped a small corner for himself. The comfort it used to bring was now deafening.

Maz was his therapist. She’d been there since he was fourteen. She was there now to talk him through a major case that held so many echoes to his own past. All they wanted him to do was focus on the part of the case that was his. The journal and the typewriter fell to other agents with more talent than he had to try to unravel how they were connected, especially the man who’d lost it in the first place. He was the one drawing him back to being under Snoke’s control. Rey’s attack had given them a clue but that almost didn’t seem worth it to see her pain and hear her worry. She was too young to feel like her life could have been snuffed out by someone trying to break him. And that part was something Maz had to hear from him. He could feel the eyes of the other agents whenever they all sat together. A profile based on revenge rarely made sense. Revenge for what? That was a mistake they made with the DC shooter, not understanding what those clues and apparently random victims meant. Things weren’t always as they seemed and, sometimes, they just were.

George was his mentor and boss. How much did he need to know about his love life? He’d crossed that line so many times but this time it felt different. George had told him to go to Rey and he did. Now, the case had to take up more of their conversations. The private side held quiet talks about how to stay grounded. They were all exhausted but still kept going. At least now he was getting better at hiding when he was working outside of his regular hours. They’d all been cleared for as much overtime as possible. That part shouldn’t be a problem, but overworking himself was always an issue that he couldn’t find a way to break. The fact that he was spending time with his son again was still unspoken but it would just take focus away from the case, he told himself.

Owen kept an eye on him. He knew how often Silla and Rey spoke. She needed that outlet. Owen kept him grounded, offering to spend more time with him outside of the office. There were lunches and dinners. But he couldn’t open up all of his heart to his partner; Owen knew it was there but was patient enough to wait for him to talk about his problems. He’d get to it eventually. He was worried and gave him harsh words when they were needed. Owen also balanced that out by letting him smoke. The small act of self-destruction was something Rey hated. Maybe leaning on him wasn’t for the best.

Grey was about the only person around him that made complete sense. He could talk him out of being stupid. He was the one to stop him from getting in the car and driving all night when Rey hadn’t answered his texts. And then again when her friend had called and told him that she was safe with someone else. Grey let him put his head on his shoulder, winding down from his panic, before Kylo forced himself to move away. Grey was the one to remind him to calm down before he called Rey the next day, letting her be hung over and thinking about his obsessive actions that night. He really needed to hear that. If Grey had been there the entire time, he probably would have stopped him from looking up where she was and texting her like a mad man.
And he was better off not thinking about the man lurking in the conference room, periodically stopping by his desk to ask a random question before disappearing again. He had spent years not thinking about what Snoke had tried to drive into his mind with his words. The actions had been worse but having Erso snooping around in his head had made him start to question whether or not he had internalized the twisted doctrine he’d typed up over the years. *It must have been hard to walk out of there sane, Agent Solo.* He didn’t fucking need another damned voice in his head.

“It sounds like you have a problem with having friends.” Luke shifted to shrug off his jacket. Great. He wasn’t leaving. “What’s having a girlfriend like? Especially one you’ve known all your life who is still a teenager? Do you feel good about that?”

“Why the fuck should I tell you that?” Slamming the plastic bottle on the counter, Kylo stood up to straighten his shoulders. He already felt sweaty and disgusting and was too exhausted to be calm in that moment. “You disappear out of our lives for years and then come out of nowhere because… just, why the fuck are you here? What the fuck do you want from me?”

He’d already been wound up from the amount of work he had to think about the next day. That heavy awareness, combined with his own thoughts, made anger easy to find.

He hated surprises and Luke showing up and asking that question eradicated whatever calm he had been fighting for when he first saw him.

“I’m just asking a question, Ben. I’m trying to figure out how you two are together and if it’s the best thing for the both of you.” Luke glared at him, his shoulders straightening as he spoke. “I’m here *maybe* to tell you things that your parents are *possibly* afraid to tell you.”

Rey had said she was worried about the texts but he had explained that he’d just been struck by a wave of paranoia. He wasn’t jealous. She needed her own friends, especially ones who took care of her. If Han and Leia were worried about that, they’d tell him to his face. This was something Luke was coming up with out of his own assumptions about who and what he was.

His glare turned harsher. “You *hardly* talk to them. You’re too busy with your own life to care about our family. This isn’t your business. Get the fuck out.”

“No.”

The word was all he needed to set him off.

Lunging at his uncle, he grabbed him by the collar. Hauling him up, he was out of his seat in a flash of violence. The wooden chair clattered to the floor. Wrestling him to the tile, he easily overpowered his feeble efforts of defence. Old hands were no match for his strong grip. He held him *hard* against the floor. He gritted his teeth and pinned him down.

“I *already* question everything I’m doing in my life! I don’t need another fucking voice in my head!” He screamed, pressing his nose against Luke’s.

He could smell the sweat and finally saw the panic in his uncle’s eyes. A shaky breath and he was broken from the state.

Shoving him away, Kylo got to his feet and loomed above him. “Why have you *always* had a problem with me since I got back? What did I ever do to you besides being found alive?”

Groaning, Luke got up to his elbows. Kylo fought against the temptation to press his foot to his chest, keeping him on the floor where he belonged. “I never had a problem with you being alive, Ben. I just have a problem with some of your choices since then and how your parents deal with
you. Now would you like to talk or practice your chokehold?”

Glaring, Kylo dropped down to the floor, resting on his knees. If he had him at this level, he’d have some control over the situation. It wasn’t an interview room but his hands had put Luke on the floor. He could do it again if he needed. The threat was there.

He didn’t say anything. Luke had to speak first.

“Okay, I guess we’re talking on the floor.” Luke turned to face him. He stretched out his legs and winced. “How many suspects have you rouged up like that?”

“When I’m at work, I have restraint. I have a clean record.” It wasn’t the complete truth but he really did feel like a different person when he was on a normal case. Those were the types of things he wanted to get back to. Erso could go home and stop bothering him all of the time. “Would you like to talk about my choice of job or my other choices?”

“About the only question I have about your job is how you were ever deemed mentally fit to handle this type of work but the government has put crazier people in greater positions of power so I’ll put that on them.” Luke took a deep breath and then licking his lips. “We still haven’t talked about that fall when Rey came to stay with me. Maybe I’ve been avoiding you too about that.”

Good, an admission. Keep him rolling. “Then let’s talk about that. Why didn’t you tell us before we got there what you had planned?” Getting dragged back to the hurt and confusion from that summer and autumn made him glad he was kneeling. He could focus on his cramping muscles and react to that pain instead.

“You would have said no to it.” Luke shrugged and picked at a stray thread on his sleeve. “But not knowing didn’t stop you from almost throwing yourself off the Falls and doing other dangerous shit on the way there.”

He shook his head. He wanted to defend himself and say that he knew he wouldn’t have fallen but that wasn’t how an interview should go. “What other dangerous shit do you think I did?”

Luke quirked his head. “You drove on too little sleep. You took your eyes off the road. Even if it was a joke, Rey told me it scared her.”

All right. “So, when you made your decision, did you think that I was actually dangerous or was it how I was acting? That I scared her?”

“It’s not that you were dangerous, but she was just a girl growing up in that house with so much grief. I wanted to give her a break and do what your parents could never bring themselves to do and that was split you two up. She had that year to grow up and become herself. She made new friends and not everything was about you.” Luke rested back on his hands, still eyeing him. “She could have meltdowns about her own issues. But then you showed back up and she got that letter. So, she goes right back to you.”

Exhaling, he rubbed his calf. This line of discussion was just meant to draw him into getting angry again. He could focus on the first half. “Why do you think Han and Leia couldn’t split us up?”

Luke sat up to rub his beard. At least that question would get him somewhere. “Leia and I grew up apart. She had your grandparents and I went to live with other relatives until we were allowed to get in touch again after we turned eighteen. Bail and Breha took care of me for a while but I had my own anger to deal with. Your mother…your mother took it personally. She thought that if we could have grown up together, there would be fewer things wrong with me. She also had your
father to deal with by then so maybe we all made mistakes. A lot of those fears came out when you were gone. I was there all of the time and saw how broken they both were. I had to talk them out of fights, keep them from divorcing. Life wasn’t perfect on the outside, Ben. And then you came back and there was no way they were letting that little girl be anywhere other than with you.”

Kylo wanted to shift off his knees but stayed how he was, rolling in discomfort. “Do you think they made a mistake?”

Luke exhaled. “I don’t know. But maybe dating her is.”

Taking a deep breath, he clenched his hands and refused to give into the urge to run from his stone-faced uncle. “What did my parents tell you?”

“That you were struggling. That they’re hearing one thing from Rey and then only short calls from you some days and then long ones on other days.” He folded his arms and tilted his head. “So, it’s not just work getting to you?”

“I’ve had a lot to deal with at work, yes.” Snorting, he rolled his eyes. “And it’s kept me from being with her how she needs me. I haven’t had time to…”


He dropped his head. Sending her flowers and then digitally stalking her really embodied who he was, he thought darkly. “It’s not like it should be. I wanted her to have everything that I had with him and I’m just fucking it up. We can’t spend any time together and that’s my fault. And when we do, I end up talking about something that makes her angry or upset. So again, it’s my fault. Then I think she’s going to leave me or someone is going to find her and kill her. I get nervous and can’t talk to her. She needs to talk about her classes or her friends and all I can talk about is investigation procedures or how miserable I am when I’m alone.” When he was alone. He paused, closing his eyes. “And I’m sure you have an opinion about George’s son even if you haven’t met him.”

Luke leaned forward. “Your parents filled me in. You two had something going on and it seemed to be going well. Whatever your bizarre version of friendship is because you’re an expert at using people. Then you pushed him too far because you led him on. To me, the guy is bad news but you have a thing for him. I’m guessing you are friends again and you just haven’t told anyone?”

Finally, he forced himself to his feet, swaying unsteadily for a moment. He stretched out his leg, gripping the wall as he moved. “Yeah and I’ve been able to talk about these things with him. He tells me that Rey needs to grow up more. And she’s trying but I don’t know how to tell her that… that maybe the best thing is to be apart for a while. I’m not acting how I should be. I’m unbalanced. She needs to finish school. But if I told her that she’d hate herself and then hate me.”

Luke picked himself off of the floor, acting like he should have extended a hand to him to help him up. No fucking way was he doing that. “Are you fucking him?”

He snapped his eyes up instantly. “No.”

Smacking his lips, Luke nodded. “It doesn’t matter if I don’t believe you because it’s your life. But I really do care about Rey. And maybe the best thing for her is that you two take a break. Let her hate you for a bit. Ben, she’s always going to be in your life. Even I couldn’t stop that.”

He ran his hand through his hair. “How do I do that without breaking her heart?”

“You’re going to have to find a way to explain that to her so she’ll understand.” Luke eyed him for a moment before looking around the house. “So, I can be here until Sunday evening. Do you want
me to fuck off then or now?”

Blankly, he could only sigh. He couldn’t think. The redness around the edges of his eyes was back. Be polite, Ben. The old feelings for his uncle were also hard to clamp down on. He’d nuked all of the old respect he’d had for him by his actions over the years but he was still family. If he didn’t have family, he had come back to an empty house. But George would have taken care of him… Shaking out of the thought, he swallowed. “You can use the guestroom in the basement. Don’t touch my weight set. There are towels down there. You can go find it yourself. I need to shower.”

It was the farthest room from his. And it still wasn’t enough distance, he thought as he turned to stomp up the stairs.

His phone in his hand, he wanted to crush it. My fucking uncle showed up.

Ru ok? i can tlk you thru it.

Why the fuck did he text like that?

Momentarily, he gripped his phone. Looking at the black screen, his gritted his teeth. He thought about throwing it against the wall. Watching it shatter would be such a relief. Instead, he tossed it onto his bed. He wanted to rip off his hoodie. Instead, he forced his hands to be stable and pull it off. The t-shirt followed. Shifting his weight, he turned and slammed his door shut.

Luke would hear anything he did upstairs. Punching the door. Pulling down a bookshelf. Losing his mind by screaming. Well, fuck him. He turned and landed a solid fist against his bedroom wall, reeling in the harsh resistance that met his hand. The sting brought him only a second of peace as he stared at the impact mark.

He did not want to give up on Rey. He did not need anyone agreeing with his dark thoughts. And he did not need his uncle thinking anything was happening with Grey.

Glaring at his messed-up bed, he finished undressing. He bit his arm, finding the same, sweet spot again.

He showered quickly. The water was scalding.

He couldn’t meet his own eyes. He should have just showered in the dark and hoped he slipped.

Pulling a clean hoodie and shorts out of his drawer, he watched the pictures rattle. With one quick strike, he brought them crashing to the ground. The sound at least brought a small spike of satisfaction.

He wasn’t giving up. Letting Luke stay was a kindness. He wasn’t a horrible person.

Finding his breathing, he hoped that he could take back what he’d said to Luke. He could fix this. Rey could never feel alone. Even as he struggled through everything, he could show her that he could be better. There would be no more strange texting. There would be more talking. In the depths of his heart, he reached for any answer about how to keep her while letting her grow. How could Luke be right?

His uncle was looking through his fridge. “Do you have coffee anywhere?”

“Left freezer. The blue can.” He tried not to snap as he snatched his cigarettes from the top of the refrigerator. “I’ll be outside.”
Not bothering to stand on the deck and be nagged at for smoking, he went down to the lawn and lit up. Whatever control he had left vanished and he dropped to the ground.

He was trapped. He had to break her heart. He had to tell her that it was wrong to love him. It wasn’t worth holding back tears and he quietly sobbed. Even if it would only be for however long it took him to figure himself out again, it would feel like forever for her. Or maybe it was the other way around. He either felt too much or not enough. Opening up to her about why they needed to be apart felt impossible because it wasn’t what he wanted. It wasn’t what she wanted.

A pang of warmth against his bare calf made him wince and shake his hand. He quickly swatted at the ash, swearing.

Old fears crashed down on him as he stared at the now-extinguished cigarette and the dusting of residue on his leg.

He felt himself moving but didn’t know why he was relighting the thin tube. He didn’t even feel what he was doing as he pressed the glowing end to the skin of his ankle. It used to burn every time it happened. When Snoke would hold his arm down to hear him scream and feel him fight against the torture, it would always be the same searing agony. The smell of his flesh. The harshness of the tobacco. Being too small and weak to fight against it. The vacant rage in the spectre’s eyes, screaming at him that he was a mistake and could never listen.

Now, he just stared as he tossed the filter aside. Unblinking, he lit another cigarette. He smoked it to a nub and repeated the motions, daring his body to flinch. The smoke curled around the burn but there was no pain. Maybe Snoke had taught him something after all. Two dark marks stained his skin and he scratched at them instantly, wondering why he didn’t feel anything. He smudged the ash around, digging his short fingernails into the wounds. That finally awakened a sweet sting on his flesh. His heartbeat quickened and he scratched harder.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

Grey stepped back as he launched himself to his feet. “You didn’t answer my texts. I thought you were here committing murder or something. I…”

“You can’t be here.” He grabbed him by the arm, glancing up at the deck. The door was still closed. Around the side of the house, he gripped him tighter. “I told you not to just drop by. You can’t just come by here, I told you. What the fuck, Grey?”

“Ky,” Grey pulled his arm free and hissed at him. “You’re the one out there fucking burning yourself.”

He was about to snap that he hadn’t felt anything so it didn’t matter, but shook it off. “Did you go to the front door? Did he see you?”

“Why the fuck would that matter? What the fuck happened?” He took another step back, still glancing at his calf. “You’re bleeding, man.”

“It’s fine,” he said through clenched teeth. “Did he see you?”

Grey narrowed his eyes. “I saw you out back, coming down the alley. So calm the fuck down. Kylo, we talked about this shit. Call someone if you want to hurt yourself. I’ve seen your arm. Dad is going to see your arm. Are you cutting again too? Ky…”
Still sucking down breaths, he didn’t have answers for any of that. Instead he found the source of why he wanted to feel anything at that moment.

“He wants me to break up with Rey. Or at least take a break. Or something. I don’t know.”

Stepping back, his shoulders fell. “I don’t want to hurt her but all I’m doing is...I don’t know. I try to talk to her and...you know how I was when she was out and not at home. Maybe I just can’t be in a relationship. She deserves someone better than me.”

Shaking his head, Grey reached out. A gentle hand landed on his arm, rubbing a small circle. “Maybe, maybe...I don’t know. Talk to her first and see if that’s how she feels before you go lighting yourself on fire. She could understand that you need a little time or something.”

His eyes blurred for a moment. His feelings narrowed on the kind grip on his arm.

“I need to go back inside. I’ll text you later. I promise,” he paused, closing his eyes to search for whatever was left of his centre, “I promise not to hurt myself more today. I can’t promise I won’t hurt him that badly though.”

Nodding, his friend snapped his mouth shut. He glanced at the house then back to him. He glared at him for a moment before he left without another word. He pulled up his hood and turned to walk in the direction of his father’s house.

He sucked down a scream before he went and picked up the cigarette butts from the ground. His shaking fingers kept making him drop the debris. Grinding his bare feet into the damp grass, he swore under his breath. Steady hands, Kylo.

He stomped up the deck and stared at his uncle on the other side of the glass. Whatever was left of his thoughts drifted off into the silhouettes of flying birds he’d stuck up there weeks ago. They’d always be trapped there, but at least no other birds would have to die because he wanted huge windows.

“Everything okay?” his uncle asked, raising his eyebrows as Kylo opened the door.

Shrugging, he tossed the trash and rinsed off his hands. Small motions. Get it together. “I just needed a smoke. Are you going to lecture me about that too?” He was surprised Luke made coffee for him too. Pouring himself a cup, he finally had to face him. “I don’t think I can break up with Rey, even if it’s temporary. I want...I want to keep trying.”

He was being selfish in that moment. But the wave of panic that had taken him would last for longer if he told her that they needed a break. It would feel unending if he had to think about her falling into the hole that a broken heart created.

She’d also find someone else.

And then he’d have to live with that guilt of not trying harder.

Why couldn’t he do this?

“Well, I’m going to disagree with you.” Luke shifted his weight, turning his mug in his hand. He leaned back and lifted his eyebrows. “So, what’s there to do around here? I’m guessing that you know where the good bars are.”

His eyes dropped to his coffee, desperately trying to disguise the erratic way his heart was still pounding.
He couldn’t hurt him but he was going to hurt himself later.

Just another broken promise.

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Hugging Kylo at the airport took away all of the hurt that had been steadily building over the last few weeks. They were finally together again as a family. Even if it was just for the weekend, they were together. He smelled clean, the hint of oxygen from the plane still clinging to his skin. His strong arms wrapped around her the second he was beyond arrivals, lifting her off of her feet.

It had been another panicked wait for him to land. She’d asked August to take notes for her in their Friday classes so she could be there to see him. The weeks of working together on their portfolios, with her always feeling like she should apologize for what happened in his room, made her feel guilty for asking. Still, he said yes and it made her feel even worse for a few hours. Han didn’t look happy to pick her up but she promised again to take her license exam soon. So, she had two people to keep promises to.

She didn’t want to have Kylo’s old car but she could take it if she needed to. Maybe she would be able to pick him up in the future. He didn’t need to rent a car every time.

He gripped her hair and she breathed him in, rocked back to the night in her dorm room. She didn’t want to think about their time apart. The texts had been weird but he just cared about her. She’d listened to him since then. She’d met August’s friends and this time she was at the right address. Kylo only texted her that he loved her that time, and then again when she was there to play a different board game.

And those times, she just stuck to cola.

He held her a little tighter, dropping his head against her shoulder. She felt him tremble, his arms pulling her closer. “I’m so sorry I’ve been away for so long.”

By the calendar, March to May, it hadn’t been that long. But it felt that way with how he’d been acting the last few weeks. It wasn’t just the texts. It was the odd look in his eyes every time he was about to click off the call when they spoke on the computer. He’d pause for longer on the phone. He’d stopped talking about the case and was more focused on how they felt about one another.

If it weren’t for the looks, those soft words would have been enough.

But now they were together. It would be okay.

Han cleared his throat and Kylo finally stepped back. “Things aren’t getting any easier there?”

Sighing, Kylo shook his head. “We got nothing from the funerals. We thought he might show up because circling back is part of his profile but there was no one there that shouldn’t be there. We even vetted the journalists and none of them worked any stories about…about us. I’m also working on two other cases that might make me go out of town soon, so…” He met her eyes. “I’m just tired.”

Rey stepped back and let Han embrace his son. Kylo slumped lightly against him before he straightened and hugged Leia. He was softly whispering things to them but it couldn’t have been
bad things. Both of them were smiling when they pulled back.

She slipped her hand into his and he squeezed it lightly. *I’m so glad you’re home.*

He turned his head, lips curling into a smile. Even though his shoulders were still tense, that part of him had started to soften. *I’m glad to be home with you.*

“Are you talking about me behind my back?” Han asked as they started towards the car. “It’s not nice to do that, kids.”

“No,” she answered quickly. She looked up to Kylo and smiled again when his hand tightened. “We’re just talking.”

Maybe she was happy that he was back. Maybe she was happy that it was just the four of them. The time being separated because of his job seemed to have vanished with his hand in hers.

“Ben, you could have brought more than an overnight bag. The tailor you like fixed that one jacket for you. And he was able to fix that pair of trousers,” Leia spoke as they wandered towards the parking lot. “The charcoal ones you like.”

She watched him close his eyes and sigh. He was shaking his head when he looked at his mother again. “The guy I found isn’t as good. He keeps re-measuring me and I hate that. I can start overnighting what I need fixed. I also…” he sighed. “I need to get a haircut tomorrow morning.”

Studying him, she noticed how his hair was curling around his ears. *You’ve been too busy.*

He shook his head. *I’ve had no time to think. I’m still sorry about the texts.*

Their old language had never had so many words. It was strange how so much new vocabulary had to be added over time and they still understood one another.

He’d said over and over again how they needed more time together. They had tonight and tomorrow night. Once he relaxed into being at home again, she’d have the real Kylo again.

He eyed Han’s truck when they reached the parking lot. “I thought the brakes were going in this.”

Han shrugged and smacked him on the shoulder. “I got them fixed. How’s the FBI garage? Did you get a rocket launcher yet?”

“No, dad.” He pulled away from her to open the car door and help her inside. “I’m not James Bond.”

“You look like James Bond. Please tell me you brought some normal clothes for tomorrow.” Leia was talking and he rolled his eyes just so she could see as he shut the door. Turning her head, she grinned to herself as he went to the other side.

She just wanted her family to be together. She would have to study at some point, but she’d be back in his arms at night. And he could rest and get more of his thoughts out. It really was hard to talk all of the time on the phone or on the computer. He’d sometimes slump down in his chair and bite at his nails, apologizing again for not having enough time off.

But he didn’t look sad when he climbed into the other side, adjusting his legs. “I have clothes here if you don’t like them.”

She took his hand again and settled into the drive home. He sounded less tired when they talked
about normal things. Nothing strange had happened at home. The house was safe. He got annoyed when Leia admitted to going to the office more again, but he shook it off when she squeezed his hand. He also worked too hard.

Eating dinner at the kitchen table settled the nerves she had felt the last few weeks. She didn’t avoid going home, but didn’t like how empty the house felt. It was nicer to eat dinner around campus with Han and Leia. They were proud that her classes were going well and she wasn’t losing focus. It really wasn’t like high school. She didn’t have to study things that didn’t make sense. Really, what was the point of chemistry and biology? About the only things she’d learnt from them was how to draw figures and forms. The rest of it she could ask Kylo to explain, to get his mind off of whatever hurtful thing his mind fell back to.

“Did you put up the swords?” she asked.

He smirked, holding up his knife. “They’re above the television. I like how they look. They were heavier than I expected.”

Han made a face. “I’m glad you bought that playhouse for your godson. Don’t buy him a sword until he’s at least six.”

Kylo’s grin made his face turn softer. He had his sleeves rolled up and was eating, not just poking at his food. This was her Kylo again. This was the one with a sense of humour. This was the one who could spot something in the room, tilt his head, and ask why it was different. They’d had the counters redone and replaced the refrigerator. He also openly accepted it when the cat jumped onto his lap, petting him until he settled down. He only complained when his claws were digging into his thighs.

Those thighs. Those legs. She’d get to sleep beside him tonight.

She kept her eyes on clearing the table when he went upstairs.

She helped Leia with the dishes and Kylo disappeared with the cat to his room. He actually carried him up the stairs, not just glaring at him when he followed. She heard him going through his closet before he settled onto the bed, having a long conversation with the cat in Spanish. Inside, she was quietly proud of herself for not being rocked back to Mexico. The main thing that had gotten her through the hours after her attack was hearing him take charge. The way he spoke and argued until he found that journal had been perfect. He must have been feeling okay if he didn’t care that everyone could hear what he was doing.

Again, she felt a pang of regret for never being able to thank Poe for teaching him that language. The words in his journal, the ones she couldn’t read, must have been for him.

“He needed to get away,” Leia said, handing her a glass to dry. “But he doesn’t look thinner. I was worried about that.”

She nodded. “He’s not sleeping but he’s eating, I think. I’ll get texts from him in the middle of the night. I talked to Silla and she said Owen is trying to help him take more time to clear his head. He’s going to therapy. He’s at their place or George’s quite a bit, when he gets upset. But I think it’s getting better. They almost have a profile even though I don’t know what that means.”

Leia sighed, her hands stilling. “Luke was there. Ben was upset. He didn’t say much more than that so I told him to leave him alone. I’m not answering his phone calls for a while. Ben brought it up so I know it got to him.”
“He said something about it.” Rey kept her hands in motion, putting familiar plates and glasses in their place. God, she’d missed their house. “I can’t wait for the case to be done. He talked about taking a temporary assignment here when it’s over.”

“Really? That would be perfect for the two of you.” Leia rinsed off the frying pan, putting it on the stove to dry. “Rey, I don’t like telling you what you can and can’t do in this house but when you’re in bed tonight…”

She felt her ears turn red in an instant. “We can…we can go to the basement.”

A gentle touch made her look up from staring at her feet. “As long as you’re comfortable, honey. You’ve missed one another. I know those feelings. It’s okay to be young and in love. We’ve missed having you both home too.”

January felt like a lifetime ago. “Thanks, mom.”

Upstairs, she stopped in Kylo’s doorway to watch him. He was reading a tattered novel, dressed in sweatpants and a sweatshirt. The fabric pulled tight, so it must have been old. The cat curled up on his lap, still purring.

“He missed you too,” she said, moving to sit on the bed. He stirred, looking up at her and stroking Bee’s fur. Even if he used to be their cat, she’d taken care of him over the years. He was almost ten now, happy to sleep in sunbeams and beg for tuna from Han’s sandwiches. Kylo had given him to Poe but she’d kept him safe since then before she moved away. Han and Leia loved him but he would love all of the beds in Kylo’s house. And then he wouldn’t be alone. “Maybe you should take him with you?”

He snorted before smiling lightly. “Then Han would have no one to talk to when Leia’s not here. He’s…he’s a good listener. I’m just glad he stopped hating me. But I can handle being alone for another month.”

Her heartbeat quickened. “You still want me to come for the summer?”

“Yes, I…” He furrowed his brow. “I didn’t think we changed our plans.”

Shaking her head, she sat up straighter. “We didn’t. I want to be there. And I can handle being there on my own.” She didn’t need Grey pretending to care about her, getting her a job just so he could get to Kylo another way. “I talked to Brianna and we can go into DC if we get bored, or just hang out at her place. She has other friends there too. And Rose wants to visit for a few weeks. If she can. I’m sorry I didn’t ask yet.”

His face returned to calm again. “That would make me feel better. I might have to work more than I want to but I do have some time off that I want to use at some point. I hate not wanting to go into the office. So I need some time off. And I want to spend it with you.” He set his book down, shifting so he could stroke a single finger down her cheek. “I’ve had a hard few months. I’m going to be better for you when we’re together.”

Blushing, she leaned into his hand. “I want that too, Kylo. And I know you can be. I like seeing the real you. I’m still…sorry I got upset with August.”

His hand dropped to her knee, warm and large. The cat was finally disturbed and grumbled, moving to curl up on her side of the bed. She kept her eyes on him before she looked down at how Kylo was touching her. “I shouldn’t have followed your phone.”

He hadn’t done it again since that night. He was working things out in his head. She couldn’t be
mad at him for his harsher thoughts when it came to keeping her safe. “I know you did it because you care. That matters to me.”

What else could she do? He was trying to find a way so they could be together. Once his job let him get away, he wouldn’t need to be afraid.

Looking up, he leaned forward. Their lips met and she sighed instantly, losing her worries in the moment. The suppleness of his plush lips drew her in and she opened her mouth to him. He deepened the kiss, tasting more of her before gasping and pulling away. “You matter to me.” He pulled her into a firm hug, resting his head on her shoulder. “Please keep loving me even when I do strange things.”

Of course she would. Even when things got hard, they always had their original love and bond. The new love, the one that felt shaky at times, would settle down

He cuddled more that night, letting his hand warm her stomach as she leaned into his kisses. The softness was back. She thought about asking to go down to the basement, to feel him inside of her again, but shoved the thought away. His hands could be loving in a different way. They could just hold her and she could find a different completeness.

When he fell asleep, she sat up from where her head rested on his chest. It was rare for him to fall asleep instantly. He really did need her to sleep without having thoughts keep him awake for too long.

The way he breathed was steady and she traced the shape of his chest beneath his t-shirt. His heart was softly beating, always the familiar tempo of safety and home. It wasn’t racing. It wasn’t pounding. He could be safe with her in the familiar bed.

Even if it was just for a weekend, it would be summer soon enough and then there could be more times like this. She longed for rolling over in his bed, in his house, and meeting his eyes and not feeling afraid in the morning. It would be their house again, even if there were swords above the television.

She sighed and put her head down, knowing that there would only be good dreams that night.

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He hardly fit at the small table inside the playhouse. It wasn’t meant for him but he should still have thought about having to be in there at some point. Drawing up his knees, he tried not to look uncomfortable even as he ducked his head lower. “So, do you like it?”

Benji sat across from him, playing with a toy car. He drove it up and down the smooth surface, sputtering his lips. He looked up and nodded. “It’s nice, Kylo. It’s just for me but I’ll share it with the baby.”

Kylo wanted to sit back and sigh. The most he could do was lean forward to rest on his elbows. He asked about the type of car his godson was playing with as he slipped into reliving his day.

He had woken up early that morning but not because he couldn’t fall back asleep for once. He kissed Rey’s forehead, whispering that he loved her. He stroked her hair, studying how comfortable she looked. The bed was very inviting. Still, he had to get up. She sleepily asked for
five more minutes. The gentle tone of her voice made him pause. He couldn’t resist cuddling closer to her again. He felt her steady heartbeat and could lose himself in having a simple morning for once.

And the only thoughts in his head were about doing things for other people. Other than getting a haircut, he wanted to be in the moment of the day. He could find a routine and try to think about others instead of the thick ball of anxiety that loomed for him, always in the distance.

There would not be moments of looking at family pictures, wishing he was there. He wouldn’t be checking his phone, wondering why his texts went mostly unanswered. Most of all, he wouldn’t have to see sharp eyes across the office, reminding him that the typewriter and journal still haunted an office at the FBI.

No thoughts about the case. George and Owen had insisted on that. Owen threatened to text him every hour to remind him of that. If his thoughts strayed, he was supposed to repeat pages from the procedural guide from memory. He didn’t really feel like digging up those words from the back of his mind. They were there but the idea of doing it was more annoying than it was worth.

When he finally got up, he had coffee with his parents as the cat still buzzed around his leg until he got a treat. Watching him bound up the stairs to find a spot next to Rey to sleep, he wondered why Rey wanted him to take the little orange beast. He wouldn’t mind the company but he belonged there.

The bruise on his arm had faded but it was always safer to wear sweaters. When he finally stopped picking at the burn on his ankle, it had started to heal. It was going to leave a scar yet it was a reminder of that day with Luke and what he had to focus on. Someone’s heart was in his hands and there were so many families waiting for him to find true answers; he had to be more balanced in his life and his work. Maz kept drilling that into his head and he had to listen. Talking about the weather with his parents was pure relief compared to glaring at Erso across the conference room. Rey was upstairs asleep. The tension could leave his shoulders for at least a day.

He showered and changed into a blue button-up shirt. The repaired charcoal pants were finally his again. He couldn’t let them get worn down again. Take better care of himself and his things. One step at a time.

Before he left, he kissed Rey goodbye, telling her he’d see her later.

He got a haircut, forcing himself to talk about baseball to the good barber in town. He’d have a few hours to himself, letting Rey study or work on her portfolio. Driving around in his mother’s car, he looked at his town in a different way. There were good people there. He had to stop worrying that everyone was out to get them. It was worth thinking about getting an assignment there. There would be less pressure at a regional office. Maybe when George retired…

Pulling up to Hux’s, he felt an easy grin spread over his face at the sight of the tarped over playhouse peaking out from behind the house in the backyard. He knew when it was delivered but Hux refused to send him pictures of it. He wouldn’t get to see it until his son did.

Hugging the boy that morning, he had more coffee with his friends. Paige looked exhausted, shifting her weight and rubbing her stomach. She was in more discomfort with this pregnancy and he ached again for not being there for her. There was always someone he was letting down with his choices.

Before everyone else arrived, he let Benji have his present so they could spend time alone together. That part he could do. He helped him pull down the tarp and his eyes got wide. It was like
anything could have been under the blue sheet and now, even though he had to hold his body in a very awkward position, the look of joy on the boy’s face would be hard to forget.

“Why have you been so busy?” Benji asked. “I miss you.”

He had just been staring at him for too long.

He sighed, guilt snaking up his spine. “I’ve missed you too. But if we are thinking about one another, we’re not really that far apart. My job makes me miss a lot of people. I have to catch a very bad man. And it’s a lot of work but I have people helping me. It’s always good to work with others.” Even if you hate one of them...

Benji was nodding but he narrowed his dark eyes. As he was getting older, his hair was lightening but his eyes were still clearly Paige’s. “Why’s the man bad?”

Shaking his head, he reached for his hand. 

He’s hurting people. And I have to stop him.

Daddy says you work too much.

I do. “But you’re safe with your mom and dad. And the baby will be safe too. I know the police here and they’re going to help you grow up without having to worry about bad men.”

“It’s because the bad monster took you, but you killed him. And you’ll find this new monster too because you can do anything.” Benji smiled and turned his head to the doorway. “Hi Rey, do you like my house?”

Wearing a floral sundress, Rey grinned at him before flicking her eyes to Kylo. The look made his heart shudder. He made her look at him that way. Despite everything he did wrong, she still loved him. He should have been more open that night in her room. Texting her in a haze of worry was him falling back into old habits that he had to break. The panic that gripped him after speaking with Luke, driving him to self-harm at the thought of breaking her heart, was a constant pressure that needed to recede. She was beautiful and strong, always his source of hope that things could change. She just needed to understand that he never meant to hurt her with all of the mistakes he made. He never wanted to make her cry but he knew she must have shed many tears in their time apart. That had to stop happening.

“It’s a beautiful house. Did you thank Kylo for it?”

The boy nodded. “Yep. And I promised to share with the baby. We can play here and dad can get some fucking work done.”

Rey’s eyes instantly went to his and he winced. “I don’t think your daddy would like you using that word.”

He shrugged. “Why?”

He cleared his throat. “It’s an adult word. You can’t drive a car but adults can. It’s like that. I don’t care if you say something like that, but your teachers will get mad.”

Rey folded her arms. “Benji, your friends will be here soon. Do you want to wash your hands and get ready? Your mom might need some help inside.”

He hopped off the low bench and hugged her, before sprinting towards the house.

“He’s gotten so big,” he said when Rey stepped inside, sitting across from him. He took her hands
on the small table, taking in how she fit so much better in the confined space. “I missed you. When did you get here?”

“A few minutes ago.” She tilted her head. “I like your haircut. It’s perfect again.”

Nothing about me is perfect, he wanted to say. Instead, he smiled. “I shouldn’t have to go out of state to get a good haircut. Or to get my clothes fixed.”

“Maybe you just want some pieces of home?” She lifted her chin. “This was a great present for him, Kylo. I think he’s going to be a great big brother but he will need his own space.”

“Hux didn’t want it but I convinced him. I had to read about what it’s like to have a younger sibling and he finally accepted that it’s a good idea.” He looked down at their joined hands. “I don’t want the party to start. When it does, it means it will be over. And tomorrow, I’ll have to be back there.”

He dropped his head and took a deep breath. The softness of her perfume kept him in the moment but reality was slowly pulling him away from it. He hated fighting against it and leaned over to pull her into a kiss. There it was. Last night, he’d been too exhausted. All of the things going on with Luke and Grey, or Erso and work, made it hard not to just want to sleep in his bed again. Shuddering, he leaned in closer to her, reaching for her across the table. Be there for her. Be there with her. Do this for her. He had to stop being in his head.

Gasping, she pulled back, licking her pink lips. “We should go inside.”

“Did I hurt you?” Again, back to guilt.

“No,” she said, blushing and tilting her head. “Hux wanted me to get you. There are still things to do inside before everyone gets here.”

Taking her hands again, he sighed. “Can’t we just sit here? For a little while longer?”

They were alone in that little house. Since he’d gotten there, she’d smiled so many times that he’d lost count.

The silent moment was only five minutes but he could finally tune everything else out when he looked into her eyes. Time slowed down as he was holding her hand. How could he keep hurting her and failing her? If there were more quiet moments like this, less arguing and pressure, he wouldn’t need to lean so hard on Grey. He would be more attentive at work and the edges would be worn down. It didn’t have to be this hard.

He ran his hand down her arm, studying her freckles. All of her scars had almost faded. He was just giving himself more.

“You look happy,” she said, her voice soft. “What are you thinking about?”

“That this is nice. When it’s just you and me...I can unwind.” He pushed away the thought of telling her about Grey. It would just spoil the soft mood.

And, like always, someone came to interrupt it.

He heard Hux before he saw him, already moving to stand. He was going to refuse to get his picture taken inside the thing. No matter how cute it looked to others, it would be a source of endless embarrassment.

“I just finished making twelve goodie bags and you’re hiding out here.” His friend met his eyes,
looking annoyed before the look broke into a smile. “Do you want to hang streamers or blow up balloons?”

He felt an easy grin cross his face. “I don’t want to do anything. He’s four. He’ll get his presents and forget about the decorations in five seconds.”

Hux, despite shaking his head, still didn’t look annoyed. “My secret goal in life is to fill a landfill with garbage my children don’t want. Come inside and help me and your parents. Paige is resting again. And my mom also wants to see you. You can keep her from arguing with Paige’s parents about the colour of the cake.”

“He wanted a pink cake. Let him have a pink cake with unicorns. Who cares?” He had to raise his eyebrows before he glanced at Rey. She looked from him to Hux and he could tell she thought it was a ridiculous thing to debate about.

Hux just rolled his eyes. “Tell that to my mother in law. Come on.”

Rey’s hand was in his as he followed him inside.

Even as the afternoon spiralled into a dozen children racing from the inside of the house to the warm weather in the yard, he fell into quiet contentment rather than pure annoyance. Most of the parents there knew who he was; they’d gone to high school with two of them. One of them he didn’t recognize. Adrian used to be one of the Goth kids, keeping mostly to himself and his group of friends. The dyed black hair and nail polish was now replaced with a cashmere sweater and auburn-haired wife. He had looked at him with excited recognition, more than happy to talk about their time in high school. Kylo had started the conversation with a bit of trepidation, leaning against the mantle in the living room to disguise how he tensed. He had been right to hide their relationship during those years. He didn’t want the day to get brought down by anything.

At least he could talk about the good sides of his job instead. That got the other man interested in another way. He’d really done it. He got out of their town and made something of himself. Adrian worked at the bank.

He was just another person, one living a normal life. His son and Benji went to the same daycare and were as close as four year olds could be. Every other week they’d have a different best friend. He’d never been that way. Hux was his best friend and he’d never needed anyone else.

Adrian was careful not to touch on the missing years. Again, he was thankful for that.

When he forced himself to mingle again, he stopped to stare out the window. Rey was sitting with the children on the grass, teaching them a game with a ball. Some of them wandered away, finding something else to do, but most of them had their eyes on her.

Sighing, he just stared, feeling his mind go blank.

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“You can go home now, Kylo,” Paige said from her chair. She shifted her weight and groaned, making him pause in cleaning up. “But thank you for your help today.”

Everyone else left was outside, sitting in the lingering warmth as evening settled around them. It
really was only their parents and Rey left. The few that had stayed longer had the barbecue dinner Hux was overly proud of. He eyed the charcoal grill and pondered investing in one for his house, but then quickly let the idea die; he wasn’t that type of person. Benji, already in his pyjamas, was asleep on Hux’s chest when he went inside to help Paige try to straighten the house, taking care of the leftover plates and other trash that both the kids and parents left behind when bedtimes started creeping closer and tears started flowing easier.

He picked up the last of the destroyed decorations, tossing it in the garbage bag. Stepping back to her in the kitchen, he met her eyes. “It really was the least I could do, Paige. I want to be home more but…”

She sighed. “I know, Kylo. It’s impossible to get away. But you’ll get time to come see us again once Anna is here. Or at least I hope you do.”

Smirking, he tied off the bag and moved to sit next to her at the table. “I thought it was going to be Sophia.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’ve been in agony for almost nine months. Armie can give me this one. Sophia can be her middle name or something. I just want my Anna.” Rubbing her stomach, she slowed her hand for a moment. “I hope today wasn’t stressful for you. You’ve been so…wound up the last couple of months. We’ve been worried about you.”

He shrugged. “It was a good day, Paige. I got to spend time with you guys and my parents. And Rey.”

Exhaustion was really pulling at him now. He was having trouble concentrating. He really shouldn’t have left the group outside on the patio but he was having a hard time keeping hold of the peace he’d started the day with.

He was slowly giving into the fact that nothing had felt right since March. And he just didn’t know why.

Licking her lips, his friend nodded. She took her hair down from her ponytail and wound her hands through the strands. “Are things…better now? Last month we were really…concerned doesn’t even begin to explain how we felt. If Armie didn’t have school right now, I would have sent him there to keep you company. You can talk to us more if you’re worried. I’m awake all night at this point. Rey loves you and wants to spend time with you but you don’t have to be everything to everyone.”

He let out a long breath and closed his eyes. It was pretty much the same thing Grey had told him so many times. “It’s hard when we’re far apart. I know I let her down when I couldn’t be here more. It’s like, when we were kids, I almost had more control over my life and didn’t realize it. All I had to do was show up to school and things would be fine. Now, I’m just getting dragged along and can’t do anything to stop it. But I’m figuring it out. I want to be with her and it’s still…I never feel like I’m good enough even if she says I am.”

“Kylo, it’s her first real relationship. I try to tell her how the long-distance thing isn’t the end of the world. You know, as long as no one cheats and drives you insane. She likes what she’s studying and she has friends now. You hate some of the people at your work, but I know you like trying to solve problems. It will be fine if you just talk about your feelings.” Paige put her hands out and he took them, feeling the smoothness of her skin. “And I’m sorry things are different with her than they were with him.”

His hands tightened. “There’s nothing to be sorry for. I just want her to feel…to feel the same
things I felt and I’m…working on not messing that up.”

The weight on his shoulders felt heavier. If they could just have some damned time together without him panicking, everything would be perfect.

Her face in a tight line, Paige shook her head. “Keep talking to us, Kylo. You both deserve to be happy. We’ve always said that and I saw some of that today. I mean, she’s my little sister’s friend but I like being her friend. But when we were in school and you were with him…” She sighed and shook her head. “Armie has been my life since I was sixteen. I keep thinking about what I would have done if I didn’t forgive him or he would have been taken from me. We’re all only just people. Love is so stupid sometimes. And now I need to pee again. Help me up and then go home. I just want to sleep and pretend I won’t be able to sleep well for the next eighteen years of my life.”

He didn’t want to tell her that there wouldn’t be much sleeping even after that. When was the last time his parents had a good night’s sleep? More things to feel bad about.

He guided Paige to the washroom, apologizing again. Leaving her behind the locked door, he went to Benji’s room and sat on the small bed. He’d been in his life for four years, longer if he counted all of the doctor’s visits. When he was smaller, he had been more than an extension of Hux and Paige. But in the last year and half, his personality was really emerging. There were longer conversations now. And it was going to keep getting bigger. Still there was the threat from the case lurking in the back of his mind. Narrowing his eyes, he checked the windows again. He trusted Hux but there could be something he missed. None of the children had been taken with violence. The neighbours would complain if they put bars up around the windows. Benji also couldn’t grow up feeling like he was in a prison.

Picking up a stuffed penguin from the messy floor, he frowned. But what would happen when this danger was gone? Would his brain just find another reason to always be afraid? There had to be a point in the future in which he could go a week without feeling like things were falling apart.

“There you are.” Hux’s hushed voice drew him to the doorway. He raised the sleeping boy in his arms. “I think he had a good day. Thanks for being here, Kylo. It means a lot to us and him.”

Putting his son to bed, Hux ran his hand through his hair. He looked up, giving Kylo a long look before he sighed. Quietly leaving the room, he left the door ajar as they stood in the hallway.

“How are you doing?” Hux asked, raising his voice to a normal volume. “Your folks are ready to go if you are.”

“Yeah, I’m…” he shrugged before letting his shoulders fall. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I just want to feel okay and I don’t.”

“You zoned out a couple of times. It’s normal for you but if there’s something on your mind, we can hang out for a bit.” Sighing, his friend tilted his head. “I understand the whole not having time for shit thing. I need summer to be here now too.”

“We’ve spread things out but with this case and the others we’ve had come up…” He rolled his eyes. “I’ll have weeks off here and there but it probably won’t be long enough for Rey.”

Eyeing him, Hux exhaled. “Kylo, I’ve seen you in a relationship before. You’re always worried about things falling apart but I know you’ve made a lot of efforts to change. Most of the time it works when you focus on the simple things. But what’s going on in your head? Besides thinking the worst?”
Kylo rubbed his eyes. “If I say I’m tired, will you believe me?” Leaning against the wall, he folded his arms across his chest. He didn’t feel like having his life picked apart by mentioning Grey or his issues at work with Erso. Or how it hurt to know he’d go back to feeling a constant ache when he left in the morning.

Even if he’d held Rey’s hand and pulled her onto his lap over the course of the afternoon, he kept drifting again. Turning quiet had been easy with so many children around but now he had to deal with those thoughts.

“Ben.” Hux touched his arm. “If you’re not okay, you can talk to us. Rey was happy today and I know you were too at times. But you know yourself. Sometimes you feel nothing and you don’t have to beat yourself up over it but you do have to work on it. I’m not mad at you or whatever you’re thinking. I know you don’t like me telling you what you need to hear sometimes so I can pull back a little. I can just listen. Talk to me or your family. Or your girlfriend.”

He knew he was bottling things up again. It somehow felt easier to want to hide some things, saving the harder stuff for Grey. Rey was home for the weekend and she didn’t need to go back to her dorm room only thinking of him as being unfeeling. He really was just tired.

“Luke planted some ideas in my head and I keep going back to them. He doesn’t think I can make this relationship work and it doesn’t take much to make me doubt myself. Yesterday and today, things finally slowed down and I could digest what I keep doing wrong. I just don’t want to hurt her, Hux, but I’m keeping a part of myself from her because we will probably end up arguing or she’ll be upset and I hate doing that to her. I thought we were at a good place and then everything happened…” He rubbed his arm. “I keep doing things wrong. I’m worried about tonight. If I tell her how I feel, she will want to make me feel better and I…”

“Yeah it’s your first time alone in months. I get the expectation.” His friend’s face softened. “You were my friend first before she was my student so even if I want her to be happy, I do want you to be happy too. I might say harsh things to you but you sometimes need to be forced out of your head. Don’t keep secrets from your partner. She’s more mature now than she was in high school, but she needs time to think about things. Try to have a little hope, Kylo. Once you’ve gotten a less frustrating case, you’ll feel more like yourself again.”

“Luke thinks we should take a break. I don’t know how to begin telling her that.”

Hux, to his credit, rolled his eyes. “Don’t let your weird uncle tell you what to think. Okay?”

Kylo could only shake his head. Easier said than done.

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Kylo was quiet when they got home. He looked around the house, mumbling that he was tired before going up to his room to read. After a day spent around so many people, Rey couldn’t blame him for wanting to be alone. She finished her readings and changed for bed, happy to feel his damp toothbrush in the stand again. At least his door was open. It couldn’t be that bad.

But it was.

The second she climbed into bed and turned off the lamp, he pulled her closer and put his head on her chest and sobbed.
“Kylo?” She pulled him closer, trying to hug him as he clung to her. “What’s wrong?”

He shook his head, burrowing his face against her. Her heartbeat quickened as his tears warmed her skin. Kylo could cry loudly with anger or silently, slipping into some brutal thought in his mind as it overtook him. He’d been happy most of the weekend. He’d been meeting her eyes more the entire time.

There had been more to those looks that she hadn’t understood.

Those were the parts of Kylo she had been able to handle when she was younger, before the shine on the world had been worn down by time. When she’d been four, there had been no lies between them. For those four years of being trapped and terrorized, he’d been so strong. In the memories that remained of the softer, kinder moments of being there, he’d refused to be broken. He would hold her and help her. Gentle words or songs would erase any of the cuts or bites or burns from Snoke. The blinking language tied them together forever. She’d survived through so much and it was all because of him.

But helping him on the outside had transformed from simple moments of just being together to times like this. She could still find dark moments of hating herself and everything she did; the mistakes she’d made shone through with that. But somehow, her faults were smaller compared to Kylo. He took over everything, including her heart and now her body.

A low whimper from him made tears spring to her eyes too. She kissed his forehead and rubbed the expanse of his back. This was what he was afraid of showing her. But she’d been through all of this since she was small.

The realization rolled through her as he turned his head to meet her eyes in the dim light from the night outside. She was supposed to be an adult now. She wanted these parts of him but she was falling back into the past, like he always did but in his own mournful way. This part, she could be stronger for him. The balance that they used to have, that bubble, should have never been broken. Had that come from him or from them both? Even as she caressed his skin, even as his quiet tears stopped and he stilled, she found herself falling into his words from the day after they slept together. Everything had felt right in the moment, but he’d been concealing how he really felt to make her happy.

The thought snapped something inside of her and she put her head back and squeezed her eyes shut. “Are you okay?” he whispered. “I’m sorry, Rey. I’m so sorry. I was up here thinking and I just… I’m sorry.”

He slowly pulled away, sitting up. He was about to leave the bed when she reached to grab for him, to get him to stay. She couldn’t let him leave this time.

“Kylo, what’s wrong? Was it just all of the people?”

He stayed, but he still pulled away. Blinking, he took steady and even breaths as he drew his knees to his chin. Even in his adult body, echoes of his younger self shone through. Why couldn’t he just be her Kylo and not as this caught-in-between version?

“Luke wants us to break up.”

The words made her heart stop. The brutal stab of pain sent her body rigid. She couldn’t breathe.

Staring at him, she saw the same agony reflected in his hunched body.
“Why would he want that?” Her shaking words broke the silence. “I hope you told him that we’re together and that he’s wrong.”

He put his chin on his arm. “He’s always had a problem with how I’ve taken over your life. He always thinks I’m hurting you, that I’m keeping you from being normal. I started thinking about it again and I couldn’t let it go. I haven’t been good to you. I haven’t been good for you. I keep you from having a real life and…”

Reaching for him again, Rey shook her head. She gripped his arm, refusing to let go. “But we’re talking more. And I don’t mean to be upset but sometimes it does feel like you are still in love with him. I know what you wrote. I know how much you care about me. I love you and you love me. I know it’s supposed to be hard with someone older, but I’ve known you my entire life. There’s no one else I want to be with and I want to keep going even if it’s hard. I know you can show me how much I mean to you if you just let go of some of the things you keep inside. I want it to just be us and then it will be better.”

She would just have to keep her heart in place, solid for him. Wavering would mean giving up. Kylo never gave up. He could falter. He could fail. But he kept going. She had to follow that to keep him strong.

“I want to be with you, Rey,” he said as he turned his head. “Please still love me. Please keep trying. I just want… I want things to be perfect for you. And I can’t do that right now. Can you…” he took a deep breath. “Can you give me a little time? When you come for the summer, can we talk and keep working on things? I need… something. You’ve always been my light and I don’t know how I’ll be able to go back tomorrow if… if you have these thoughts too.”

She bit her lip. “It’s been hard to be away from you but I won’t leave you, Kylo. No matter what. We’re together now and we’ll always be together.”

He met her eyes and he slowly nodded. “I didn’t mean to cry. But I’m… I’m okay that I did. Things aren’t perfect but I can fix it. I promise, Rey.”

He leaned over to kiss her and she tried to lose herself in the sensation.

She managed to smile when he pulled back to stroke her hair.

If they weren’t able to talk about this then it would escape her hands. She didn’t want to think about where they would be if that happened.

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Grey looked up at him when he reached the table. “Hey. How’s it going?”

Kylo sighed as he sat down across from him. He’d actually answered his text, agreeing to meet. The weight on his chest lifted. The week since he’d been back had been a steady fight for stability. But reflecting on what happened the night before he left, it had been good to tell Rey his fears. She understood better now. It was all about finding and keeping that balance. Luke was wrong; he could do this. “He liked the playhouse. The baby will be here any day now.”

Snorting, Grey shrugged. “I guess that’s good for you and your friends. I was waiting for you to order.”
“I can get it,” he said, standing before his mind caught up with him. “What’s wrong?”

The unanswered texts or only short replies flashed in his mind. But he was busy too.

Blue eyes flicked up and then down again. “We can talk about it. Just get me, I don’t know. Whatever.”

Stepping away, he eyed him as he went to the counter to order. Grey always put sugar in everything. It was easy to order him an extra-sweet hazelnut latte. After the previous weekend, he just wanted something simple and chose espresso. Exhaustion was also part of his normal life now.

Whenever he glanced over, waiting for their drinks, the other man was staring out the window.

Putting the mug in front of him got his attention. “Thanks, Ky. Hey, you know what I like. Isn’t that a thing?”

Sitting down, Kylo narrowed his eyes. “Are you okay?”

The glare from under thick lashes made him sit back and hide his reaction by drinking his coffee.

“I’ve been, um…” Grey grabbed his own ceramic cup and took a sip. “So, the last time we talked, when I came to your house when I wasn’t supposed to, it wasn’t normal and I wanted to apologize. And I hate saying this shit so, yeah. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. We’re talking now.” Exhaling, Kylo kept his hands where they were. “Rey will be here in two weeks. I’m going to tell her.”

Rubbing his forehead, Grey nodded. “Okay, cool. I mean, it’s fine. I already know what’s going to happen so it’s good that I’m going to be out of here soon.”

“What do you mean?” He forced himself not to react.

“I got a response for one of those Masters programmes I told you about. They took a look at my undergrad garbage and my resume and decided I’m not that big of a fuck up. I’ve got an interview in a month. Tickets are booked. I mean…” Grey took a deep breath. “I’m already about to get cut out of your life so maybe it’s a good thing if I can get out of town. Be out of your hair and dad’s hair too. I don’t know, they probably won’t take me in California, but I still got an interview, right? And I can hang out on the beach for a bit before I come back here and pack up my shit and move there anyway.”

He hated thinking about California but he swallowed that thought down. “I meant about knowing what’s going to happen.”

Grey gripped his mug. “Come on, Ky. She’s going to freak out. I’ve told you that the entire time. It’s like it won’t matter how you feel about me anymore. I fucked up by getting close to you again. It’s not your fault or maybe it is or whatever. It’s why I’ve been…avoiding you. I told you the entire time to tell her and you didn’t so…whatever. I tried my best and it wasn’t good enough.” A slow tear he tried to wipe away punctuated the distant look in his eyes. But Kylo still saw it and sat up more.

“Grey, maybe that won’t happen. If you can talk to her and tell her how you’ve helped me, I think she’ll understand. Things are going to get better between us and I can finally stop falling apart. I told her what Luke said to me and she still believes in me.” He had to keep his distance and not touch him, but it was hard to see him hurting. There always had to be space between them. Still, he didn’t want to show how it rattled him at the prospect of having to either push him away or him
being on the other side of the country in that hateful state. “Let me have some hope here. I hardly ever feel hopeful about anything.”

Grey dropped his head, swearing under his breath, before he looked up. More streaks of nearly white hair, disrupting the black tones of his head, shone in the sunlight of almost summer. It was distracting. “Ky, when have you ever been able to have what you really want with her? Especially when it comes down to two people? I’ve fucked you. I’m damaged goods. I tried hard to get her to like me and then all of that shit that she told me….we’ve been over it. I’m just feeling sorry for myself. She’ll call you on your lies and bullshit. And I told you not to do that. You’ve had months to tell her about our being friends again. You didn’t. So, I know where I stand. I’ve been the one you turned to when you needed to talk about real things and I’ve been a fucking secret. I’m the one that didn’t give two shits when you needed to bitch about Dr. Bitchface. I got to talk about my problems when you had a clear head. I didn’t make you feel like shit when you couldn’t think about anything other than a mass-murder investigation.”

Kylo sat back, his mug forgotten. He took two, slow, gulps of air. “She’s been listening. Please, Grey. Everything has been so much and I…”

“You what? You think things will blow over? Nah, you’ve fucked up and you’re…”

He put his fist down on the table. “Let me have hope, Grey.”

Blinking, Grey shook his head for a moment. “Sure. Okay.” He drained his cup and stood. He pulled down his dark t-shirt, another band logo filling his chest. “I guess call me in two weeks and we’ll go from there.”

He walked away and Kylo was left sitting and looking at an empty chair, apprehension finally settling in his chest in place of the lies he’d been telling himself.

Even as he counted down the days and clung to the hope that she’d understand, the day with Grey had left him more than stunned as May bled into June.

He talked her through final exams, being forced back into old thoughts that he shouldn’t have anymore. They planned what they wanted to do and he looked at his schedule and just saw a mess of meetings and interviews and endless time spent spinning his wheels about the case.

*Erso* noticed. Maz noticed. Everyone noticed.

She asked if the both of them could meet her when Rey got there, after she was settled.

With clenched fists, Kylo agreed.

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Her excitement over her grades and showing him pictures of Benji’s new sister vanished when she noticed the look in Kylo’s eyes at the airport. He said it was mostly the case, but he was overwhelmed in other ways. The constant feeling of being inadequate pulsed with each of his words. And she felt the same.

Going to talk to Maz the day after she got there made it hard to feel anything but dread. Even as she held Kylo’s hand and he’d kissed her good morning, there was something off in how he moved.
Fiddling with her FBI Visitor badge, Rey tried to find optimism in the fact that they were still together and could get through anything.

After hugging her old therapist, Rey forced a smile before sitting down on the couch beside Kylo.

“So,” Maz started. “Let’s start with how you’re both feeling today.”

Looking from Kylo to the older woman, Rey exhaled. “I’m nervous. I know Kylo has been tired lately, but he’s been…distant since I got here.”

Maz nodded. “Does that also make you nervous?”

“I’ve been looking forward to being here for a long time. It’s been a…” How should she put it? Had it really just been hard? The times when she’d felt good about herself, like the future was going to be like she imagined it, were still there. Spending time with Kylo, even if it was on the phone or computer, meant they were always talking. Her feelings weren’t forgotten. But since he brought up what Luke had told him, there were fewer smiles. Those weeks had been difficult. If she hadn’t been able to talk to her friends and go to class, she probably would have focused on them more. But he kept saying things would be fine. And she trusted him, even though now it felt like the opposite. “We’ve had good times. And we talk. But we almost always start talking about sad things. Sometimes it’s like Kylo can only focus on what’s hurting him and I get frustrated.”

Kylo was looking at his hands when she turned her head towards him.

“Kylo, what do you think about what Rey is saying? Can you tell me what Rey is saying in your own words from your perspective?”

Glancing up, he nodded. “Rey has worked through a lot this year and I’m proud of her. I also wanted her to be here because we haven’t been able to spend as much time together as we wanted. I’ve had the task force and my other cases keeping me stuck here so I’m also frustrated. That’s why I need to talk about what’s going on in my head, even if it only feels like difficult things. But I do make space for Rey to talk about her problems. I try to listen to her more and…I have been keeping some of my darker thoughts to myself. It’s not fair that she has to hear them all of the time.”

“You have gone over them many times with me. We’ve always talked about communication. How have you felt about that?” Maz tilted her head and Rey kept her eyes on Kylo.

His lips were a tight line. “Sometimes I am afraid to tell her things because of how she’ll react. I’ve tried to talk to her about this and…I just don’t want her to shut me out. It’s been a thought I haven’t been able to let go of for a while. I have trouble coping and I act…irrational.”

She shook her head. “I told you, Kylo, I want to talk about these things. Just not all of the time.”

Maz cleared her throat again. “Let’s go back to communication and how you two work together as a team. Rey, can you give me an example of one of the ‘things’ that Kylo might be referring to. Just so I know.”

Blinking, Rey thought. “I didn’t want to talk about him wearing the armband he got from Poe when he was sixteen. But I did tell him I was sorry for being mad about it. But I still think all of that should be in the past now that we’re together.”

She could hear Kylo swallow as saw how he dropped his head out of the corner of her eye. Good.

“Kylo? How do you feel about that? Elaborate on your earlier thoughts.”
Rey slowly looked at him. He kept his body rigid. “I think I’m capable of loving Rey at the same time I still think about someone I’ve…someone who meant something to me. I appreciated it when Rey told me that it was okay that I felt that way.”

Rey grit her teeth. She was always going to have to apologize for everything she felt. “I still think he should talk to me more if he feels this way.”

Maz tilted her head. “Rey, have you thought about why Kylo might not be able to talk to you?”

Her face flushed. “I think if he’s allowed to feel this way, then I should be able to be upset. And sometimes I feel like I can’t. Poe shouldn’t be something we should still be talking about.”

Turning, she saw Kylo look away and felt even more anger build.

“Kylo?” Maz’s voice made him sit up. “Why do you think Rey thinks that way?”

“I…” He exhaled. “I feel like we are only talking about this because I’ve been having a lot of problems the last few months. I’ve tried to talk about them. I mean, Maz, I’ve been here every week. Most of them are caused by my own…weaknesses. When it comes to how I deal with memories some things are hard to let go of even when I try. I took down the pictures at home and I…

“I never told you to do that, you did that because you wanted to.” She glared. “And Grey took them down. Not you.”

He’d started this by not saying anything last night. He’d just looked distant and focused on himself.

“We’ve talked about this before. I had the armband on because I was thinking about him. That’s all it was. That’s a time in my life I don’t want to forget. It meant something to me, it’s always going to mean something to me. I’m trying to learn the things from being with him so I can be better for you.” Kylo took a deep breath and met her eyes. “It did happen. I did love Poe. But you are different from him. Our love, all of it, fills other places in my heart than the love I shared with him. I have room for both of you.” He dropped his head and lowered his voice. “I can’t just pretend Poe never happened. That’s not how this…that’s not how I…I don’t know. This is what I mean when I say it’s hard to talk about some things. I want Rey to talk more about herself and how she’s feeling but I end up taking up too much space.” He breathed out slowly. “I never meant for my past to be everything we share.”

Maz turned her eyes to her. “How does that make you feel, Rey?”

Licking her lips, she nodded. “Like it would be nice to talk more about how I’m feeling. Bad things have happened to me too, Kylo.”

She nodded. “Kylo? Why do you think you haven’t asked Rey about those things before.”

“They hurt,” he started. “And they’re my fault. I couldn’t protect her enough. I always found distractions. But Rey, I love you. For who you are. We can talk about this more, more about how you feel but I need to be able to talk about who I am too. I gave you the journals. You know me. You know that I get locked in my head. I’ve been…I haven’t been right since March when you were attacked.”

“That’s only because you have the journal back,” she said, snorting. “And his ring.”

“That’s not the only reason.” He met her eyes again. “And that’s unfair. I have to deal with them
Shaking her head, she folded her arms. “I keep waiting for you to finish the case. I also want it to be over too, Kylo. I know you can do it but I’m…” She stopped talking, sighing. “I’m worried that you’ll still just go back to it. You say all of the time that you love me and we haven’t been really together since March. And then you make me come here and now we have to talk about all of this again. I don’t get it.”

She could hear him swallow and then he looked at Maz, his eyes pleading.

Maz shifted in her seat. “Okay, why don’t we take a step back. Kylo, we’ve talked about how you can be more open with Rey. You’ve said you’ve been trying. Describe that.”

“I…” He sat back, shifting his weight. “I try to tell her everything but I’m still…afraid of upsetting her. I want to ask her about how she’s feeling but it’s like…I just said this. I don’t want her to be upset. And I don’t want her to see me upset. Especially when we’re far apart. The night…the first time we made love, I started to panic. I didn’t want…I didn’t want to let her down. I never want to let anyone down. I was afraid to tell her at the time. I needed help to tell her and I know that’s wrong. It’s like if I said stop, it would have been my fault. I started thinking about how young she is. I know better than that but it was still a thought in my head. I felt…I felt like I was hurting her. I depend on…I depend on a lot of talking during sex. I thought Rey understood that. I needed to know she was okay and it’s like she didn’t care.”

“Kylo, I would have helped you. I do care about you.” She let her hands fall to her lap. “You just have to give me the chance.”

“How would you have helped him, Rey?” Maz asked. “Put yourself in that situation and imagine your boyfriend, the man that you love, wants to stop having sex when you want to keep going. You know he has these problems. How would that have made you feel?”

She clenched her jaw. “I…I would have been hurt. That I wasn’t good enough.”

Kylo rubbed his eyes and then looked at the other side of the room. His voice was soft when he started to speak. “That’s why I kept going. I didn’t want to ruin it. Like I ruin everything.”

Maz’s eyes snapped to him. “Kylo, can you phrase that in a different way? Put yourself in Rey’s shoes and get rid of that last part. Remarks like that are only self-deprecating. We’ve talked about that when you’re here with Owen.”

“I know. And I still do it.” He exhaled. “I’ve always felt like I’ve disappointed my…lovers when I didn’t orgasm. I knew it was Rey’s first time. I wanted it to be perfect. She deserves it. And I really feel like I’ve been failing her the last few months, but I haven’t been able to be myself around her the entire time either. Like we talked about, the things that I keep from her would only hurt her. And I don’t want…I don’t even know anymore. Sometimes I’m just tired of not being able to be myself around her.”

She blinked. “Kylo, I can always tell when you’re not yourself. It’s like there are so many versions of you and I don’t know what to do either.”

His eyes narrowed for a moment before they turned to Maz. “Can I ask Rey something?” Maz nodded and he looked back at her. “What version of me do you want?”

“The one that I really love. The one that listens to me. The one that sends me flowers.” She tried to soften her look but still tucked her hands under her thighs. “The one that made love to me until the
other version of you took over. I want the version of you that doesn’t have to wear Poe’s armband or talk about all of the bad things all of the time. I have things that I want to talk about. August listened to me when I told him about Finn. It’s like you want to forget that happened but you can’t let go of the fact that Poe died.”

He held her eyes before looking at Maz. His head fell a little as he waited for her guidance. It was like he didn’t know he was at that moment either.

“Kylo?”

“I’m thinking,” he mumbled. “I want this to be perfect for Rey. And I haven’t really thought about her and what she wants. I’ve been making up plans in my head again or panicking when she doesn’t answer me. I come here to talk to you, Maz, and I try to focus on the case and how stressful it is and I’m working on dealing with him as a victim. I can do it when I’m here. But what she wants... Rey, it’s like you want a different person. Not who I really am. And I’m trying to be better but the last few months have been hard. I’ve needed someone to talk to. And sometimes it’s like I can’t just…be me. Like it used to be. Because that version of me isn’t perfect.”

She instantly shook her head. “I don’t want perfect. I just want you.”

Maz looked at her. “Rey, let’s go back to what you just said. Kylo has been talking about a lot of how he sees himself in this relationship and you’ve talked about how you see him. Do you think that if Kylo was able to talk more about himself and his worries that it would also give you more space to talk about your own?”

“Of course,” she answered. “But it would be nice if he asked me.”

Kylo had his head in his hands. “I’ve told you that you can talk to me. That means about anything. Just because I don’t ask you about it doesn’t mean I don’t care. You don’t ask me about things either.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t have to ask. You just tell me about it. You knew the FBI was going to be hard and then all you do is complain about it. I wish you could have done something else so you didn’t have to live somewhere else. So we could still be together all of the time.”

“It’s, I…” He sat up again, scratching at his face. “I knew it was going to be hard. It’s like…” He snapped his mouth shut. She kept her eyes on him until Maz cleared her throat again.

“Kylo? Can you have a moment of self-reflection here?”

He glared at her for a moment and then exhaled. “My performance evaluations were better before we started dating. Those are…I’ve tried to ignore my most recent one and blamed it on other things. I wanted to ignore it so we could be together.”

“Kylo, then why don’t you do something else? So it would be like it used to be?”

Looking at her with wide eyes, he took two deep breaths. “I was able to do my job when things were like it used to be. When you were here for the summers, I liked spending time with you and I could relax. And then you kissed me and I thought I finally wouldn’t be alone for the rest of my life. And you wouldn’t be alone either. We’d have each other. And then…and then it was like I couldn’t talk to you without feeling like you would shut me out if I said the wrong thing.”

“I needed to shut you out because you hurt me,” she said.

Kylo just stared at her.
Maz sighed and Rey turned her head away from Kylo’s blank face. The older woman levelled a look at her that made her suck in a breath. “Rey, I don’t think that was really fair to Kylo. We’re here to talk about communication. And you know that Kylo sometimes has a hard time bringing up certain things. And that he’s very dependent on your reactions. Do you think he wouldn’t listen if you brought up problems you’ve been having or painful things you’ve been remembering?”

Her mouth was dry. “I…I know he’d listen. And make me feel better. He always makes me feel better when he’s…when he’s focused.”

She couldn’t look at him in that moment as the blush warmed her face.

“I’ll always listen to you. I’ll always be there for you. I just want you to be there for me too. And I…I haven’t felt like I’ve been able to tell you everything for a long time. I just wanted you to understand me. I gave you my journals. Those are my heart, Rey. And it’s like that wasn’t…it’s like it wasn’t enough. That’s why I didn’t feel like I could talk to you about everything and why I couldn’t really ask you about how you were feeling. It’s not that I don’t care. I give Rey space to talk about her problems and she acts like…she acts like she is all I’m supposed to be thinking about. And I feel selfish when I have other things on my mind.” He sucked in a long breath and rubbed his eyes, dropping his shoulders. “I’ve been talking to Grey since March.”

The sound was sucked out of the room. The pure betrayal at hearing his name again set her body stiff. The blood rushing in her ears slowly replaced the stillness in the room. She levelled her eyes at him, knowing what he meant by that month. It meant that he’d run to him at some point because of her attack or after they had sex. A sharp heat arched through her body that enveloped her. He shouldn’t be in their lives again. Kylo had said he was done with him. He’d been lying the entire time. Everything they just discussed evaporated in an instant. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself not to cry even though her soul felt shredded.

Her mouth dropped open as her body went numb. “And you didn’t tell me? Why are you doing this? Kylo, he said he was in love with you and lied to your face. He was bad for you. You said it yourself! He said all of those horrible things to me and you just went behind my back and kept him a secret? Why did you feel like you needed to talk to him ever again?”

She gave Maz a long and pleading look, wanting her to tell him how wrong he was for needing his friendship. Frowning, she gripped her hands together and stared at her newly painted nails, letting her anger burrow up from inside of her. He hadn’t said anything for months. He was always keeping things from her. The old feelings, the ones left over from when she was six, were brought to the surface, painfully tearing up old the scar tissue.

He really did want something else. All of the things he’d done since March had brought them closer but he had kept a secret the entire time. It hadn’t just been Luke in his head. How could he keep hurting her? She kept trying to move forward, to be with him as an equal partner and he always had to keep something from her.

“Kylo, I think you owe Rey an explanation.” Maz was sitting back, her eyes locked on him.

He just kept his head down for a moment. “I needed someone to talk to.”

“You have other friends! You have me!” She couldn’t hold back shouting at him. “Why can’t you just let people like him go?”

His eyes flicked to her, sharp brown orbs drilling into her. “I learnt how to trust him again. And I knew if I told you that you wouldn’t understand. I tried to have hope that you would but I…I knew this would happen. And he knew it too. And now I’ve lied to you both.”
Figuring out his life was all she’d tried to do. He’d been holding so much back and expected Maz to fix the problems. Like always, it had to fall to someone else to tell him how to think properly.

She sucked in a sharp breath. “Your life can be hard to understand but I keep trying. You keep making promises and then can’t really be there for me. What else aren’t you telling me?” A piercing thought staked her heart. “Are you sleeping with him again?”

His shoulders went rigid and his look turned dark.

“How can you accuse me of that?” He shot back. “I told you how much I love you. I haven’t cheated on you, Rey. I wouldn’t do that. All I’ve tried to do is make things right for you and it’s been hard and he listened to me.”

Rage still pounded in her chest. “I don’t know, Kylo, because you’ve been ‘just friends’ with someone before and had deeper feelings for him and you didn’t tell anyone about it? You told me that you weren’t only interested in guys and then I have to hear that you wanted to stop having sex with me. Maybe you are gay.”

The look in his eyes made her jolt back before she found her resolve again and sat up straighter. “Can’t that be the one part of my life that you can truly understand? You say you want to be with me and then it’s like you want me to ignore my past, you want me to quit my job, you question my sexuality, and you misinterpreted what I said and that ruined my friendship with Grey. I am attracted to you. I think you’re beautiful. But it’s been hard for me to get used to seeing you this way and not feeling…not feeling like I’m going to be like Snoke. You asked me to help you after you were assaulted and getting turned on by that scared me. Everything that happened to you scared me and you were so hurt and I…when that turned me on I…”

“Kylo, I think it’s okay. I understand.” Maz’s eyes swept to her. “Rey, can you put what Kylo just said in your own words?”

“I…” She frowned. “He’s doing what he always does. He’s taking my problem and making it about himself.”

“So I can’t have my own feelings?” Kylo snapped. Rage flashed in his eyes for a second before he let his face go blank again. “I want to be with you but I need to be able to talk about how I feel with my friends so I can understand them better so I don’t do things like that.”

Throwing her hands up, she rolled her eyes. “They aren’t your friends if you have to lie about them, Kylo.”

Maz cleared her throat. “Kylo, can you explain more about why you thought you had to hide this friendship?”

His head shot to her and he shuddered. Settling his shoulders back, he nodded. “Grey has said some things that crossed the line many times. He has been…rude to Rey. And me. He kissed me when I didn’t want him too. But Rey kissed him too without him asking too so I don’t know what’s fair anymore. Grey and I have worked through most of that. And I depend on him again but now we have more boundaries. He knows that we’ll only ever just be friends. He’s been trying to help me when he sees that I’m struggling with…how I treat Rey. He’s tried to help me through my breakdowns so Rey didn’t need to hear about all of them. So she has space to talk about her problems. He wants us to be together and for it to be healthy. I push myself too hard and…I don’t know. I’ve been under a great deal of pressure and I didn’t want to put it all on her.”

“Think about your words. Is what you just described a healthy friendship?”
“No.” His voice was weak. “No, it’s not.”

He was a stranger to her in that moment: a stranger who’d just broken her heart. But that wasn’t going to stop her from what needed to be said. “You know what, Kylo, you put me through so much, and to say what you just said? I can’t believe you’d do this to me. I don’t listen to you? I don’t want to hear it? You can’t be yourself around me? It’s like you don’t know what’s going on outside your own head.” She stood, fingernails pressing into her palms, as she tightened her fists.

“It sounds I like forced you to keep having sex, or how I made you take care of me after my assault. Okay, since you can’t stop thinking about him, how about that last weekend with Poe? How about how you had sex with him in a room right next to mine, so loud I had to hear it? I was eleven, Kylo. And it’s taken me a long time to get over that. But, I don’t keep bringing it up! Maybe I should start.” She looked him dead in the eyes and watched him jerk back from her.

Maz opened her mouth to speak and Rey cut her off, still glaring harshly at him. “You want me to talk about my problems and how I feel? I’m talking now Kylo. You never listen to what people tell you and you stopped listening to me a long time ago. It’s only important if you’re the victim. You’ve done plenty of things to me. I’m tired too. Why can’t I feel bad without you making me feel guilty for feeling bad too? Why do I always have to be the bad guy who makes you have problems with your friends and your job?” She let out a low groan and raised her hand to point at him.

“This is Grey. This is Grey getting into your head and putting these thoughts to tear us apart so he can save you from me. You know he’s a liar and you’re still listening to him!” She scrunched her face in anger. “I wish he was dead too!”

“Rey!” Maz interrupted her, forcing her to stop. She glanced at the woman before looking back at Kylo. He’d pushed himself to the furthest part of the couch, eyes wide. He was not blinking but there was no other reaction on his face.

Because, of course, he had to make this about himself.

-=-

She gathered up her things as quickly as she could. She didn’t want to have to forget anything she needed that would give Kylo an excuse to come over and talk to her until she was ready. She didn’t care if he hated when she cut him off. He deserved it this time. Everything he’d done the last few months had been with a secret hanging over them. Their entire time together had been a mistake.

She’d been silent in the drive back to his house, even as he kept trying to speak to her, to apologize. She was going to call Han and Leia and tell them everything the second she could, but the tears that started flowing when she called Brianna made it hard to think about that phone call. She could stay with her until she decided when she wanted to go.

Slamming her suitcase shut, she turned and glared at him in the doorway. He was filling it, keeping her stuck in the room.

“You should never have told him that we had sex.” She couldn’t remember the last time she had been this angry. Her hands wouldn’t stop shaking. She wanted to hit him or throw something at him. He had to get out of her way. “Why did you do that? Why are you obsessed with him?”
“I don’t know.” His face finally broke, tears staining his cheeks. “I don’t know, Rey. Please don’t go.” Slowly, he dropped to his knees. “You promised you’d never leave me. You know I don’t always get why I do things like this. Please don’t go. I can…I can fix this. You’re allowed be angry with me but please don’t go.”

Biting her lip, she swallowed down the ache that spread across her chest at seeing him like that. “I don’t know, Kylo. All I wanted was for you to love me. And it’s like you keep finding reasons for me not to love you.”

He blinked before he wiped at his eyes. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. Just please don’t leave. Please don’t leave me alone. I’ll…I’ll call him. I’ll tell him that we’ll never talk again, I…”

“You can’t take back what you already told him,” she snapped. “Kylo, this hurts so much. All my life everything has been about you. I just want you to feel the same way about me that I do you and it’s like you’d rather have something else. If you really wanted to be with me, you wouldn’t even think about doing these things. I…I’ll be at Brianna’s.” His face held so much hurt that part of her anger cracked. Those were the same eyes that had kept her alive for four years in hell. The nineteen years they’d spent together couldn’t be destroyed because of this. She had to be stronger. “I won’t go home right away. But you really need to show me that you want to be with me.”

“I will,” he pleaded. “Please, give me another chance.”

It hurt too much to keep looking at him. All she had to do was forgive him and she’d take that ache away. She needed to think. He was everything to her and she wouldn’t be able to let him go without feeling like the world was ending. The agony of being alone, being without him, would erase all of the healing she’d felt the last year.

“I need to think, Kylo.” She picked up her bag. “Please don’t hurt yourself.”

That fear would be hard to shake. But she just couldn’t look at him anymore.

Downstairs, her hand on the door, she met his eyes one last time.

I love you, he blinked.

Turning, she didn’t have the energy to reply.

-=-

“You were right. I can’t…I can’t talk to you ever again.”

“I’d hate to say I told you so, but I did. I fucking did so many times. Ok, now I’m lying. I fucking love that I told you so. I’m going to have to fuck off now and that’s the part I hate. I hate how much I love you. I hate what you’ve done to me. Say hi to Rey for me. Or don’t, I don’t fucking care. I knew you were going to pick her and I’m fucking glad I’m leaving town. Have a nice life, Ky. Enjoy being locked in that terror closet the rest of your life. You’re an asshole.”

“Grey, I…”

Silence followed on the other end of the phone.
Alone on his bed, he wept.

=-=

It was a sleepless night in Brianna’s guest room and an awkward breakfast with her parents. She didn’t want to look at her father’s holster. Thoughts about Kylo were already pounding in her head, keeping her from thinking about anything else. All she’d done was make choices to be with Kylo and he kept picking other things.

Escaping back to Brianna’s room, she bit her lip again. “I just don’t understand why it had to be him. And I…I’m just so afraid that they are having sex and he’s lying about that too.”

Brianna looked equally as angry as she felt. Talking to her last night had kept her from giving up and texting Kylo, to make sure he’d kept his promise and told Grey that he was never getting back into their lives again. But if he was having sex with him, then all of that wouldn’t matter. Even if it devastated them both, she could never let herself be that close to him again. Kylo had made his choices and would have to live with them.

“I can’t believe he’d do something like that to you. I think you should just break up with him anyway. He’s not worth it.” Brianna folded her arms, sitting heavily on her bed. “What a fucking douche.”

“I…” She started and then shut her eyes. Her eyes already stung from crying all night. “I don’t know.”

Her friend held her eyes before she shifted, taking out her phone. It buzzed again in her hand and she grimaced. “Gross, he is texting me.”

Leaning forward, Rey frowned at Brianna’s screen, noticing how Bri had renamed Grey to Asshole. “I blocked and deleted his number. What does he want?”

Saw Rey was back in town.

Is she with you?

Can you tell her I would like to talk to her about me and Kylo?

Please?

She groaned and Brianna scoffed. “What should I even say to him? You don’t want to see him. What a fucking creep. I mean, you can go tell him to stay away from your boyfriend? Maybe ask him the truth and see if Kylo really is a fucking liar. Kylo probably went right there and cried to him about everything you said. And since it’s Grey, he’ll probably want to rub it in your face that he won. I think you ask him and then you will really know.”

Kylo would be at work by now. He wouldn’t miss it because that’s apparently all he had to live for. Grey should have been at work but he probably blew it off.

Taking a deep breath, she thought about her reply before reaching for Briana’s phone. Ok. She has some things she’d like to say to you.
Can you come by now?

Looking at Brianna, she forced her hands to be steady. Okay. Where are you? At your dad’s?

No I am at home.

She knew the address only because Kylo had told her where it was. It wasn’t that far away on her bike. Kylo would be at his dumb job and she’d be able to get it without him noticing until he looked over the cameras in the evening. He’d have to look at her taking more of her things from his house. It had never been their house. She could tell Grey all of the things she’d thought about since last year: how she hated how he’d taken the love of her life from her by tricking her at every turn. How he’d tarnished so many true moments that used to be beautiful. If she could unleash her rage at Kylo, she could tell Grey how much she hated him as well. She still had so much bottled up inside of her that it would feel good to explode again.

And if Kylo had been sleeping with him, she’d know what she’d have to do. And the world could keep ending.

Ok. She’ll be there in fifteen minutes.

Tell her that I will see her soon. Thank you, Brianna.

-=-

Stopping her bike, she recognized his car in the driveway. The syndicalist bumper sticker was still there from when he’d drive her to the library.

It was a really nice house, but so were all of the houses.

Parking her bike near the car, she locked it. Her hands were shaking the entire time and she tried to force herself to breathe, clenching her fists. Kylo wouldn’t have cheated on her. The secret friendship was one thing but he wasn’t like that. And Grey would have to tell her the truth. If Kylo had cheated on her, she was going to get on a plane and never talk to him again.

The door was unlocked. It didn’t surprise her how careless he could be.

“Grey?” she called, stepping inside.

But the house was silent. The pile of shoes by the door and jackets didn’t really tell her anything. She called out again, lingering in the mess. There were his countless coloured sneakers. She’d had to look at them all of the time when he was pretending to be her friend.

But he still didn’t answer.

Huffing, she straightened an empty beer bottle that was lying on the kitchen counter. There were dirty dishes in the sink. Why the hell had Kylo trusted him to clean up his house when he wasn’t capable of keeping his own space tidy?

She heard a thump upstairs and rolled her eyes.

She clenched her fists and glared at the ceiling.
But instead of leaving, she was going to go upstairs and yell at him for tricking her into coming there. He had lied to her again. He didn’t really want to talk. He wanted to play another stupid game. He had wanted to sleep with Kylo the entire time he was pretending to be his friend, pretending to be her friend. He was still a stupid jerk and…

Her thoughts were cut off when she was halfway up the staircase.

Heavy footsteps made her head snap to the form at the top of the stairs.

The man in black with a covered face stopped short when he saw her.

There was a bloody knife in his hands.

Heartbeat.

She only heard her heartbeat.

The shuddering thunder pounded in her ears in an instant.

It looked exactly like the man beside the pool.

In an aching moment, slowed by her own brain, she saw the man start to move.

And she finally snapped out of her fugue.

_Run._

This time, she had to run.

Screaming, she bolted down the stairs to sprint for the door. She hoped she was fast enough as she slammed the door shut behind her, wishing that it would stop him but was sure it wouldn’t. She could hear and feel the man right behind her. Again. Everything came back again. Scrambling, she sprinted for the car. Crawling under it, she finally dared to stop moving when she was in the middle to look out, to open her eyes.

But there were no footsteps. There were no dark boots on either side, waiting to hurt her.

But it was the same man again.

She couldn’t move to get her phone, tucked in her pocket. She was stuck there.

Every inch of her tensed with terror.

Memories of almost drowning, memories of Kylo busting down a door because he still might be there. She needed him right then. The scrapes on her elbows finally started to pulse and she realized she was bleeding. If there was some higher power watching over her, they’d planned it so she’d be able to fit underneath the car.

But he must be waiting for her, she thought as she pressed her head against the cool pavement. He was waiting to finally finish her off, to put an end to all of this. And Kylo would be alone.

The image of him putting his gun in his mouth flashed in her mind and she forced her forehead down, waiting to be snatched by the ankle at any moment and dragged back into terror.

She was stronger than this. _Kylo_ was stronger than this.
But Grey was hurt. He could be dying. Even if she hated him, he was still a human being who needed her help.

She had to get beyond her fear.

Slowly, she crawled out, expecting to be grabbed the second she emerged. The concrete scratched her hands as she slowly crept into the sunshine.

But no one was there.

The door was wide open.

Even if she died, she had to check the house, hoping that Kylo would be able to understand the evidence. She went in not to die, but to try to see if she could help someone else. She should have called him in that moment but if Grey was hurt, she had to check that first. That’s what she should do, right?

Shaking, she took heavy breaths as she walked back towards the house. Finally, she spotted the knife in the dirt. The blood drops went around the corner, down the walk to the back alley.

He was gone.

But he could come back.

The sight of blood burned in her mind as she slammed and locked the door. Her heart still pounding, she ran upstairs.

“Grey!” she screamed, forcing herself not to think the worst. He had to be okay. He was tall and strong and could fight. Kylo wouldn’t have been with him if he wasn’t like that. He was probably hurt really bad and she’d interrupted it. That’s how it had to go. That’s how it had to be. He was George’s son. He could do anything. “Grey!”

His bedroom door was closed and she threw it open.

If she had stopped to think, it would have only been to consider that the worst had happened. She wanted him to be in the corner behind it, bloodied but with some weapon in his hands that he’d used to fight him off. He’d be swearing but she’d get to him and they’d call the police. The police would come again and everything would be fine.

But the door opened and her hope vanished into a tilting world that couldn’t be real.

Her hand came up to her mouth when she saw him.

This wasn’t real. This wasn’t happening.

Frozen, she just stared at the blood.

Why was there so much of it?

He wasn’t moving; the blood covered the floor beneath him.

She screamed at him again and he was still.

Swallowing, she finally moved.

“No. Please no.” Gasping, she dropped to her knees beside him. She felt like everything was going
too slow. Hitting the floor took too many heartbeats. She couldn’t reach him fast enough. Her hands were too sluggish when she finally looked down at his torso, at his shirt. It was the same one she’d just seen many times before, after he’d taken it off and pulled on different one at work, before he shrugged at another colour, grinning at how stupid it was. But the shirt, he’d told her that it really was a good band and she should probably give it a chance. And she promised that she would. She never did because he turned out to be a lying jerk but…

Deep stab wounds littered his body because she saw the oozing blood on the brown fabric. Is this how stab wounds looked? The shirt was ripped. He was bleeding. How was there so much blood? She sobbed when she reached for a pulse, gripping at his neck and trying not to scream again. The man could still be out there. “Please, Grey. Please.”

He wasn’t cold. His eyes were open and blank. The blue had faded. How could that happen? There was still some warmth there, there had to be. Someone could fix this. Someone had to fix this. They had to get there. Someone had to help her save him.

Finally shaking loose of her shock, finally remembering a lesson that Kylo had taught her, she called 911. As it rang, she stared into his vacant eyes, willing them to move.

They didn’t.

-=-

Kylo was already shifting in his chair, staring out into space before the task-force meeting was to start, avoiding Erso’s sharp eyes. The little sleep he got that night had been restless. He wasn’t even sure that he had slept. Getting up and getting to the office felt aimless and empty. He wasn’t really there. He was just a body, going through the motions. His arm ached. The cuts on his thighs still stung. The burns on his ankles had bled into his socks but the black hid his shame.

She was going to leave him. It was everything he deserved with his lies. The pain and rage in her voice had torn him upside and he didn’t know how to start putting the pieces back together.

Owen was about to start speaking. He’d adjusted his papers, rubbed his beard. It was the usual routine for meetings. He had to get his focus back. He’d really only felt slightly alive that morning when he’d put out four cigarettes on his ankle.

Everyone had seen how silent he’d been all morning. He forced himself to sit up straighter, glaring briefly at Erso’s sharp eyes before turning and giving his partner his full attention.

But running feet snapped that brief concentration away instantly. No one ever ran anywhere at Quantico unless something awful had happened.

Owen’s beard scratching was the last thing on his mind in an instant.

A panicked-looking intern knocked rapidly and entered the conference room without being told to do so.

His sorrow switched to full concern, dropping his pen.

Kylo was already standing before the young man started speaking. Owen looked at him hard, shifting to stand as well. The other agents moved as well, probably more annoyed at the
interruption and their sudden actions. He was finally able to tune Erso out, only registering him as standing.

“There’s an emergency. SSA Jinn, Agent Solo, I’ve got the local police…”

His head snapped to George, then back to the other agent. George found his voice first, cutting through the urgency. “Where?”

“Your…” the agent finally found his composure. “Your son’s house.”

A flash of fear crossed George’s face but he nodded before the mask returned. He glanced over to Kylo and he could feel the breath he was holding in.

“Why do you need me?” The question almost shook when it left his mouth.

“A young female was on the scene, sir. She called 911.”

Owen’s hand gripped his arm, forcing him to stay standing.

Kylo, his mind spinning into chaos and heart pounding in his ears, could hardly hear what George was saying. “We can get back to this once we…once we know what’s going on. We’re on our way.”

It was only when he was in Owen’s car, the scenery blurring around him, that he remembered what date it was and how the world had skidded to a stop eight years ago on that day as well.

-=-

The officer held her hand, letting her cry as she tried to calm down. Breathe in, breathe out. She didn’t know how to do it. It all came out wrong. It hurt every time she thought that she had her lungs under control; she could only see Grey’s face when she closed her eyes. It hurt. It hurt too much and couldn’t be real. Her chest ached and she couldn’t stop shaking. Kylo would be there soon but she didn’t want to see him. She didn’t want to see George. The pain would be real. If they didn’t come, she could keep it all to herself. She could suck up the pain and put it inside her and keep it there forever.

The ambulance that had come for him had instead helped her cover up her scratched-up arms. She pulled the blanket closer around her damp skin as she shivered.

“But you saw him?” the officer asked again. “Can you remember what he looked like? How tall he was? Anything distinctive?”

Nodding, she tried to replay the memory again. It wavered in her mind because none of it could be real. “He wasn’t… I think he was probably around six feet tall, maybe shorter. I don’t really know. He looked shorter than Grey or Kylo. He was wearing a black coat so I don’t know if he was really fat or not. But it was the same man who attacked me in Mexico. He never said anything but his breathing was the same. The way he grunted. I was mostly just looking at the knife and thinking about Grey. I mean, Gregor. His name is Gregor Jinn and I used to know him and…”

Her words stopped working and she dropped her chin. Kylo. George. Kylo.
He gripped her hand. “The FBI are on their way. We’ll…there will be more questions later. Your memory is still fresh so we need you to help us find who did this. Either we’ll get you to do a sketch or they will. We’ll get someone from victim’s services to sit with you if you need…”

She shook her head. No one was going to be able to help her.

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He got out of the car and sprinted to her, throwing his arms around her. He could never let her go again. He could never let this happen to her.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and burrowed her face against his chest. For a moment, he could cry. But it was only a moment. They had to go upstairs.

“I love you,” he whispered. “Stay with the officers. They’ll keep you safe.”

Her lips were trembling as he stepped back and wiped his eyes. Turning, he forced his face to be blank. He forced his eyes to be sharp as they took in the entrance of their crime scene.

Guided upstairs by uniforms, he felt every step press harder on his chest.

And then, there he was.

Kylo couldn’t reach out to touch the face that was dead before them, still on the floor. The discarded medical supplies from the EMTs were still everywhere: paper, tubes, knee prints in blood evidence. There was nothing they could do.

George couldn’t do anything either. He stood there for far too long, silent and unmoving. Just staring.

Kylo didn’t want to look at Owen. If he did, his composure would vanish too. He hadn’t been able to really talk to Rey yet either. His focus was the last thing that he was clinging to.

George was depending on him at that moment.

And so was Grey.

Finally finding his own strength, the one that Kylo had clung to for so long, George turned away and told the other police, the local ones who looked at them to solve their problem for them, that it was his son and they should keep going. He must have been hiding in the house, waiting for Rey. Once they had a proper time of death, they’d know for sure.

Gripping his hand to his mouth, Kylo finally locked eyes with Owen. His partner only shook his head. They had to get over their emotions, to get them under control, but right then, they could feel them. Regaining control meant having to lose it.

There was only silence.

And it stretched on into infinity.

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He put his hand on George’s back, holding him up. They’d gone outside. Somehow, they got there onto the sidewalk. They’d been to so many crime scenes that it was routine to step away to allow the others to start surveying the course of events, but this distance was also for them to find out what they could do in that moment. He didn’t have words for George but touching helped.

It always helped.

His feelings were locked in his chest. He was moving but couldn’t let them out. Bottling everything up would make getting through the hours to come possible. He had to be someone else in that moment. He would just watch that person who looked like him do a job, one that had to be done.

George was right there and he needed to push down his own sorrow and be there for him. Taking this moment to breathe would be inhaling enough air to make it through the next few hours of phone calls and investigative techniques.

“I just got to know him again, Kylo. These last few years…he was finally my son again.” George’s eyes were empty as he stared out at the lawn, at the countless police cruisers and gawking neighbours. Slowly, he watched the older man’s façade crumble from a bitten lip into a sob. “He was just a baby yesterday and now he’s gone.”

All he could do was pull him into his arms and hold back his own tears. His own selfish memories rocked him but he finally accepted that crying was the only answer before he could push all of those emotions down again. “This…I’m so sorry George.”

Words weren’t enough. Words couldn’t fix it.

A deep scream started inside George and rocked through him. Kylo only held him closer, letting him shout into his jacket. It rocked him: the rage, the sorrow, the feeling of the world shifting beneath them.

When George finally stilled, he pulled away in an instant.

He wiped at his eyes, locking his gaze on his like nothing had ever happened. “Let’s get back to work.”

Kylo firmed his face. “Yes sir.”

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Sitting in the back of the ambulance, she watched George almost collapsing in Kylo’s arms. And he kept him standing. And when Kylo turned and followed him back into the house, they both looked like nothing had happened.

Tears sprung to her eyes again and she wiped them away. There was still blood on her shirt and she let out a low whine at the sight.

“Rey?” A strange man was standing below her. He had an FBI badge in his jacket pocket and his eyes held sympathy for her. “I’m Dr Erso. I’m here to get your statement about what you saw. And make sure you’re okay.”
She swallowed. “I already talked to one officer. Is this for the FBI?” She had hoped that she could have talked to Owen about this. She didn’t want to see the hurt in Kylo’s eyes. It would make her angry again and she was trapped there in that moment.

Climbing into the ambulance, Dr Erso sat across from her and put his warm hand on her arm. “Yes. And since I don’t have a personal relationship with you, we need to maintain the chain of evidence. There are a lot of rules to follow when it comes to something…like this. I’m on the task force with Agent Solo. I hope you can trust me more than he does.”

“I just want to go home,” she said, dropping her head. “He was waiting for me there. He texted my friend to get me here. He was waiting for me and he could have…”

“That didn’t happen, my dear. You’re alive and breathing and if we work quickly, hopefully we can get him before he gets away again.” The hand on her arm tightened lightly before he loosened his grip and sat back. He took out a notebook and raised his eyebrows. “Now, please take me through your day. Start with what happened before you arrived and then we can work on what you saw. I know you’re very shaken up and someone you cared about is dead, so we can take a break whenever you’d like.”

Taking a shaky breath, she nodded.

There could only be so many minutes until she had to face Kylo again.

-=-

Night had swept in before he could make sense of it. Every hour had felt endless but it had still vanished before their eyes.

At the police station, they finally felt the adrenaline waning away. He had lost track of George. So they finally gave up and he and Owen were splitting exactly one package of cigarettes. No more than that.

“All of us know this is too personal,” his partner said, his eyes focused on the tip of his cigarette. “We will hand this over to the others. I don’t want to fight with George over this because he knows better but I want you to be on my side here, Kylo. You were the last one to speak with him. Your girlfriend was the one to find him. We’re too close to this and you both know it.”

“She’s…” He was about to say she’s not. But that pain couldn’t claw its way to the surface in that moment. Like everything else, he just pushed it further down, waiting for the explosion that would come later.

Flicking his cigarette, he weakly nodded. They were trying to do as much work as they could before they were officially forced to step back. Canvassing had gotten them nowhere. One neighbour had seen a man in black running down the alley fifteen minutes after Rey called 911. But no one had seen him go in. There were no suspicious vehicles or, at least, not yet. It was the crucial forty-eight hour window and they were already running out of time. This would go to the Bureau but they might not be able touch it directly.

He’d been separated from Rey all day. It felt like a lifetime. He had a flash of hope that she’d want to talk to him again.
“I have to take her somewhere safe,” he said, looking up and shaking his head. “I’ll take her to Brianna’s but she has to go home. He could still be in the area.”

Or he could be anywhere by now. They could have missed their chance to finally end this before someone else had to die.

He closed his eyes but they snapped open again instantly. Instead of a comforting nothingness, he only saw two sets of vacant, dead eyes staring back at him: blue and brown. The third set eyes, amber-brown, held only disappointment and hurt.

“There still has been nothing suspicious at your parents’ or your friends’ homes.” Owen cleared his throat. “For once, I’m glad you don’t have more friends.”

The dark humour almost made him almost smile. The phone call to his parents had been short but necessary. They’d already spoken to Rey and wanted her home now. But how could he let her go? Every time he took his eyes off of her, there was a chance he could lose her either through the evil actions of someone else or his own selfish choices.

If he stayed focused on thinking about Rey, the deep and lurking pain he felt for Grey wouldn’t be able to overwhelm him. He had to keep it together until he got home. The tears could come then. Not now. Be steady. Be better for him and her. Most of all, be there for her. All of her words still clouded his feelings. He’d deserved to hear all of it. Grey was dead because of him and Rey hated him because he couldn’t see past his own pain.

George’s ex-wife and other children were shaken, but safe; they were in North Carolina and the local sheriff had a car outside of their house. He saw George break down again when he told his son and daughter goodnight and that they were okay, and that he’d talk to them more tomorrow. His other ex-wife was in Europe, unafraid of whatever threat that was out there. But he had sobbed again when he spoke with Gregor’s mother. She was on her way, probably arriving tomorrow.

And every time he hung up the phone, the blank looked crossed his face and then he got up and went to find someone to talk about, discussing possible theories of the crime like it was any other victim. But really, they couldn’t move that many mountains. Talking to the local police, forcing them to take it seriously, had been a chance to step back and regain perspective on their case. It could still be more than one man, even though he was sure it was just revenge killing. It was too organized to be more than one person; more than one person would have just left more mistakes. Still, there could be so much that they were missing. It was better to panic and be wrong than be relaxed and face the consequences.

His phone started ringing and he sighed at the display.

“Hey Hux.” He looked at Owen, who winced. “Where are you?”

He heard his friend suck in a breath, loudly. “What happened, Kylo? There’s a cop car outside of my house and I have to hear what happened from your mom and dad. Are you okay? Is Rey okay?”

He didn’t know what to say. Glancing at Owen, he shrugged. Owen returned the look. They’d have more results in a few hours, but at that moment, it was all still in motion. Grey was being cut open on a slab right then and he couldn’t let his brain follow those motions. “He could be coming there. He’s highly mobile and we’re…it’s all about me, Hux. Anyone I’ve ever cared about…” Sucking down his cigarette, he glared off at nothing. “He’s crossing all of the boxes: organized, disorganized, thrill killer, long-term planning…he’s been waiting for us. He tricked Rey into coming there when Grey was already dead. We don’t have his phone but we have Brianna’s and…”
Owen grabbed his arm then, shaking his head. *Don’t scare them,* he mouthed. *For fuck’s sake stop giving away evidence.*

It was a sharp jab of a reminder to follow the logic of the clues and not jump to conclusions. They wouldn’t solve this if they did that.

“Just tell me that I’m safe with my children even if you don’t know where he is.” Hux’s firm tones knocked him further out of his scattered thoughts. “Rey should come stay with us. I don’t care how safe your house is there. We can take care of her. But Kylo, I…” Hux’s voice broke. “I’m so sorry. It has to be the same guy. Who else would know what day it is?”

Taking a shaking breath, he let his eyes blur. “Hug Benji for me. Kiss Anna for me. Keep your family safe. I love you.”

“I love you too, Kylo. We all love you. Call me whenever. Whatever you need, I’ll be here.”

Ending the call, he shook his head. “We need to check with forensics if they’ve found anything yet. There were too many stab wounds. He *had* to have nicked himself.”

Owen snuffed out his cigarette. “Let’s split duties. I’m going to take another drive by your street. I need…I know he won’t go home so I’m going to get him a change of clothes. He won’t stop until Tekka gets here and makes him. Please, just…don’t make it harder for me, Kylo.”

Kylo nodded at the grave attitude.

They needed to stay in motion.

Because every time things slowed down, he felt himself being drawn closer to collapse.

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“George?” Rey came into the darkened office in the police station. The officer said he was in there but it was silent inside, quiet, and dark. It looked like she should turn on the light but she really didn’t want to.

She’d been away from Kylo all day, just being shuffled around and interviewed until she couldn’t cry anymore. They made her eat. But she knew that Kylo wasn’t eating. They’d lock eyes when they were in the same room and his face would break for a moment before returning to the mask that he needed to wear. He was stepping up when George had to step aside. He was following evidence and clues and trying to find motive, commanding officers and investigators with power and grace that she was used to seeing from George but not from Kylo. Kylo was nervous and clumsy when talking to people. But somehow, he was taking over. She wanted to be proud of him but the pain in her stomach, the one that had been there since Maz’s, reminded her that he was not going to be the same person when they got home. He’d never cared about her before and now it would be even worse. Until she talked to him, she didn’t know how to let her heart even start to heal.

It was going to be the same. Kylo was never going to be able to just pick her.

“Hello Rey.” He was sitting on a couch in the corner, looking at his hands. His voice was quiet, like he didn’t want to be found. It was so late. He should go home. Could they go home? “I’m
None of what happened had made sense but his words still fell into that category. What she thought about Grey couldn’t compare with how his father felt for him.

Slowly stepping forward, she shook her head. “I’m the one that’s sorry, George. I…I can’t believe this happened. I thought I could save him and I…”

She hadn’t gone in there for Kylo, she told herself. She’d gone in there for George. He didn’t deserve this.

He sat forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He wiped at his eyes again. Like with Kylo, he was exhausted and serenity was escaping him. “I’m just thankful that you weren’t hurt. This is a very…difficult situation.”

“Do you…do you want to be alone?” She stepped closer, not sure what to say.

He shook his head. “Not right now.”

Taking the seat beside him, she put her hand on his leg. The touch seemed to break him and he pulled her into an embrace that made tears spring to her eyes in a moment. Leaning against him, she heard him sob and matched it with one of her own in response.

“What can I do?” she asked, feeling new tears come to her eyes. “What am I supposed to do?”

He sat back, gripping her hand. “You’ve given your statement. You’ve done that part. Now you need to go home and take things slowly. Talk to Han and Leia. Reach out to your friends. Your life was put in danger again and you can’t let yourself get too angry or scared about that. We’re working very hard to make sure…to make sure this never happens again.”

Leaning against him, she shook her head. “I’m sorry I didn’t like him, George. I was so angry with him for so long and…”

“Rey,” George’s voice was firm for a moment and then he shut his eyes. “Thank you for your apology but I have a lot to think about right now. He makes, he made, a lot of choices that I disagree with. But none of them matter now. I’ll never get the chance to be angry with him again and now I have to live with all of the times I was angry with him for the rest of my life. I know things are difficult between you and Kylo right now because of him. What I want you to do is something I’m sometimes not capable of with the people I love. You have to be understanding. Even if you were angry with Gregor, you still went upstairs and put yourself in danger to see if he was…alive. Even if you are angry with Kylo, you still ran to him when we arrived. I see you here for Kylo now, and I know it must not be easy for you, given his and Grey’s relationship. But I would be glad if you were able to put all that behind you, Rey, and be here for the support he needs right now. He is also more…capable now of listening to your pain than you think. The two of you need to be stronger together. That means more to me than any platitudes anyone can give me about my son’s death. He’s gone and I need time to accept that. So will you and Kylo.”

Slowly, she put her head down, letting the words sink in. Closing her eyes, she tried to find what was left of her strength and not imagine what would have happened if he had caught her too.

And she hoped that Kylo would stop to think about that when she finally got him alone.
He slowed before he knocked on the doorframe. George was sitting on the sofa across the expanse of the office, running his hand through Rey’s hair. He exhaled heavily and stepped into the room that was slowly being brightened by the rising sun.

It was a new day. Time to get to work.

Time to take Rey somewhere she could rest before they’d have to go through a very painful conversation.

“You didn’t sleep,” was the only thing his dumb mouth could come up with. He’d only managed a half an hour of rest at a desk before he had to get up and keep going. Everything was going to screech to a stop the second he was alone with Rey. He might not ever sleep again if she still wanted to walk away from him now.

Sighing, George nodded but didn’t move. “I got a few minutes here and there. It was more important for me to sit down and ignore the phone calls from our superiors for a while.” He paused, looking up to meet his eyes. “How much did you love him, Kylo?”

He blinked at the question. He didn’t want to talk about this. He’d hidden their renewed friendship from him, not knowing it would end like this. Now, his phone records were part of evidence. And his feelings for Grey, the deep ones that made him want to call him right then and get him to explain what was going on, had never been clear until the previous day. And George needed to hear the truth. “A lot, George. He means so much to me and I’m terrified about how to deal with it all. We argue but he matters to me. If life had taken a different turn…” he trailed off as his supervisor’s eyes bore into him. Their final conversation knocked against his mind and he had to push it away again. “But there are no what ifs.”

“You still brought him back to me. He listens to you in a way that he never listened to me before. He wants to work harder and…I never told him that I was proud of him. My own stupid arrogance stood in the way. I don’t even remember the last time I hugged him.” George turned back to running his hands through Rey’s hair. He grabbed a lock and started twisting it the strands together.

“At Christmas,” Kylo answered. “Christmas at my house.”

George’s lips quirked slightly. It was the closest thing to a smile he would see from him for a long while. “Yes. I remember now. I am not hard on him because he’s gay but because he has… potential. He had potential.”

The quirk of speech brought tears to Kylo’s tired eyes. He hadn’t slept. Neither had Owen. They had stopped at their mutual homes, also doing a sweep of George’s house. Silla wanted to come to the station, to take care of Rey. And maybe he should send her home with her. He had to think about it.

“I talked to his mother. Her flight was delayed, but she’s still coming. Tekka has already called five times. Owen and I need to give him an answer.” He didn’t want to give up control of this but Owen was right. Another death had stained his hands and he’d have to step back again.

George’s hand stilled in Rey’s hair. “The method was the same. But we can’t ignore other people out for revenge. His mother’s parents may have Russian mob connections and we need to rule that out. We can’t let our other postulations carry too much weight. I’m assuming that I will be relieved of duty the moment I answer one of those phone calls but I can give you one last private order for
the time being until someone physically makes me stop.”

“Anything, George.”

“Don’t ever take Rey for granted. Show her that you really love her. *Listen* to her.” His blue eyes shone when he looked at him again. “You need to promise me that.”

Nodding, Kylo swallowed down his words. “I promise. I love her with all of my heart. I…I’m sorry. We…we brought you a change of clothes. We need to get going. I’ll be out there when you’re ready.”

They exchanged a long look: respect, grief, loss, pain, love…Kylo found every emotion in George’s eyes.

He finally turned to flee into the station to avoid breaking down.

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Someone had braided her hair when she woke up alone. Tracing her hand over the entwined locks, Rey felt new tears fill her eyes.

“Hi.”

Her head snapped to the doorway and she pushed off from the couch to be in Kylo’s arms. He held her tightly, breathing her in. It didn’t hurt for a moment. Nothing had changed for a fraction of a second before reality came charging in again to make her sob.

“Why did this happen, Kylo?” she asked, her lip trembling. *How are you going to act now? Is it all going to be like it was after he died? Did you even think about what I said?*

“I don’t know yet, sweetheart. But we are going to find out.”

She wasn’t sure what she was to him at that point. The word should have been comforting but it just felt hollow. She inhaled, resting her head against his chest. He still wore the same clothes from yesterday. “I have to go home, don’t I?”

His embrace tightened. “Yes. I’ve…we have spoken with the police at home. Snap has promised that you’ll all be protected and safe. Benji is okay. Han and Leia are okay. Hux is mad at me but that’s nothing new…”

“You were smoking,” she said and sighed.

“Owen lets me do it still.”

Despite the acrid smell, she didn’t want to leave his arms. She wanted to pretend that he hadn’t lied to her. She wanted to pretend that he hadn’t broken her heart. She wanted to pretend that she didn’t want to deal with him mourning another person, pushing her away from him with every breath.

“Silla is going to take you to our house and stay with you until I can get there. We’ll talk before you go home, okay?” He held her tighter. “Please still love me, Rey.”

Stepping back, she nodded. “I want…I want to be here for you.” She had to. She was stuck there
again, living only for him and not herself.

His lip trembled for a second before he kissed her forehead. “I’ll see you tonight. You’ll be safe there.”

Leading her out of the station, she had to turn her head when she spotted George talking to Dr Erso in a corner. There were so many thoughts in her head that it was hard to look at the agent who’d been such a fixture in their lives for the last fifteen years. And now his son was another name that belonged in that grove of trees across the country. And the same man had tried to kill her twice.

He hugged her one last time, whispering that everything will be okay and to give him time.

Getting into Silla’s car, she looked at the blood again. “Thank you for getting me.”

“Rey, my heart, I wanted to be here the entire time. We don’t have to talk about it, okay? Let’s get you home so you can shower and then we can do whatever you want. You can cry or scream. You can draw or paint. We can also just sit in silence and stare at the trees.” Her hand was on her knee, squeezing it lightly. “Whatever reminds you that you can get through this, we will do.”

Meeting her eyes, Rey tried to smile but it faltered. “I don’t know if I can.”

The other woman pulled her into her arms. “Shh, sweetheart. We can feel that way too.”

Leaving the station and her heart behind, Rey settled for numbness. Until they could talk, there were too many worries in her mind to deal with. The unanswered questions would grow too large and she’d explode and disappear into nothing.

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He got home after 9 p.m.

Exhaustion and anguish burst through him when he shut his front door and leaned his back against it. Sobbing, he slid to the ground.

The two women on the couch were by his side in an instant. Pulling Rey into his arms, he tried to push back everything and focus on her. The last light in his life. The only one that had always been there and should always be there. Her worries for how he thought were all true. He was in an impossible position to try to keep her and he couldn’t figure out a way that he could both mourn his friend and deal with all of her anger. This man, this killer, was truly trying to destroy him.

“I’m sorry I’m so late.” His teeth were chattering as he spoke before he firmed his jaw.

Rey’s eyes, red from crying, met his. “I was safe here. And you’re here now. We can start…we can start talking about what happened.”

He didn’t want to talk. He just wanted his friend back and his relationship with her to be perfect in that moment. He wanted to be able to hold her and cry, rolling into the ache of mourning as every feeling threatened to break him. He could have lost her too. Life would be meaningless without her and her bitter words from the session with Maz opened a renewed gash of anguish. He felt like he was on the edge of the Falls again, being drawn into the temptation of falling into the freedom of not having to worry about anything ever again. There would be no more mistakes if he was dead.
He’d stop hurting Rey if he was gone.

“I can stay the night,” Silla whispered. “I can be here for you both.”

Shaking his head, he remembered that she was there. Picking himself up off the floor, he locked his hand with Rey’s. “No, you should…Owen needs someone to talk to as well. He’s at George’s and they sent me home. Go there and help…help them. We have each other.”

She narrowed her blue eyes and he had to turn his head as she hugged them both goodbye. He still didn’t move until he saw the patrol officer walking next to her to take her down the street.

He moved through a fog, everything so soft, so distant. He felt a hand drag gently across his arm, and rest on his shoulder. Having her close to him was a double-edged sword. He needed this silence and had craved it all day. At the same time, he knew that he couldn’t just let any illusions of peace descend around them. His friend was dead, another lost lover. And his current lover couldn’t trust him anymore. He should have just kept working until he fell over dead.

“Did you eat?” she asked softly. Her eyes were distant, not focusing on him. He felt it the moment Silla left. Rey had shifted away from him, not willing to meet his eyes. Still, she managed some small act of kindness, despite the rage he still felt rolling off of her.

“I’m not hungry.” His words came out as a whisper. “I’m on leave for two weeks. George is on indefinite leave. I don’t know when I’ll ever be hungry again.”

He had to accept that he was going to get benched over this. He had wanted to argue with Owen that he wouldn’t be able to handle stepping back when he needed to work harder for Grey and Poe and especially Rey. But he didn’t. He had stood there and accepted the warning from Tekka. Take two weeks and come back to it with fresh eyes. Let them dig through another part of his personal life like Erso was doing with his journal.

“Kylo, you need to eat something.” She stood up and woodenly moved to the kitchen. She made him a sandwich, gripping the knife hard as she sliced through it.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be here sooner,” he finally said. “There’s been…too much was happening.”

She sighed as her face fell. “Silla was here. I called mom and dad. Han said he could come get me but I told him that you…that you’ve fixed the flight. I didn’t tell them…I didn’t tell them that I was already planning on leaving.”

That meant she got the email. He’d booked the trip for early the next morning. No return ticket. One-way back to Connecticut, where she would be safe. Where she could be away from him.

And then he’d be truly alone.

The thought made him shake out of his stillness. He didn’t deserve her sympathy at the moment. He’d pushed her into such a state of anger that she’d already left him once. She was going to leave him anyway. He stood, taking his plate to the sink. The emotions in his chest twisted and he finally felt something other than emptiness.

“You can tell me how much you hate me again right now,” he said, stopping to stare at her. “You already hate me. I almost got you killed too. Again.”

Her soft mouth fell open and then snapped shut. She wiped her eyes and sat up straighter, narrowing her eyes. “It was terrifying and I know you’re in pain but I don’t know how to feel about you right now. Kylo, I’m sorry your friend is dead. I don’t want to even think about what would
have happened if he’d caught me. But Kylo, I can’t stop thinking about how the same man has tried to kill me twice. And then I would have been gone, forever. But I’m not gone. I’m right here. And Grey isn’t. Grey is dead and not coming back, okay? But I need you. I need you to help me with this so I can help you. I’m sad, too. I’m also scared. Can’t you see how much I need you? Were you even listening yesterday? This is what I was talking about. I don’t even know if I want to be with you anymore. I don’t want to have to listen to you crying over him for years too.”

All strength left his arms. The grip on the plate faltered.

It shattered on the floor and he sobbed. Turning, he fled for his bedroom. He heard her following him and couldn’t face her until he was finally upstairs. He needed to do something to pull him out of the anxiety that was building within him. He took off his holster and stowed his weapon but his eyes lingered on it for a long second before he closed the safe.


“Kylo?” Rey’s voice was soft, fear etching her face.

“What do you want from me?” He spoke but his mind was leaving his body. “How can I make this better? How can I fix this? Everyone keeps telling me what to do but they never tell me how to do it.”

“I just want you to love me.” Her hands fisted in her dress, her face firming. “I just want someone who only wants me. I don’t want you to keep leaving me behind or hiding things from me. I want you to ask how I’m feeling and mean it. I want to be able to help you but you don’t…we need each other so much right now and it’s like I don’t know who you are anymore. Maybe I don’t want to be with you anymore because this keeps happening.”

Inside, the last half a year flashed in his eyes and he didn’t know himself at that moment either. The man that Rey had described with Maz wasn’t who he was trying to be. Reaching out, he pulled her into a strong embrace, mumbling that he was sorry. She was stiff against him. The way her body felt made it hard to ignore how he longed to feel nothing in that moment. The world was only that room. He had to show her that he loved her so she would know him again.

She whimpered as he pressed a harsh kiss to her lips, gripping her arms and pulling her onto the bed. Holding her down, his thinking blurred into a red haze of sensations. He had her by the back of the neck and it was smooth. He kept his body pressed against hers, shoving his tongue into her mouth as her hands fisted his shirt. His hand traced under her dress, tracing her delicate thigh until she broke the kiss to gasp.

“This is the only way I can love anyone,” he whispered, registering the terror in her eyes. “Do you want to know what I’m like? Who I really am now? You want to know why I hold back? This is who I am. I’m violent. I’m erratic. If I didn’t have that fucking job I’d be insane. I keep this from you so you stay my light. You don’t want this side of me and I don’t know…I keep trying to change and just stay the same.”

Her rapid breathing hit him hard in the chest and he pushed himself off of her to pull away. Tears warmed his face and he wiped them away as he stumbled, landing hard on the floor.

Putting his head in his hands, he couldn’t ignore the pounding thought in his head. “I loved them both and I’ve lost them both. I love you and I could have lost you. I’m a monster who just takes what he wants and then gets people killed.”

She could still look at him but her face was still terrified. “You loved him.”
“So what if I did?” His voice was hollow. “I love you too and I still treat you like this. But I can give you what you want. I have to. I can’t lose you.”

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She was still shaking from feeling him on top of her. He could have just taken what he wanted and it was making her world collapse around her further. He could have hurt her like that. How dare he think that she couldn’t handle everything that he was? She could have tried to help him if he’d just opened up to her before. Now, it all felt like it was too late.

“I knew it would be like this but I’m trying to hold it together. It’s just so hard and I’m…I want to hurt myself. I want to do something that makes this pain hurt less but,” he stopped talking, reaching the drawer on the other side of the room, “I need to know you’ll be there for me on the other side. I’m done taking you for granted. I can make it up to you.”

He grabbed the small box from within and opened it.

“I…” She looked at the ring. It glittered in a memory of being at grandma’s, watching her feed her fish, calling each one by name. His desperation made her shiver. “Kylo…”

His eyes glistened as he stared at her. “Please be with me. Marry me. Don’t ever leave me please. No matter what I do. I can listen to you. I can…”

The weight of the last few days crashed in her chest and she couldn’t breathe. Taking a step back, she put her hands to her mouth. His eyes were burning, wild with grief and exhaustion. Too many things were happening and the silence stretched on.

Kylo’s shoulders sagged as she stared at him. Breathing deeply, his head fell. “Then maybe it’s for the best that you stay away from me.”

“Kylo, I don’t know what to think right now!” Her hands flew to her sides. “He could have killed me too! And I had to find him like that! I don’t know how to feel about all of this right now. Why couldn’t you just love me?”

His mouth wavered open and then a sob broke the air. “I don’t…I don’t know.”

He turned, dropping to the floor beside the bed. Putting his head into his hands, he let out a low scream and made her heart shatter. The sound rolled into harsh sobs.

She was trapped across the floor, unable to move, to go to him or to run from him.

All of this had been hidden underneath the eerie calm he’d had when he’d been in his role of an agent. Keeping it inside must have felt impossible, but he was good at hiding things. Slowly, the sounds quieted. He put his arms down after wiping his face. Looking up at her with dark eyes, she realized that there was no way she was going to comfort him through this.

“You need to stay away from me. I can’t give you what you need. Get out.” The voice wasn’t his as he pushed himself to standing. “Whatever you feel for me, forget it. It will just get you killed. Leave. Get out. Go to Brianna’s tonight and fly home tomorrow so Han and Leia can take care of you. I can’t handle seeing what I’m doing to you, what I could have done to you just now. You need me right now and I can’t be there. Maybe I’ll never be able to be there.”
“Kylo…” tears were slipping down her cheeks and she took a slow step forward. He flinched back, making a sob erupt from her chest.

“No!” he shouted. “This entire time I’ve just been letting you down. I promised myself and you that I would never hurt you. And now I have to do that and it destroys me inside. Leave me. Leave me alone like I’m supposed to be. Go out and have a life that doesn’t have me in it, one that isn’t made up of death and pain and the monster that I am. You’ll just die if you are close to me in any way. I can’t…I can’t save you this time. And you can’t save me. Nothing can.”

He stepped back again, leaving the room. He went down to the kitchen, staring at the broken plate. She followed, not knowing what else to do. “Get out, Rey. You deserve someone so much better than me. Just forget about me. Forget anything nice I’ve ever done for you. Forget how it feels to be in my arms. Go find the life you deserve to have. There is nothing good left inside of me. And you deserve to be with a good person. Not a monster.”

Looking at him, she could only shake her head. Words weren’t coming out of her mouth. They were trapped in her chest.

Dropping his head, his face had turned blank again. Like he wasn’t feeling anything. “Please leave now, Rey. You’ll be safe there.”

“Kylo, you can’t…”

“Yes, I can Rey. You can’t be in love with me anymore. I’ve been selfish, demanding and I will just get you killed.” His voice dropped into an icy tone and she felt herself quivering. He sat roughly at the table and put his head in his hands. “Get out and don’t look back. The officers outside can take you over. Just get out.”

Still shaking, her feet still wouldn’t move. She bit her lip. “All you’ve done is lie to me and keep things from me. I almost died yesterday, Kylo, and all you care about is him and yourself. Again. Maybe there really is nothing good left in with you.” Her panic firmed into resolve. “If you could have only just been with me then maybe things would have been different but you always wanted something else.”

The world slowed to a single moment as she backed into the living room. Her eyes never left the broken plate on the floor.

The last bits of her heart evaporated when she stepped out the door, joining the bubble in the atmosphere.

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Someone was smacking his cheek, light annoying taps that made him stir awake. Flashes of last night filtered through his headache and he quietly cursed being alive in the light of morning. Why did his head hurt so badly? The memories of sitting on the floor, drinking until he felt nothing finally hit him and he felt a familiar weakness in his arm.

“Kylo, stay with me.” He felt a gentle touch pushing the hair off his face. He blinked his eyes opened, hissing at the unforgiving sunlight.

“Rey?” Everything was a blur but she was gone so it couldn’t be her. “Grey?” He was slipping
away, again. Sleep was screaming at him. “Let me go.”

Grey’s hand brushed against his cheek. It had to be him. “Kylo, what happened? Stay with me.”

“Just leave me alone.” Kylo shut his eyes against the waves that threatened to pull him under.

“Kylo, you’re bleeding quite profusely. I can’t take you to a hospital. They’ll never let you continue if the Bureau knows. Okay?” The familiar voice shifted from Grey’s to someone else’s as awareness kept coming back to him, refusing to let him drift.

At some point, he’d picked up one of the shards. That was the last image before black. Kylo tried to lift his head, only managing a few inches, before dropping it back to the floor.

“You should try not to move too much.” The hand was on his cheek again. It felt so warm. “Listen to me, I need you to focus. Do you have a first aid kit? Where would I find it? Or else I’ll need to call an ambulance. I can try to fix what…what you’ve done to yourself.”

He blinked around slowly. There was so much broken china and glass around him. He’d only broken one plate though? He was slipping into exhausting but managed to get out the direction. Grey knew where it was. Why was he asking? “Main upstairs bathroom. There’s…there’s adhesive stitches in there. I always thought this would happen again and…”

The warmth left his cheek. He felt like he was floating, softly drifting, sinking…

“Kylo!” He winced at the yell, blinking up at its source.

“Where did Grey go?” High cheekbones, and sharp eyes looked down at him. Erso wore that horrible green plaid suit that Kylo hated. The knees and shins stained in blood. Erso’s face finally held an emotion other than smugness. It made him smirk, darkly satisfied at the sight.

He heard Erso sigh, and moved back to his side after a moment. He pressed a warm cloth to Kylo’s left arm, which caused him to hiss. He opened the first aid kit and then quietly helped him sit up. He watched him clean the wound, curious at how numb he felt. At least he’d only done half the job this time.

“You really did a number on yourself.” The man’s calm had returned as he wiped away the blood, cleaning the wound with gentle hands. “What happened last night?”

“I don’t…” He winced as the alcohol stung the jagged cut. “I can’t talk about it right now. Why are you here?”

His hazel eyes held only kindness in that moment. “You weren’t answering your phone. Everything is chaos right now, to say the least. Agent Kenobi has had to take a leadership role and sent me here to check on you.”

Even as the man was applying the stitches, putting his arm back together, he wasn’t sure if he should be thankful or not.

Nothing mattered.

Rey was gone.

Chapter End Notes
Warnings: Character death.

As for me, here is an author's note that I hope you will read and understand where I'm coming from. And, I guess, for many of you this is goodbye. I'm sorry.

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1RdO0VlxX5vpOX6Ber4cYTOmJh6jCo5rOgHX9_2lOG98/e usp=sharing
Kylo woke up on his couch, not knowing how he got there.

The feeling was euphoric for a moment. Floating in emptiness, his eyes finally started to focus as he swam up from sleep. Staring up at the ceiling, he watched the light fixture begin to sharpen. The gold chandelier seemed to sway as he studied it, daring him to drift into the echoes that surrounded it. He could remember everything about it: when he’d picked it out, when he’d bought it, when
he’d installed it.

It was only when the memory shifted to who was holding the ladder that reality shuddered into place. Clear blue eyes and a cocky smile, threatening to let him fall if he let go. Shivering, he whimpered as the dull ache pounding in the back of his head spread to his arm when he tried to move it.

Blinking, he turned his head to study the throbbing limb. His fingers tingled as he tried to curl them into a fist. The tips looked pale as the prickling sensation grew steadily more painful; he wished he could blame it on sleeping on it awkwardly. Repeating the exercise, he hissed as the dissolving numbness spread deeper, beneath the beige wrappings. It was the same physiotherapy he’d been taught almost exactly eight years ago, pulling him back again. He was trapped in an endless circle of self-doubt that he could never break because he was truly worthless and weak.

Distantly, he remembered Rey and then Grey being there but both of those things were impossible. They had exited his life with hatred for him in their hearts; he’d deserved all of those harsh words. His mind had burnt at the broken things he’d left in his wake. There had been smashed dishes, the white ceramic shards standing out against the wash of blood on the pale tile. There were two empty bottles of wine and a nearly empty bottle of vodka. The mess would still be there when he turned his head and he’d be forced to deal with it, even though he didn’t have any of the will left to keep going.

Because underlying it all was pure despair.

He longed for the abyss that he’d just been robbed of by being fucking awake.

He hazily took in his quiet and darkened house. Taking steady breaths, his growing frustration drove him into motion. Forcing himself to stand with one hand, he made it one pace before stumbling, having to catch himself at the last minute on the edge of the couch. Snorting, he wouldn’t let the heaviness of his head stop him. His throbbing temples equally matched the discomfort in his arm. He needed water. He needed something to force reality to come crashing down around him. Despite the comfort of his vacuum, he needed to start getting beyond pain. Or maybe he needed more agony. Whatever knocked him into being more than a ghost. Whiteness touched the corners of his eyes as he made it to the kitchen, only to be forced to support himself on a chair. Sucking down desperate gulps of air, he sat down and rested his sweaty forehead on the table.

He had to stop his body from trembling but his angry thoughts screamed at him as he drew his left arm up against his chest. It was dark out. But the kitchen was clean. And his wound was bandaged. He could feel the stinging pull of the adhesive stitches he’d ordered specifically for a time like this. His head was aching. The last clear memory he had was Rey walking out the door, turning her back on him and the miscreation that he was. All of her words, which only further confirmed how much he should hate himself, threatened to burst into being again and he fought them off for now. Maybe feeling nothing was better after all. His wavering thoughts wouldn’t land as his head kept swimming.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a smear of blood near the fridge. His lip started quivering and he shut his tired eyes again as the tears started to bubble in his chest.

Fighting against the fatigue and the sorrow, he tried to stand again. But his rushing head caught up with him after two steps.

Crashing hard against the floor, he swore as the sickly sweet taste of pain knocked him into the moment. Rubbing his head, he absently took in a new pain to his temple. Heaving erratic breaths,
his memory finally cleared as to what had happened after Rey left him to his demons.

Erso had been there. Erso had cleaned him up.

He needed to get to his phones.

Sitting up to his knees, he wiped his forehead and fought the urge to pass out again. His eyes felt heavy and his heart was starting to pound in his chest. At least some prickling ache kept spreading in his arm, distracting him from thinking about anything else. There was nothing outside of the pure agony of existing. Rey’s angry eyes had to be pushed away or else he’d lose the last threads of his sanity.

The knock on the patio door made his head snap in the direction and he winced instantly. The brief flash of hope that someone else would be standing there to rescue him vanished as quickly as it flared.

Forcing himself up, he made it to the door. He weakly slid it open, staring wildly at his returning houseguest.

“You were here,” he said, his throat dry. “Why are you back?” He was leaning heavily against the thick glass door, taking in long breaths to try to steady his heart.

“I told you I was coming back, Agent Solo.” Erso’s eyes quickly took him in, fiercely glancing up and down before he pursed his lips. “And it appears that I should have come back sooner but I was unfortunately occupied.”

Kylo glared at him, keeping him in the dull floodlights of the back porch. Annoyance. He had to lock on that emotion before the crush of wretched misery could overwhelm him. “This was never your case.”

Folding his arms, the other man raised his eyebrows, clearly offended at not being let inside. Good. Let him feel that way. “We are two agents down and another is dealing with a sudden promotion and a great deal of pressure from up top about how something like this could happen. Your name came up many, many times today. Even if I am here on a temporary assignment, I’d hope you’d want all of our best people on this…incident. Unfortunately for you, and your current attitude, that includes me.”

The coolness of his tone made Kylo slump further against the door. “I really…” Rage was hard to find in that moment, slipping through his weak fingers. As easy as it had always been to lock onto it before, it was lost in everything else. “Thank you. For whatever you did for me this morning.”

“You don’t remember?” Erso’s eyes narrowed, shifting his weight. Kylo spotted the other man’s dull swallow but had no energy to read more into it. He had been there and only pitied him. Embarrassment started to burn his sweaty throat as he watched Erso still before speaking. “You were in quite a state. How is your arm? And your head?”

He shrugged. Everything just hurt. “I don’t know.”

Languidly, Erso stepped inside. He couldn’t stop him. He’d let him in again. A gentle touch to his bandaged arm made him finally look up. He saw a flash of kindness before the hazel tones of the man’s eyes turned neutral, a frown settling on his face.

“I haven’t told anyone. You should know that. Let this be an offer of trust. But whatever happened last night…you need to discuss it.” The other man continued feeling up his arm, stopping only when he hissed. “You may still need a professional to look at this. There was only so much I could
There were only hazy blurs of being on the floor and someone else being there. The only hint that he had drawn from his broken memory was a flash of eyes that held compassion rather than the burning rage he’d seen the night before from a different pair of eyes he still cherished, even if he could no longer drown in them. “Just that you were here. And you helped me.”

Erso let out a long exhale before he nodded. He fidgeted for a moment, fixing his tweed jacket. “Then we are in a situation in which you unfortunately owe me something. I know you don’t like being in this position but I hope that you value your career enough to get over your hatred for me. I want to help you, Agent Solo. I wouldn’t be here otherwise, keeping our secret.”

The phrase set his mind into another spiral. He must not have meant to die this time, even if he couldn’t remember how he was thinking. He’d been drunk. He’d been overwhelmed. Everything just felt too much. To feel something in that instance of flailing, he’d grabbed one of the shards of grandma’s plates and drove it into his wrist, leaving a jagged streak. There was no thinking in that moment of vicious release. It was only about finding some way to forget.

The softness of Rey’s kiss had to vanish: she only hated everything that he was and had come to be. He’d brought it all on himself by never listening, by never being able to be enough. The firmness of Grey’s grip on his leg as he kept him steady had to go in the same breath: he’d died and his last thought of him had been loathing. Remembering those looks and embraces, gentle and kind ones that made him feel wanted and worthwhile, had made it easy to let disgust guide his hand. He’d never deserved them to begin with and now he’d lost them because of what he was.

The memory of pressing the broken edge into his flesh rose viciously. At the time, he’d only wanted it to be over. Now, living in the aftermath was just as painful. It really wasn’t like it was the first time. When he’d been in the police station, Poe’s blood fresh in his nose and still staining his hands, he could remember every second of his actions. Now, it was just a blur. That was the booze’s fault, he chided himself. Could he ever trust himself to be alone again? He’d thought Rey had been gone forever in that moment eight years ago. Now, fucking now, he knew that she was gone because he was a monster. And he deserved every pain in his life. He almost wished that Luke had found him instead. He wouldn’t have picked him up. His uncle would have sat down, told him to look at what he’d done, and then let him slip away. Cruel. Demanding. Egotistical. And he would have died in the most selfish of ways. Even in his death he was going to disappoint everyone and he’d earned it.

He started to feel himself sway and was quickly guided to the table. Cradling his arm, he weakly nodded as the warm hand left his back. Some part of him missed the touch in an instant. “What do I have to do...what do you want from me?” He exhaled, fighting vertigo. “I know what I’ve done and deserve to lose the last piece of my life so I don’t know why I should beg you to keep this between us.”

Erso stepped back and Kylo could feel his eyes taking him in. High cheekbones and a curious gaze swept his form. The action normally brought on instant revulsion, especially across the conference room or in the strange downstairs’ office that he lurked in. But now that Kylo was drifting, there was only dull acceptance.

He couldn’t reach out to Rey: she hated him because he’d broken her heart. He’d betrayed every part of the bond that they used to have. If he hadn’t been fed by his constant loneliness and the fear that she’d leave him, he would have thought twice about the relationship in the beginning. But in that moment, that first kiss, he thought the world would finally be complete. And then, just as quickly, nothing felt right. He had shattered any and all of the soft memories that they’d shared;
she needed to forget him and that he was ever capable of kindness. Part of him could never pull himself out of how young she was; the constantly brutalized and destroyed bodies of girls at Snoke’s was burnt in his mind. Even if he had hoped that being with Rey would permanently erase those visions, they still remained. With her, he didn’t want to be drunk the entire time like it had been with Liza. It had been a miracle he was able to get an erection with her and then with Rey, his thoughts kept betraying him even as he fought to stay in the moment.

And then there was the other shimmering ache on the waters of his churching thoughts.

He couldn’t call Grey to come over and beg him to fix it: he was gone. The last conversation rang in his head like the unanswered text from Poe. They were just echoes. He’d betrayed them and the promise that he’d made to protect them all.

As long as Rey thought he was a worthless monster, he might as well give in to the blackness and emptiness. He’d at least know how they’d felt at the end. There was no fucking heaven or afterlife because the world was just that cruel. But maybe, maybe right at the end, he’d know the terror of feeling the last of his life draining from him and he could share that with them. Like all of the other blood that was on his hands, he hoped for a brutal instant that he wouldn’t feel any pleasure when he did succumb to death. He knew himself well enough by now; he didn’t see his end coming in a comfortable bed, surrounded by loved ones. That was the type of death meant for inherently good people; that was how both Poe and Grey should have died, not in the horrific way that reality had given them.

Swallowing down another sob, his self-hatred made him turn his eyes to the bandage on his arm. Another flash of memory told him that Erso had really taken care of him. He’d applied the stitches with careful precision, cleaning the wound and talking him through it as he stopped the bleeding. The words were only reverberations in his mind but Kylo still saw him speaking in his head. It wouldn’t be until he had the strength to shower that he could see for himself the damage that he’d done.

Erso was still there, breathing and watching him. He tugged his arm to his chest a little tighter and let his head fall.

Still, he heard the other agent turn, taking a glass from the cupboard. Kylo didn’t want to look up to see what was left in the cupboard. Grandma wouldn’t care if he’d broken all of her dishes but Leia would. Like him, his mother also had a hard time letting go of the people who they’d lost.

Grey’s hollow, dead eyes flashed in his mind and a sob escaped his lips. The way George had sagged against him rocked him again and he shuddered.

Water was placed near his good arm. Not bothering to wipe his eyes, he took in the entire offering in three long gulps. Staring at the empty vessel, he thought about throwing it at the other man. He could scream at him to get out and finally find the strength to dive fully into the void that had nearly consumed him the previous night. Grey was right. It was like falling, but at one moment it was like flying. The freedom of nothing was an ascension into the beyond. Except now, there was no one left to stop him other than the nuisance that stood in his kitchen, waiting for a response.

“I’ve spoken with SSA Jinn,” Erso spoke and Kylo winced. There was his reason. “He asked how you were doing and why you haven’t been answering the phone.”

“What did you say.” Kylo slouched down more, reading the admonishment in his voice.
“That something happened when you came home and you wouldn’t tell me. He knows our relationship so he was...angry that I was here as well. He’s tried to call several times, but his other children and the women in his life have kept him from you, along with his own grief and our colleagues. Agent Kenobi is forcing him to follow orders for once. What I did say was as much truth as I could force. You were in good health and needed some time alone before you could come to him. I suspected you’d been drinking.” Erso slowly took the chair next to him, clearly judging Kylo’s reactions as he settled his clasped hands on the table. Kylo slid back, creating more distance between them. “He means a great deal to you, Agent Solo. I have seen that since the moment I arrived. And knowing the details of the case makes this...interesting to me, how close you two are. Perhaps you should have considered who you were leaving behind when you wanted to give in to your pain last night.”

Blinking, Kylo looked up. “You haven’t told anyone? Not George?” *Especially not George, not this time.*

“You really do think so little of me.” Erso scoffed before he bit his lip and sighed. It was a dull sound that should have made Kylo stiffen, but he lacked the energy to feel anything other than the growing void within him. “I’m not planning on telling anyone either. As long as you explain to me what brought you to this cliff. And why you nearly threw yourself off of it.” Sitting back, Erso crossed his arms again. “We can begin with where Rey is. I know it might upset you, but I had to search your house for her after you passed out. You were injured and it was clearly self-inflicted but it made me very nervous for her and...”

“She left,” he said flatly. “She left and she’s never coming back.”

He tried to focus on what the man was saying. He’d never seen him acting nervous; he’d hardly seen him flinch. His reaction in the conference room had been bored curiosity when the lightning bolt had struck, what was it now, three days ago? The few times they had spoken that afternoon and into the next day had only frustrated him. The questions and observations Erso put out there were correct but delivered in the same tone as always: detached haughtiness.

But if he didn’t put his full attention on him then he’d implode again.

“That’s...unfortunate.” Erso sat up and cleared his throat. “Can I apologize again for my earlier questions about her? I still don’t understand the depth of your relationship. Agent Kenobi gave me a very blunt explanation but I was...”

Kylo cleared his throat, cutting him off. “Owen does that. He knows...he has a lot of opinions. We worked better together before...I don’t know. Before she fell in love with me, I was actually not a mess. You can look it up. I used to have a promising career and then...then I followed my heart and it got me here.”

Another wave of exhaustion made him lean forward, bracing himself with his free arm.

“You haven’t eaten,” came the indifferent voice, losing any hint of kindness. “I’ve read your file, Agent Solo. The eating disorder won’t help you in this moment, I’m afraid.”

He groaned, finally finding a spike of anger. That wasn’t what it was. He hated himself and hated his body but none of it fell in line with what *that man* had read about his not eating. Maybe Kylo needed to study more if he survived the next few weeks to make a better argument. With his strength gradually returning, Kylo finally found some words within him that would make Grey proud. He owed him so much. And that beautiful, although difficult, person had been dissected as he’d laid prone on his kitchen floor. Grey had been cold on a slab, being prodded apart as he’d screamed at Rey to try to love him and then get away from him when he fully embraced the
monster that he was. And her last words to him had driven the hurt so deep into his heart that he wished Erso had never dropped by. He could have just slipped away after failing to connect with the young woman who loved him but had also been beaten down by the constant ache in his disgusting heart. “Maybe I would have ordered something if you hadn’t come here? I was getting up. I was figuring things out.”

Sitting back and then pushing up from his chair, Erso tilted his head. “We haven’t known one another for that long, but I know you depend on others when it comes to solving the problems in your head. And if the mourning in your heart can begin to take hold, then I suggest we eat. And that we talk. I never want to hold anything over you but if you talk to me, just like I said, then I can understand you better and when you are free from compassionate leave, then we can start again. It’s like I said about first impressions. Can you understand?”

He still wanted to go back and argue about how he did eat. No one had had to watch his eating since high school and most of that was thanks to Poe and Rey. They still worried but it wasn’t a problem. He had protein shakes. He made it work. His last meal with Grey had been simple but also freeing. Just sitting on the couch, eating pizza and talking about random things, had taken him back to how ultimately special their friendship had been when the toxic side was held at bay. Grey would sometimes slip, gripping his knee when he got animated about a topic; he could smile easily but scowl and turn bitter just as fast. His eyes would always light up at the prospect of an argument, frustrating Kylo to no end.

Distantly, he realized that the last time they’d kissed had been exactly where Erso was standing. Whatever their friendship was, the awkward pain of examining their failed romance would have to be dissected again because he could never leave anything alone. The number of poor choices he’d made with the both of them...why had they ever chosen him as someone to love? What sort of good had they ever seen in him?

Just drifting to the thought of him made him give Erso a stiff nod. “I had...she and I had made plans. There’s everything in the fridge. I do get hungry, Dr. Erso, but I…”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me. I have my opinion and you need to change it through actions and not words.” Erso’s eyes softened for a moment before he looked away. Still, after a heartbeat, he stopped and turned back to lick his lips. “I only know what I’ve read. And I can say that I agree with you about your relationship with Rey, the little I’ve seen. You know yourself well and have the capacity for a great deal of constructive self-reflection when you allow yourself to have it. You don’t need anyone to tell you that your last performance evaluation really did show a decline.”

“I’m not…” Kylo shut his eyes and sighed. “I didn’t realize what was happening until I lost her.”

Erso watched him in a sudden silence that started off cold but slowly shifted as Kylo turned to look at him. There could be understanding in those eyes, if he gave him a chance. Maybe the proud way he carried himself was to avoid being criticized. Kylo could act in the same way when he needed to. It had been his fault that the typewriter had been stolen, after all. He made mistakes too.

Kylo realized he must really be in shock if he was actually warming to the other man.

When Erso turned to look in the fridge, Kylo rubbed his forehead and groaned. He needed to get up and do something other than just sit and watch him poke through his kitchen. There was so much in the space for a profiler to work with. And he was freely letting him do it because he was just bone tired and sore.

He needed to get up. There must have been hundreds of phone calls to return. He braced himself on
the table and tried to stand but was quickly tutted down again.

“What are you looking for, Agent Solo?”

Kylo breathed out heavily. “My phones. I need...even if Rey hates me, I need to know if she’s safe and I need to...I need to talk to George.” He snapped his mouth shut before he could say more. He was on the verge of confessing everything to this man who was loitering in his kitchen like he somehow had a right to be there. It made his guilt about not going those few houses down the block burn even harder. But he wouldn’t have been helpful. He would have just done more damage by begging George to fix it all again.

Almost every time he had felt lost in the past, George had been there. When the outside world had swallowed him and Rey up, he had no control. It was a different sort of panic than when they were being held captive by Snoke in that house of hatred and abuse. Kylo had to trust other people to take care of Rey. He had to find a way to be better and almost all of that came from seeing her grow and everything George had tried to teach him. It should have been enough, but it wasn’t. When he’d found Poe, there was a new sense of warmth and safety; but he had put that relationship in jeopardy and again needed George to tell him what to do.

In the end, his selfishness had started there; that choice had only shut out Rey, causing her to hate a person who really didn’t deserve it. Still, underlying the hard times with Poe, George had been there. He’d swept in and had taken care of the mess that thundered around him when the world had turned upside down.

Then, there was that weekend with Grey that turned into a friendship that had flowed easily but had been twisted over time. They both had ruined it by being bad for one another. Still, George had been there, never judging him and giving Grey more room to be himself. And now, when George needed him, Kylo had only been sucked down by being the selfish asshole that he was; Rey had made that clear. Every word he’d never said to her started to bubble up within him and it meshed with his all of the harsh opinions he’d ever had about himself. He’d tried to give her all of his heart but had started pulling away out of fear; it had never been enough even when he thought he was doing something right. But just with a look and a touch he could make Grey smile. And before he started disappointing Rey with every turn, George would look at him with more trust and with greater pride.

All of his mistakes rocked in his chest again and he sobbed out of the cascading memories.

Firm hands hit the table, knocking him back to where he was. “You can’t speak to anyone right now. You can hardly speak to me.”

Swallowing, Kylo found a small ounce of defiance. “I can always talk to George.”

Exhaling, Erso drew his hands back as he eyed him. “Your mobiles are on the coffee table. I moved them earlier.”

“I didn’t see them,” Kylo answered, his voice still harsh. But he swallowed the tone when he started to roll back into the person everyone wanted him to be and what he always tried to be. He needed to stop failing at that. “Why are you doing this?”

Erso took another step back, straightening his vest with tight tugs. There were vegetables and other goods on the counter. He was planning something, trying to take care of him. Kylo had to find a way to let go of his contempt for the person offering him care in a time of pure need. “You’re a young agent, albeit with many problems. You write beautifully and can consume complex texts and put them into your own words. You have a good closure percentage and that is actually
unusual before you reach your fifth year. You have a relatively clean record, despite your background. Other than the facial injury, you carry yourself in a professional way. I would…” Erso paused and looked at his shoes, black leather reflecting in the light of the kitchen. “I would like to think that my advice to Agent Kenobi was correct, back when we were reviewing your application. You need the space and time to embrace your talents. And you are only met with grief along the way.” Erso’s eyes snapped up. “It’s hard to flourish in that environment.”

Kylo licked his dry lips and nodded. “I need to make...I need to call George.”

With tight eyes, Erso nodded. “I can help you do that, if you let me make you dinner. If you don’t eat…”

“I won’t feel better. I know.” He still defied him, finding some strength come back to him with every challenge. “I’ve slit my wrists before.”

Erso snorted. “Yes. At the police station. After another very similar set of circumstances. To be blunt, perhaps the next time someone dies, you’ll find a better way of handling your grief. Moving on isn’t about forgetting. It’s also about learning. So. Dinner?”

Kylo couldn’t untangle the look but nodded and reached out his hand to be helped to his feet. The firm warm hand in his, being drawn closer to him, made him focus on the fact that he was an actual person. He wasn’t just the embodiment of exasperation that he’d seen him as before. Still, the second he was able to walk two paces for himself, he brushed the other man off and made it to the couch under his own strength.

He took his work phone first. The dread on his private phone could wait; if something had happened to Rey, someone else would have come to talk to him. And if something had happened to Rey and they were hiding it from him, he’d be ripping up the stitches before Erso could stop him.

Focus. Think about work. The weight on his chest pressed harder at the amount of missed calls and texts. The glance at his email showed equally more unread messages. The order to take two weeks and ignore all of this, only dealing with his grief, was only an invitation to disaster. He’d done so many things wrong to Rey. And what she’d said to him made his feelings for Grey burn hot with guilt. He only had his job to focus on at this point and he wasn’t allowed to pour himself into it like he wanted.

George would understand. And then he’d have to beg him for forgiveness for getting his son killed. And he didn’t deserve it this time.

He hit dial before he could think twice. He was going to start the process of losing another person the moment his call was answered.

“Kylo? We’ve been trying to reach you all day.” George was tired, skipping hello. The gentle tones of his voice were already worn down. “Are you really okay? Dr. Erso was...evasive.”

Kylo tuned out the sounds from his kitchen and nodded in the emptiness of his living room, eyes settling on the swords on his wall. Why did he buy something so idiotic? Another wave of ache took over when he remembered the joy on Grey’s face at seeing the decorations. Oh shit, can we fight with them sometime? That would be sweet. “I needed some time. But I...George, how are you? I want to be there right now but I....”

The dull silence made him drop further into despair. “Kylo, I…” George sucked in a long breath. “I want you here. It’s selfish of me to want to protect you right now but I...I’ve been worried about you. You and Grey have this bond and I should have stopped it but there were times when you both
made one another happy.” George paused again and Kylo just stared at his left hand as he tried to flex it again. “I know you need time as well. Grace and Grant are here and I feel…I can’t remember the last time I didn’t know what to do. I’m making decisions but they don’t feel like mine. I never thought I would have to plan a funeral for my son. And all I can think about is how much he would have hated every one of our choices. His face and his words, they’re in my head too. But just promise me that you’re okay. I can’t…I can’t lose you too.” Kylo heard tears in his voice and he squeezed his eyes shut, the thick and pulsing sorrow rising in his weak veins. But then, George cleared his throat. “Come for breakfast tomorrow. I can’t…I can’t exactly tell you what to do but…”

“I’ll be there,” Kylo answered. “At nine?”

“No, I thought...maybe ten.”

Kylo slowly nodded even as his eyes started to blur. Grey always slept in when he could. “Tell me what to bring. And I’ll be there.”

“Just be there. Goodnight. Please get some sleep for me.”

The call ended and he put the rest of his unanswered messages aside. Fourteen calls from Owen. Well, the last thing he’d heard before he left was that he was on leave and not to touch anything with the case. He’d answer to his fury when he woke up more level headed the next morning.

His personal phone held only more heartache.

Rey hadn’t called or texted once. He still had her photo as the background and would have to find a way to change it or risk a constant stream of despair every time he looked at his phone. He imagined her blocking and deleting his number and clenched his jaw.

Wiping his nose, he called his father. He didn’t dare call the home phone because anyone could answer. He fully expected Rey to hang up on him again and, like the coward he was, he took the easiest way to get what he wanted.

“Jesus Christ, Ben, where have you been?” Han answered and instantly he could hear him getting up and leaving one room for another. His father had a way of breathing when he was upset that he’d come to realize he possessed as well. “I have almost started driving out there a dozen times. What the hell happened?”

He lost his grip on anything and just sobbed. For George, he could be strong, but for his father, he couldn’t hold it back. “Dad, I’m not okay.”

He heard Han shuffle before he sighed. “Son, we talked to Rey. She’s safe and she’s home. We don’t...she won’t tell us anything other than she never wants to see you again. But, Ben, you have to know that I have the car packed up. I know that I gave you a hard time about Gregor and all of this shit but, for fuck’s sake, you can’t be alone right now and I’m…” He heard the backdoor to his old house open and shut. His father’s voice dropped. “Ben, I can’t believe that she walked out on you after all of this. This isn’t the girl I raised, I swear to you. We’re taking care of her and the cops have been here and giving us a hard time but she’s just up in her room and won’t say anything. When we couldn’t get a hold of you, we already decided that…”

“Dad.” He kept his voice firm for a moment and then the wall crumbled. “Dad, just come and get me. I’ve fucked up so bad. I don’t know who I am or what I’m supposed to do right now and I just want...I just want to come home and I can’t come home anymore.”
He sniffled, hearing how disgusting he sounded as he wiped at his eyes. But the guilt returned: Rey needed Han more. He’d burnt her heart to ash and he had never shown his parents how much he cared for them. But he’d at least said one truth. Connecticut was gone. Virginia was home. Rey had earned having parents who cared about her and a house in which she could live surrounded by love. He had only been uncaring and self-obsessed. He’d deserved to lose them both eight years ago and now he’d truly earned the hellfire that another loss had brought on.

He was about to take back his words when Han cleared his throat. “Ben, I’m getting in the car right now, okay? I would have been there sooner but you...whatever you’ve done, we’ll talk about it. Everything is fine here. I’ll see you soon. Just...just keep answering your phone. I love you.”

Letting tears fall down his cheeks, Kylo absently nodded. “I love you. I’m just...tired.”

“Well then, get some sleep. I’ll talk to you soon.”

Not caring that someone he hated was making noise in his kitchen, Kylo clutched his phone and screamed when his father hung up. Everything he felt went into the shriek, even though his lungs felt weak and his heart was pounding. He shouted until he needed to catch his breath.

Exhaling, he shook his head and scrolled through his phone.

He texted Hux and Paige, ignoring everything else. I am fine. Tell the kids I’m fine. I will talk to you soon.

Picking up his other phone, his remorse forced him to answer Owen. I am fine. I will call you tomorrow when I have a clear head.

Letting both phones fall away, determined to ignore the replies, he couldn’t help but be drawn into the comfort of sleep that the couch promised.

He sagged down, curling up on his good side as he exhaled. His mind was in two places that folded into one as his strength ebbed again.

He jerked awake the second a soft hand touched his forehead.

“If you have a fever,” Erso said, stepping back with eyes filled with warning, “then we will need to find a private clinic to look at you. I was only checking. How were your conversations?”

His eyes unfocused, Kylo sat up, wading through confusion at the question. “I need to sleep tonight. I’ll see George in the morning. And my father is coming. I don’t want to think about my phones anymore and...” Kylo realized he was talking too much so he shut his mouth and exhaled. “How do I do this?”

“Navigate the impossible? Find hope in hopelessness? I think it all starts with getting your thoughts out and talking through them.” Sighing, the other man’s shoulders dropped and he sat down on the coffee table. He crossed his legs and frowned at him. “How much of this can you tell your father?”

Kylo dully shook his head. “He’s picked me up off the floor so many times. I never wanted...Shit, I should tell him not to come. Fuck, I…”

A blunt grip stopped him from reaching for his phone. It loosened instantly but Kylo still sat back, weariness forcing his breathing harder. Erso’s eyes sharpened. “Don’t mistake your need for a weakness. A father will do anything for his son.”

Despite how he spoke, Erso was right. Exhaling, Kylo glanced over his shoulder at the kitchen,
drawn into the aroma of what had been prepared for him. “I think I’d like to eat now.”

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He was staring at his bedroom ceiling, finally figuring out that he was awake again.

Dully, he remembered being helped to bed but none of the memories really took hold. Rolling his tongue over his teeth, he dully tasted blood. He’d bitten the inside of his mouth during the night; he poked at the sore and winced. He also felt the familiar ache in his throat of having thrown up. The shock must have truly set in and he didn’t remember it. Christ, how much did he owe Erso at this point?

But he’d started talking. Those memories started to come back to him. As the night wore on, he found himself getting increasingly more exhausted. But he ate. Even if he did throw it all up, he’d tried. But unpacking the pain of what Rey had felt had burnt hard. And it spread when he’d started discussing the complex emotions he also had for his dead friend. All of it echoed how he’d refused to talk eight years ago; the words now bounced against his unwillingness to accept reality when he’d been younger.

Erso had looked engaged the entire time. The usual boredom or annoyance didn’t shine through as Kylo had to stop and quietly weep at times. The words blurred together and he felt his head begin to swim again as he recalled being helped to the washroom. Then the memories kept shaking as he was put in bed, sweating and weeping. Feeling down his chest, he realized that Erso had put him into shorts and a t-shirt. There were shaking images of being helped to undress as his trust started to firm for the other agent. He knew he had been speaking but the words and thoughts jumbled together; those would take time to untangle.

Someone made a noise downstairs. Something fell over, crashing.

If he knew one thing, it was that Erso was not clumsy. And he’d gone home.

He launched himself from his bed for his gun, unable to accept dying by any hand other than his own. Open the lock. Remove the safety. Find the threat. He had to steady himself, despite knowing that the position and resistance would likely rip up the fragile stitches. He had to fight against how his body ached with every action; that had to be pushed down for now.

Adrenaline drove him as he took firm steps out of his bedroom and into the hallway, his shoulders rigid. If he’d come for him, he wasn’t going to go down without a fight.

He only stopped when he had to face his father’s panicked eyes on the staircase in the dull morning light.

“Fuck, Ben, you look like hell. Can you put the gun down?” Han kept his hands up, wincing when he stepped forward and spotted the wound on his arm. “Son, please put the gun down. Do we need to go to a hospital for that?”

Lowering his weapon, he sucked in two low breaths. He set the safety, keeping the gun at his side and his finger off of the trigger until he could put it away. And then he stood there dumbly, swaying as his rapid heart reminded him that he was still not well. “No. This is fine.”

Han stepped forward, shaking his head. He ran his hand along the adhesive stitches and sucked in a
sigh. “It’s not fine.” His father eyed him, feeling down his arm before turning to his right side and
the mouth-shaped bruise that stained his bicep. He only had to glance down to see the cuts on his
legs and the burn marks on his ankles. He felt a trickle of blood slide down his skin; he must have
been scratching himself in his sleep. “You can admit that things are bad right now, son. There’s no
shame in that.”

Swallowing, Kylo jerked back and shook his head. “I don’t even know anymore. I can’t think
straight and it all...it all got to be too much. But is Rey okay?”

Han exhaled and put his hand on his back, guiding him to his room. The gun returned to the safe
and Han held his eyes for a long moment as he locked it. Kylo could finally glance at the clock and
was mildly thankful that it was still early. He could sleep more, trying to wade through the ghost
memories in his head. Erso had helped him; he’d got him talking even if he couldn’t remember
exactly what he’d said. That was something he couldn’t get wrong this time. Whatever images his
brain had created while he was asleep mixed with reality. He wouldn’t be able to piece it together
until he spoke with the man again. Kylo quietly hoped that the universe could be kind for once and
he would keep his word. And he really didn’t seem like the type of person to go against a promise.

Unlike the man who had once been Ben Solo.

Sitting down heavily on the bed, he felt his breath shudder as he looked up at his father. Words
were about to come spilling out of his mouth and he trembled as he held them back. But a tiny
meow and furry body filled his lap and tears hit his eyes the second he caressed the small orange
form. Kylo shakily inhaled. “You drove all night with him in the truck?”

Sitting beside him, Han shrugged. “He liked it when I zoomed through the tolls. He did that thing
he does, when it looks like he’s smiling. He’s fine. He’s a good co-pilot. Only puked once. But
what the hell happened, son? Have you been here alone the entire time since…”

He didn’t want to say it. He didn’t want to admit the crushing reality of the last few days.

“Since she left?” He felt himself grow distant again even as he ran his hand down the cat’s soft fur,
desperate to stay grounded. “No. But it’s felt that way.”

Han sighed, gesturing at his arms and legs with one swoop of his hand. “So, this is why you didn’t
answer the phone?”

Kylo nodded, not knowing what else to say. “I broke almost all of grandma’s plates too. You
should have never given them to me. Rey would have taken care of them. I’m just selfish and
careless with fragile things.”

A deep sigh escaped his father’s lips. He put his arm around him.

Kylo winced, realizing he’d bruised his side when he’d fallen over.

Han started rubbing his hand up and down and he had to bite the inside of his mouth, digging into
the tender spot from before. “Ben. Can I just say there is nothing wrong in calling your dad when
things feel like they’re imploding? I would have given anything to call my father when you
disappeared, or when Poe died, or all of the other times when you’ve looked at me like I’m the
smartest person on the planet. I’m not here because you made me. I’m here because I’m your dad
and this is what we do.”

Tears stung his eyes again, even as he nodded.

“Grey and I were friends again,” he admitted, springing another pain to life that throbbed in time
with the ache in his mouth. “And that’s what got him killed. We went out like we used to do. I wanted things to feel normal and he must have seen us. And until we can prove it, I’m only being paranoid again. I...I killed George’s son, dad. I killed someone I loved again just by having feelings for him, because I couldn’t leave him alone. I don’t know what this person wants from me. I keep trying to find a reason and the only thing I can think of is that I survived. The moment I ran down that path and screamed for help, I doomed everyone I touched. Rey could have died again. Getting her out of Snoke’s house only made her hurt more. I took advantage of her devotion for me. I never deserved her love because I’ve done everything wrong. Every second with me is just torture. I almost wish you had listened to Luke and separated us. She would never have hurt this much because of...me.”

Kylo felt a soft hand run through his hair and he sighed, leaning into how his father tucked a stray strand behind his ear. Like the cat, he was sensitive to touch.

Han pulled him closer and Kylo sighed as his father spoke. “The past is the past. We made that choice and we don’t regret it. You did the things you thought you had to do too. And you can still learn from it and we can too. Whatever gets us to move forward to get you both to feel better.”

He shook his head. “I don’t know anymore.”

“Then we’re on the same page because I don’t even know what I just said.” Han’s arm tightened for a moment before he pulled away, groaning and rolling his shoulders. “Ben, I’m here now. But can you give your old man a break? I’ve been driving all night and it’s 6 a.m. Sleep would feel really good right now.”

His eyes darting, Kylo still tried to push himself from the bed. “I’ll get the litter box from the garage and...”

Han pulled him down again with one harsh tug to his good arm. “I already found it. And he’s had his breakfast. I checked in with the squad car outside and he let me in and told me that you were inside. Can you just...let’s go to sleep for a bit.”

Settling down, Kylo tried to ignore how predictable he could be about some things. Grey was wrong. There was nothing interesting or different about him. “I have to be at George’s at ten,” he said. “I promised.”

“Well,” Han answered, “we’ll have to be there.”

His father nudged him, just as he’d done when he was a boy. Small smirks and gentle touches. Get in bed. Go to sleep. Kylo weakly glared at him before lying down, staring at the ceiling. Some part of him hoped for a story or a song before he fell asleep. He shut his eyes to fight from asking for one.

The rough sweater and jeans his father had been wearing hit the floor. He put himself on the side of the bed that had always belonged to someone else. Kylo put his head on his father’s chest and sighed when a strong arm came around him. Bee hopped back onto the bed and purred against him, settling beside him.

That part made the heartbreak twist again, even as a familiar warmth spread from the cat’s tiny body. Rey didn’t want him anymore. Of course she wouldn’t, a distant voice whispered to him that he wanted to deny. Still, he could read between the lines of what his father was telling him. Kylo didn’t even need to ask. He’d tainted every happy memory she’d ever had of the animal that she’d inherited because he decided she should have him. She had hated the soft moments that Bee had seen between him and Poe. Distant Sunday mornings in bed with a cat between them, slowly letting
passion overtake them. And then Poe would get up and throw him out of the room. The flash of his grin, long lost to time, made him think about Grey again. And then his thoughts drifted to Rey and the pure disappointment he saw in her eyes. The pressure started to build as the cycle of images began to pound in his head...

“Get some rest, Ben,” his father’s tired voice commanded.

And he nodded, shutting his eyes and dreading whatever thoughts would follow him into sleep.

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A nightmare knocked him screaming awake, struggling against the arms that held him. Angry eyes, flashing in alternating forms of blues, browns, and blacks: forceful hands, forcing him down and clawing into his sides. Snoke had him again but this time he reached out and slit his throat as he penetrated him, violating him as he killed him.

But there was nothing there; he was just empty skin and bones. No blood flowed from his neck and he felt no pain. It was just a hollow release.

The images hit him but faded just as rapidly, vanishing in a haze. Shuddering, he fought against the form trying to grab at him.

“Ben, stop.” Han’s voice finished clearing the hallucination and his unfocused eyes latched onto his gruff mouth. His father was holding him down, gripping him by the biceps to hold him against the mattress. “It was just a dream. No one is hurting you. I’m here.”

Exhaling, he forced a nod and Han sat back, shaking his head. Sitting up, he curled his left arm against his chest. There was more feeling and less pain today; that part registered. The clock read 9 a.m. It was time to get up. “I forgot you were here.”

His father sighed, rubbing his other arm. “You were talking in your sleep. It woke me up when you cried out for me. Then there were…a lot of other names. You sounded so...not yourself.”

Kylo put his head down. “We have to be at George’s in an hour. I have to get up and look at what...look at what I’ve done to myself.” And figure out how to hide it. “Dad, George can’t know about this. Owen can’t know either. And please don’t tell mom. And Rey.”

The burden he was putting on his father’s shoulders wasn’t lost on him.

“I don’t want to lie to them, so I’m going to have to think about it.” Rubbing his stubble, Han sighed. Right answer, at least. He could count on him for that. “Are you at least feeling better? You don’t look as pale and sweaty as you did a couple of hours ago.”

With his heart slowly steadying from being jolted awake, Kylo stopped to think. And he realized he could actually do so. Things weren’t spiraling out of control into guilt, grief, and a mishmash of other thoughts. His headache had faded into a slight throbbing in his temples. His arm remained weak but not like it was going to fall off, like it had been chained to the bed. He should have gone to the hospital but that would have risked too much. The shock he’d felt had finally receded enough. He had to deal with putting the pieces of what happened together and he could fall apart in the process. The wave of nausea he’d felt that morning had also passed. He had to get up and keep all of those feelings at bay.
“I feel…” he started and then licked his lips, hoping he could find the words he wanted to say. “I feel human. But at the same time, I think I don’t deserve to feel better.”

Sighing, his father clasped his knee. Kylo had to resist jerking away, even if it was a familiar touch. “I’m going to go make some coffee. You can clean yourself up and then we can figure out what you can do to stop feeling like that. You’re always putting yourself through hell. Put the brakes on that for a while.”

Numbly, he shifted his weight. “I need to shower.”

He could come up with more to say once he’d cleaned himself up. He turned away, standing before his father could reply. He quickly shut and locked the bathroom door. Shuddering, he wiped his face, one hand falling quickly to his scar, before he lifted his head to meet his gaze in the mirror. A couple of days of stubble darkened his chin and cheeks. The bags under his eyes were harsh lines that revealed how much he’d slept. The soft bruise on his temple would be hard to explain but he’d deal with that later.

Looking at his arm, he winced to himself. His flesh was stretched red and angry, but the wound was still mostly being held together. Where one or two stitches had started to lift showed lines that were oozing coagulated blood. The bruising around the injury was spreading still. Even through all of the new terror, old white lines still lingered as a permanent reminder. If he saw this on any other person, he’d have an easy time slipping into the shoes to understand his or her pain. But his own thoughts still remained elusive. He knew he’d done it. And he was almost sure why he’d done it. The feelings from eight years ago had been clear but now, in the cruel light of morning, he’d lost track of what had actually happened. It was layered with fragments of memories that he couldn’t put in order.

And having to trust Erso was starting to claw at his resolve.

Removing his t-shirt, he gritted his teeth. There were bruises up his sides. He must have fallen more times and didn’t remember it. His chest hurt as he studied himself further before disgust made him turn away.

He saw how he’d punched himself. He saw how he’d cut himself. And then the scars kept singing to him even as he documented everything new that had happened. Old wounds overlapped with new ones until his head spun.

Making the shower spring to life, he shed the last of his clothes. The ache was settling throughout his body as he moved, slowly waking him up more. He was getting very good at breaking promises but it stung to realize how quickly he was always drawn to self-destruction. He had restrained himself only to biting but when he’d opened the door to burning, cutting quickly came with it again. It was like returning home to drag the blade across his skin, hissing his way to completion.

His knees were scuffed up. The slashes on his thighs looked redder now.

Shutting his eyes, he washed as methodologically as he could, trying not to count each newly discovered bruise, scratch, or cut.

The strength in his arm was returning but it was hard not to let it rest against his chest.

He dried off and quietly thought about what he was going to say to his father. He’d wait to plan what he was going to tell George when he got there.

Focusing on the two of them kept him from diving deeper into the raw hurt that remained under
the surface. He had to be better today. He would let himself cry but not out of self-pity. Shaving, he kept his focus on not cutting himself for once.

He put on a long-sleeved shirt and a pair of jeans as he practiced holding his arm in a way that wouldn’t reveal how much it still stung. A thick ache travelled up his shoulder every time he straightened the limb. He’d have to find a way of keeping it together; as long as Erso kept his promise, he’d be able to survive this. Owen would never let him back on duty if he knew about this. And George had lost so much. Fucking Erso was right of course.

Staring at the pictures on his dresser, he regretted replacing the frames. He did up his belt and scowled to himself. He was only going to break them again, just like he’d broken all of the promises he’d made to the faces that were staring at him.

That part made him snap inside.

He turned from his bedroom and stomped to his office. Opening up the box he still hadn’t moved into the garage, he took out his favourite picture of him and Poe and returned it to its spot beside the bed. Moving to the drawer of the larger dresser, he took out the photo of him and Grey that he’d hidden there for Rey’s visit. The final picture was of him and Rey, one of the pictures Leia had taken at Christmas.

There they all were, side by side.

Shaking off tears, he grabbed his socks and stomped downstairs. He had to let the others go to be with Rey. But as long as the gap between them grew in the vacuum of being separated by his own selfish actions, he needed some reason not to hate himself. In the moments captured in those pictures, he’d felt something for another person. He wasn’t a hollow corpse.

“Tell me what Rey said when you picked her up,” he said, standing across the kitchen. All of the cupboards were opened and Han was still surveying the lost china and glasses. “I still care about her, dad, but so much happened when she was here that I had to send her to you. I’m sorry...I’m sorry it looks like I gave up.”

Han shut one of the doors and shrugged. “We’re going to tell your mother that one of the shelves collapsed. You’re getting it renovated. I’ll make some calls so you’ll have something else to think about. That will distract you. And your mother too, if she asks about it.” Han met his annoyed look with one of his own. Rolling his eyes, his father took down two of the remaining coffee cups and filled them both. “We went and picked her up, but we couldn’t get a hold of you so there was a lot going on. Owen didn’t say much when I talked to him and your mother just sobbed on the phone when she spoke to George. I just knew I had to get to you and the way Rey was acting kept stopping me. She didn’t say anything. It was like talking to a wall. We asked her about you and Gregor, we asked her if she’d spoken to George...we just wanted to know something and she kept her mouth shut. What happened?”

Kylo sat down, testing out his left hand by lifting the mug. He could almost do it without pain or shaking. He’d need more practice but at least he had something to take his mind off of how close to the edge he suddenly felt again. “We met with Maz the day after she got here. I sort of surprised her with it but I’ve been really struggling since March and...and maybe before that. Maybe since New Years’. Maybe since last year. I’ve had a hard time at work and everyone has noticed. I could handle being on the road but being around the office again...They’ve tried to help but I’ve been pulling away from everyone. Talking to her used to make me feel better but when...” his face burnt and he slouched down. “We’ve only had sex once. I felt myself starting to freeze up but forced myself to keep going. It hurt to tell her that but I did. I thought...I thought she would understand and she just threw it in my face in the end. I’ve always had issues with sex and looking back at that
night, I didn’t want to go that far so quickly. I wanted her and I wanted it to be perfect but I don’t think I was ready. But I did it anyway so I wouldn’t disappoint her. And it turns out that everything I’ve ever done has disappointed her.”

Han reached out, rubbing his good arm. “Leia has heard more about this than I have. Rey...she hasn’t really been home since March. We were giving her space but maybe we gave her too much. She talks a lot about you and how things were before you had to be out of town all of the time. But I thought...I thought you two worked it out.”

He swallowed. “We were only able to talk about it...because Grey told me to tell her. He sat here and...” Tears were in his eyes before he could stop them. “I hurt them both so much. All they wanted was for me to love them. Rey needed me to listen to her and I made it all about me. All Grey asked for was me to be happy, but also to be myself. I love them both, dad, in different ways. And now I’m alone and I don’t know what to do.”

The cat wandered up, hopping up into his lap to nuzzle him. He took a slow drink of coffee before he ran his hands along his furry back.

“It doesn’t look like you’re alone right now, son.” Han sat back and checked his watch. “Do you want to talk about him now? What were you...what was going on with Gregor?”

He kept his eyes on the cat. “We’re just friends but I...I don’t know anymore. None of it makes sense and I don’t know what to say to George. I got him killed. He will tell me I didn’t, but it happened again, dad. He had the same look in his eyes when I saw him. It was just blank terror. It was a body I’ve held and made love to, dead on the floor again. If I hadn’t called him, he’d still be alive. If I loved Rey more, then I would have been able to stay away from him. I got him killed. The last time I talked to him...he just wanted me to love him. He acts like an asshole but he is a good person. And now he’s gone and I’ve slit my wrist again. And it’s like...it’s like I forgot what day it was until I was in the car. Poe died because I loved him. Grey died because I couldn’t let him go. And Rey was almost killed twice to teach me some sort of lesson that I’m still not understanding.”

“Well,” Han sat up and cleared his throat. “What does your profile say? Talk to me about that.”

Glancing up, he shrugged. “Male. Aged in his late forties or fifties. Maybe early sixties if he’s in good shape but I doubt that part. He has some connection to the Snoke case, even if it’s one he just dreamed up. Possibly abused as a child, likely by a male relative. He is used to being in a position of power that he’s afraid to lose. We’re focusing on the loss of a job or the breakup of a marriage as his stressor. He had my journal for years so he knows things about me that no one else would. He got a hold of the typewriter by stealing credentials. He took it because I wrote about it. He has the means to travel great distances, but we were able to narrow him down to that town in Connecticut so we’re digging into any connection that may go beyond just being the first site.” Shaking his head, he exhaled. “He plans. He plans long in advance. He must have been watching the house and saw Rey was here. But he was going to get her to come to Grey even if...even if she hadn’t already threatened to break up with me. Maybe he planned on it driving us apart but that’s just speculation.”

Sitting back, Han folded his arms. “And he knew you’d be at work.”

“Just like he knew I’d be at the gym.” He took a thick swallow of coffee, resisting scratching at the scar on his face again. “But he must have seen me with Grey again. He’s probably been watching us for years thinking...thinking like everyone else.” Going out to bars. Going to parties. Running together. Standing too close. Always looking for one another when something got to be too boring or just too much. Him forcing Grey to be there until they just merged into one another’s heads and
they were both too confused to know how they really felt.

The kitchen was quiet, except for Bee’s happy purrs. It settled around him until he forced himself to move, to clean something up as his father showered and changed. In the time alone, he talked to the cat. Hearing himself speak Spanish again and seeing the way the cat tilted his head helped settle some part of his heart, even if he didn’t know why.

When they left, he didn’t even bother trying to get rid of the cat hair that clung to his dark clothes.

Grace answered the door, her red eyes immediately making his misery hammer hard in his chest, awakening in a flash. She looked up and threw her arms around his waist, a small whimper leaving her mouth. He stroked her hair, fighting back tears. Everything hurt more suddenly and he felt unsteady again, even as he tried to fight it. But maybe he didn’t want to hold it back. Maybe it did need to hurt physically for it to feel real.

“Hi Gracie,” he whispered, letting his clammy flesh press against her warm, tear-stained skin. “It will be okay, sweetheart.”

She looked up and frowned. “Dad was yelling at Owen on the phone. Then he yelled at Grant. Everything here just sucks and I’m worried about dad. He’s so mad and sad, Kylo.”

Shakily, he exhaled. “I’m here now, okay? Do you want to sit with my dad so I can go talk to him?”

She eyed his father and then turned back to him. “Where’s Rey?”

The ache in his stomach felt heavier at the simple words. “She’s...she’s not here. But she cares about you so I’ll ask her to call you.” Did Rey even think about Grace? That she’d be there? She let Bee go so easily. He didn’t want to fall into that hole and hoped that he wasn’t lying to her. Taking the girl’s hand, he entered another house of grief.

Distantly, he heard shouting upstairs. His mouth fell open before he snapped it shut. “Gracie, do you want to stay here with Han?”

She was fiddling with the end of her braided hair. “I guess. Grant and I just want to go home. It’s too sad here without Grey.” She stepped back, tears shimmering in her eyes. “Why did he have to die, Kylo? Why did he have to leave us behind? Why did someone have to hurt him?”

Falling to his knees, he ignored the sting in his arm as he pulled her into a firm hug. She dropped her head against his neck and sobbed, gripping him hard. It brought out every pain in his body and he couldn’t chase it away or ignore it in the moment. He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder, knowing that his father was still there. Another set of siblings that would grow up without their brother. Everything between him and Grey had been selfish far too often. But the bond with his siblings ran deeper. And he’d robbed them of that.

Light footsteps from down the hall got his attention. He looked up to see Grant; the boy’s face was awash with rage at the sight of him. He pulled away from Grace. The girl glanced over at her brother and her face fell again.

“Grant?” he asked, lost in how the boy’s eyes echoed his lost friend’s.

“Go fuck yourself!” he snapped. He turned and his feet pounded down the hall and then harshly against the basement steps.

So this was the mess he’d made.
Looking up at his father, he sought out some form of sympathy. He got another light squeeze on
his shoulder in response.

“Gracie, why don’t you and I go talk to your brother. I’m kind of an expert when it comes to things
like this. And I’ll make sure you two don’t feel forgotten.” Han reached out and Grace’s grip on
his neck tightened for a moment before slowly pulling away to take his father’s hand. “You’re both
free to scream at me all you want too. I’m used to that too.”

Forcing himself to his feet with his left arm, he didn’t bother to hide the hiss of pain. It kept him in
the moment at least.

Climbing the stairs, he was met with another set of angry eyes. A middle-aged woman in a long,
black dress glared at him instantly and he had to pause, caught in the fury that he felt pouring off
the small frame with burning green eyes in a sea of curly red hair.

He opened his mouth and she cut him off with a wave of her hand. She took two steps down to
stand closer to him and he was locked in place. A sharp finger landed in the middle of his chest and
he could only stare at her. “You are the last person I want to see right now, Agent Solo. My son
does not tell me everything but I have had to hear so much about you both in my marriage and then
from my boy. I no longer have a family because of you. How does that make you feel? You use
my son and break his heart. Is this what love is to you?” Each word was met with a sharp jab to his
sternum, keeping him from catching his breath. “You...Otyebis ot menya!”

She shoved by him, jostling his left side and leaving him stunned and hurting on the staircase.

Still, he kept moving. It took him five deep breaths to get him there.

He found George in Grey’s room, sitting on his bed. “So, you’ve met one of my ex-wives now.”

Kylo swallowed. “I hope...I hope meeting the others is more pleasant.” He crossed the floor,
keeping his eyes on him to avoid taking in the space. Dropping down next to him, he forced
himself to stay steady. The bed was made for once and it stung to think about. “How are you?”

“I don’t know where to start.” George met his eyes and pursed his lips. “I may not have been
handling myself well this morning. Or last night, for that matter.”

“I had…” His own feelings were just as elusive. “I had a breakdown. Rey left me after I got home
last night. I was trying to send her away to protect her and she...she listened in a way I didn’t
expect. I’ve been dealing with that too. But Dr. Erso helped me. And my father is here now. So I
can finally be here for you and stop being...selfish.”

“She left you?” George’s voice turned hard, surprising him. “Because you had to send her away?”

Kylo tried to focus on the lamp on Grey’s desk. He’d drawn an angry face on it in sharpie, next to a
sticker of the Soviet flag. “There were other things. I was desperate not to lose her. And I still did. I
don’t...I don’t know how to do this either. He means...he means so much to me but she does too.
It’s like my head and my heart aren’t agreeing with one another. I felt...I felt like everything was
just collapsing. And she needed to step back and hate me. I just wish she didn’t hate him too. But I
want to know how you are feeling. My thoughts are a mess so they don’t really make sense either.”

George put his hand over his mouth, resting on his elbow as he watched him speak. The hand slid
down and he rubbed his palm against his jeans. “Kylo, I’ve known for a while that you and Grey
had renewed your friendship. You both...aren’t really careful. I still think about when you called
me, when you were flying home. I don’t think I’ve ever told you how much hope I had in that
moment for you both. And then to know that my son was the one to...make it collapse, that took
time. But hearing how much you feel for one another, I don’t...I don’t regret facilitating you two
getting in touch again. Despite what happened. Despite what the two of you did to each other, I still
saw the good sides. So this time, I couldn’t object when I found out. Even though I don’t like how
you both lied to me, maybe that’s what made me not say anything. I don’t know what I was
thinking anymore. Owen was fairly clear to me when we spoke, before all of this happened, that
he’d warned you about this and how it would affect your relationship with Rey. I was selfish there.
I have tried to care about all of you equally but...my flaws must be clear to you at this point. And
they are shining right now to everyone else so don’t blame yourself if I’m suddenly not your hero,
because I’ve never tried to be that. So I need...some time to reassess how I feel about Rey too. I
love both of you equally. You have always reached out to me and there have been times when
she’s done the same. But over time...I should have done more for her too. When we were at the
station, and she looked so alone, I needed to make sure she didn’t feel that way. But the last thing I
needed to hear that night was that...was that she disliked him for who he is. He’s twenty-seven.
He’s still...He was finally growing into who he wanted to be. I am fully aware of the bad sides of
my oldest son. But I had hoped that she would stick by you.”

Kylo wanted to let his arm curl up against his chest but resisted it, crossing his legs instead,
wincing at how his body still ached from how he’d abused it so many hours ago. “I asked her to
marry me.”

“Kylo, that wouldn’t have fixed anything,” George said, then snorted. “Ask the two women
complaining about me in my kitchen right now. Talia and Johanna have never seen eye to eye.
Now, I’ve really given them a chance. And Grant is going to grow up just like him and...thinking
about that makes it hard to accept that he won’t walk through that door and scream at me to get out
of his room.”

It was like George could see into his mind, he thought, because he had the same image of Grey
wandering in, hungover, and rolling his eyes at them. Big fucking deal. I’m dead. Get over it and
find out who did it, you fucking morons. And don’t touch my shit. Or do. I don’t care. He stared at
the doorframe, willing the fantasy into life until a gentle hand clasped his knee.

“I don’t blame you for this, Kylo. And even if they were only words of anger, you were still the
last one to speak with him. He...” George reached into his pocket, revealing a neatly folded
photocopied piece of paper. “The original is still in evidence but I convinced Owen to let me have
this so I can give it to you. He was writing this to you and about you. I’m sorry that I read it before
you but...it’s the last piece of him I have. I think it will be hard for you to read but it’s something...
it’s something you need to deal with to start moving on. He loves you and I need time to reconcile
that thought as well.”

Sucking down a breath, Kylo let his fingers brush the note. “I can’t take this. You should keep it.”

George shook his head. “I’ll get the original when...when we close this case. I will...I’ll leave you
alone with it. I need to see if everyone else has calmed down. And now that you’re here, I’m going
to try avoid making things worse.”

Kylo just stared at the other man as he stood. “Can I wait to read it?” Can I keep him for a little
while longer?

“Of course.” George tilted his head, almost smirking. “Let’s start...let’s start pretending that
everything will be okay. The first steps are always the hardest.”

So Kylo tucked the paper away and followed him downstairs. In the kitchen, he got a formal
introduction to Natalia and then Johanna. The other woman was tall, younger, and blonde. She
looked at him with more sympathy than the smaller-framed, red-headed woman. Talia had looked at him once and then firmly turned her attention to George, speaking in harsh Russian. Her arms were folded, occasionally moving to slam her palm on the table.

But the way she talked and moved was precisely Grey. She’d tilt her head and lick her lips and Kylo felt the wealth of sorrow he was trying to keep at bay blossom in his chest.

How was he supposed to handle this?

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His father wandered down into the basement as he was slumped beside his treadmill, gnawing on the tip of his water bottle. He yanked out his headphones and tried to keep his eyes clear as he looked at him.

“I heard you stop.” Han looked at him and sighed. “I guess it wasn’t such a great idea.”

“No,” he answered, keeping his head low. “But I needed to try something.”

He didn’t know how his father convinced him to leave George’s, but he was eventually pushed into it. His father had been driving the entire night and needed to rest. He claimed the couch to nap, the cat instantly curling up on his chest. And despite feeling lethargy start to take over his entire body, Kylo needed to move. He hated feeling exhausted for a reason that he wanted to take back. If he could push himself hard enough, he’d just pass out tonight. There’d be no dreams. There would just be sleep.

Grey’s note was still folded upstairs in his jeans. Rey still hadn’t texted or called.

So he tried to work out, his arm starting to burn as he ran. The ache was instant in his legs, reminding him that he hadn’t been able to keep to a proper schedule for far too long. He still managed a solid forty-five minutes before giving up. His heart was beating so hard and whiteness was constantly starting to snake in at the corners of his eyes. He almost stumbled and needed to balance himself with his good arm several times. Now, sitting on the floor of his basement, sweat dug into his open wounds. He needed that sting. He needed to keep being reminded that he was alive.

Han ran his fingers through his hair and shrugged. “I’m going to go pick you up some things for the kitchen. Dishes. Glasses. You can pick out whatever you really want when you’re feeling better but right now, you need some basic things. I also...I need something to do also, Ben. And I think you’re okay on your own for a few hours.”

His father was tempting him with that trust. And he did need to be alone.

He lifted his phone. “I’ll call if anything happens.”

Looking at him, Han stiffly nodded. “You’re going to have to go to a doctor eventually. That thing looks...I know you want to keep it from your bosses but it’s going to get infected and…”

Rubbing his eyes, Kylo huffed. “We’ll go when you get back. I’ll make something up at the clinic. Now that I...I don’t look crazy anymore they won’t commit me.”
Han looked like he was going to say something but Kylo managed to silence him with a glare. Throwing up his arms, his father left. Groaning to himself, he got to his feet. If he passed out, he didn’t want anyone surprising him.

It took more effort than he expected to climb the stairs but he forced himself through it. He took off his shoes and socks before he locked the door. The disgusting sneakers he used on the treadmill should have been replaced long ago. Grey had laughed at them once, stretched out on his sofa and pointing out every hole.

Dropping onto the couch, he kept trying to put the pieces of the last few days together. Rey had arrived and he’d felt the burden take over all of his other expectations. His eyes darted around, looking for things that weren’t there. It was supposed to be the start of summer. Those were the times when they could connect the most. They should have been making more of their plans, what they were going to do as a couple. But his thoughts just wouldn’t let him rest. The first day was a blur but the second day he could count every breath before and after he left the house.

The last time he kissed her. The last time he rested his hand on her back to guide her into Maz’s office.

He had only told her that Maz thought that they needed to talk. He’d been too afraid to admit that he needed someone else in the room when he got his most difficult thoughts out. Some of them needed to be forced out. Most of them needed to be ripped from his mouth.

He just didn’t know what that would cost him.

I needed to shut you out because you hurt me.

Why can’t you just let people like him go?

You keep making promises and then can’t really be there for me.

It’s only important if you’re the victim.

He’d never seen her so full of rage before. Maybe he’d blanked it out if it had happened before in such a brutal form. He knew that he had seen flashes of it in the past, like when she was eleven. He’d heard about it from his parents when he was off making this fucking life happen. She was right about everything. He never listened.

The doorknob jostled and he jerked up to his feet. Dad didn’t have the new key; he’d forgotten to give it to him.

This was one of his coworkers. But George would knock; he knew he was home.

That left Owen. Or Erso using Owen’s key again.

The patrol outside wouldn’t have cleared anyone else to come in to see him.

Shit.

Thanking his father’s inability to ever hang up his jackets, he snatched the thin zip-up hoodie from the back of his couch. He shoved it on before glancing down at his legs. Fuck. There was just a bottle of water on the coffee table but nothing truly incriminating. Everything was cleaned up except for the marks on his skin.

He heard Owen call for him before pausing in the doorway, an annoyed sound leaving his throat at
being distracted. Kylo was halfway towards the stairs when he stilled and listened to the other voice. Erso was with him. Erso was interrupting Owen to comment on something he couldn’t hear, drawing his focus outside. Owen was arguing back and Kylo slowly realized what was happening: the other man was buying him time. If he hadn’t gone to George’s, he would have been dressed like he was now anyway.

The door thankfully shut and he could sprint for cover.

He took the stairs three at a time and made it to his bedroom, trying desperately to catch his breath. He snatched up the closest pair of sweatpants and changed as he heard the front door open and Owen’s voice clearly call for him again. Wiping his brow, he forced down his panic and darted into the bathroom. He hit the faucet and stood back to stare at himself. He spaced out all of the time; that’s all this was.

But it was annoying not to know why Erso was doing this. Why he was there. Shoving his headphones on, he turned up the volume of his music.

It was easy to slip into dread, despite the hammering tones in his ears. He was just gathering more things to hang over him. Swaying, he finally turned and shut off the water. He was still unwell but his heart was able to settle now without him feeling entirely lightheaded. He tired far too easily but even that is improving too. If anything, he could blame it on drinking too much. That part he could get away with. But the cuts and bruises had to stay hidden.

The knock on the doorframe made his head jerk in that direction. His eyes flicked to his partner’s pale ones. Owen smiled easily, shoulders dropping in clear relief. The gestures made him miss their easy camaraderie when he’d started at the Bureau. How to fill out this form. How to log into this system or that system. Which person at HR to talk to if he wanted something done quickly and correctly.

He managed to stand there, stunned into memory, as he pulled off his earbuds.

“Kylo. There you are. We tried...I guess you didn’t hear.” Owen glanced quickly around the room. He knows he’s looking for something but he isn’t sure what it is. When he didn’t seem to find it, he heard a soft sigh from Owen. The tension vanished completely from his shoulders. “Tekka asked me to come speak with you and to see how you’re doing. George said you were home and looked...he said you still looked stunned.”

“I’ve been...” he exhaled, glancing shortly at Erso before returning his focus to Owen. “Things could be better. Han got here this morning.”

Erso lurked behind Owen, standing just outside of his bedroom. There was something in the way that he was standing that made Kylo shiver. He wanted something from him and he was getting it by constantly showing up when he needed it.

Shifting his weight, Kylo kept his focus on the shorter man between them. “I’m fine. I haven’t been sleeping, but with my dad here now I...I can handle it.”

Despite having his eyes on Owen, he could still catch hints of Erso in the distance. Bee stirred on the bed, giving Kylo an excuse to sit down. He ran his hands through the fur, feeling him start to purr before he stopped, keeping his sharp eyes locked on the doorway. Letting out a small sneeze, the cat turned and dove off the bed, crawling under it.

Okay, they both had to get out now.
He stiffly gestured for Owen to follow him. “Dad drove all night with him in the truck. He’s not...he has bad moods too.”

He didn’t really wait for a response. He pushed by them both with his left arm held close against his waist. He was down the stairs and in the living room before he could stop and breathe again. The panic that had risen in his chest had struck out of nowhere. He tucked his left arm in his pocket, hissing as he bent his elbow. The other arm followed on the opposite side, but everything he was doing was suspicious at that point. He had to hope that Owen would read something else into his jerky motions. His head was starting to swim again and he finally turned to face them.

Erso caught his eyes at the top of the stairs but Kylo quickly lowered his gaze to Owen instead. He felt like he’d seen enough of the other man for a lifetime; even if he did help him, he was just doing it to get more information out of him about himself or Snoke. There were thousands of other things he wanted to talk about other than that monster.

He took two steps back, dropping his head. Everything was being ripped up inside of him again and he was tumbling down the hole. Rey was always supposed to be in his life; he was always supposed to protect her. He hadn’t been there twice. He’d made a promise to Poe that got him killed. He’d jerked Grey around for years, caught in a toxic friendship, and that had earned him a death sentence as well.

Sniffling, sound left the room before someone gripped his good arm. “Agent Solo?” He flinched against Erso’s touch and stepped back. “Are you okay?”

Owen was watching them, sharp eyes narrowing. “Kylo, why don’t we go for a walk?”

It was a hollow question. He stood up straighter and nodded. Slipping on his sneakers, he tightened his grip on the phone in his pocket when he spotted Owen motion to Erso to stay.

He had told him. He grit his teeth and narrowed his eyes at the third agent, letting threads of rage bleed into his look. He’d promised. And if he’d broken it, if his world was about to crumble, he should at least have warned him. Or maybe he did hate him that much, twisting a cruel knife.

But the look he got back was just a quick shake of his head: a silent guarantee that he hadn’t gone back on his word.

Softening his eyes, he glanced at Owen as he stepped out the door with his partner behind him.

Owen shut the door and the look of alleviation from earlier, at seeing him, vanished into a sharp glare. Owen grabbed his arm, the wrong one, and he had to fight from pulling away. Clamping down on any reaction, he forced his face to only give away a look of annoyed surprise.

Owen’s hand dropped. “I’m not an idiot you know.”

The shorter man started walking, leaving Kylo tilting his head on the porch. Clamping down on his terror, he had to try not to make quick judgments.

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He caught up in two long strides, still feeling tense but feigning ignorance. “What?”

Owen rolled his eyes as Kylo matched his pace. “Kylo, I have a lot on my shoulders right now. You may have only seen some of the harsher sides of George but dealing with him right now is impossible. On top of that, I have to do his job now because his son and your friend is dead. And I don’t like whatever’s going on here. Are you purposely trying to never have a good relationship? I have had to hold my tongue before but if something is going on here...”
“What?” Kylo stopped, repeating the question with a different tone. He couldn’t hold back from gawking at the other man. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Owen cocked an eyebrow of warning at him to back off. Kylo instantly nodded, taking the silent chiding, but confusion still ran rampant in his head before his partner, now acting supervisor, kept talking. “Whatever it is you and Erso are up to, it’s none of my business. I don’t want to know. And I want it kept out of my office.”

Stepping back, Kylo finally read into the words and nearly exhaled with relief. “There’s nothing going on here, Owen. He showed up and I was just hung over. I was probably still drunk. Rey left. I didn’t just send her away. I was trying to and she took the chance to get away from me. She walked out the door when I needed her the most. And I…” He shook his head, crossing the short lawn beside the street. Dropping to sit on the curb, he frowned again. His legs were threatening to give out on him if he didn’t do something. Nothing felt clear anymore. He needed more time to figure out exactly what he had done. In the end, he couldn’t blame her for anything. She should be freed from her burden. But it didn’t mean it still didn’t hurt. “He bothers me. It bothered me that he came to my house. I am working on not having a problem with him. I’m not hiding anything from you. With him, Rey, Grey, George...there’s just too much going on right now.”

He’d lied. He’d openly lied to his partner. He was never supposed to do that. But this was all he had left. He had to find some way to fight through his shattered emotions to keep a hold of it.

Swallowing, Owen sat down next to him. He kicked lightly at a stray pebble, getting his attention. “Kylo, I don’t know what I thought, really. I’ve seen you glare at him all of the time. I’ve heard George force him to leave you alone. And then he’s the first one to volunteer when things were falling apart yesterday morning. You weren’t answering your phone but we knew you were home. Patrol saw Rey leave and heard the argument from the street. I didn’t want them walking in and finding you...maybe I made the wrong decision in sending him. And about Rey,” he paused, making Kylo flex his arm to send a jolt of pain through his body. “I’m not sure what to tell you. She’s still young and she’ll come around, if she loves you. And I think she does.” Owen sighed and looked at his hands. “Grey is another...another matter. I’ve worked with you for almost four years now. I know how much he matters to you. And that losing them both,” another pause, another flex of his arm. “I was concerned. And we sent the most qualified agent we had in case you had done something.”

He desperately wanted to rub the ache out of his arm. Instead, he let his shoulders slump. “I just...I just drank. I broke some plates. I didn’t know how to handle losing her. It was all my fault. I blew it. Even if she does love me, it doesn’t matter. I was the one who ruined it. I never listened to her and everything I did to try to fix it...it just pushed her away. And the worst part is the whole time, Grey told me I had to tell her but I was afraid to lose her. And I lost her, anyway.” Kylo fell back onto the small stretch of grass behind him, shutting his eyes for a moment before staring up at the clear sky. He’d missed that it was a beautiful day outside. “I’m just so tired, Owen.”

“Yes, you look awful. Worse than usual.” At the words, Kylo gave him an annoyed look. It lasted until Owen grinned at him. The gesture slowly faded as he shook his head. “If your father is here, that makes my job a little bit easier. If you need to see someone, you should. There’s always Maz, but Erso, if you’re being upfront with me, and nothing is going on, he’s supposedly great at what he does.” Owen snorted lightly. “Even though we’ve seen little evidence of that.”

Owen was staring at him, kindness finally returning to his blue-green eyes. He looked exhausted too. They’d only briefly talked about plans for the future. Owen had so much more seniority than he did. And George had all-but handpicked him to take over the unit. Kylo had just hoped he could stay as his partner for a few more years before he had to deal with him as a boss. George let him
get away with things that Owen would stop in a heartbeat.

Swallowing, Kylo nodded. “I just need to stay busy. I’m following orders this time. Maybe I...it was immature of me not to answer my phone. I didn’t like being put on leave even if I needed it. If I stop moving, I start thinking about everything. And then I can’t get my head out of it.”

He shut his eyes again but could feel Owen still watching him. “To be honest, we’d thought the worst when you wouldn’t answer your phones, Kylo. It shows how much you’ve grown as a person to know that you didn’t fall into that old vice again. I’m proud of you. I mean, the drinking is bad but that’s something you can sleep off.”

Kylo bit the inside of his mouth hard. What was he supposed to say to that? He stood up and brushed himself off, hoping the action would obfuscate the look on his face and the slope of his shoulders. Owen copied him but it didn’t look like he was going to drop whatever he was digging at.

Owen’s sharp eyes remained on his face, though, looking for an answer he had to keep hidden for now. “Kylo, if something happened, you can tell me. I’ve seen you drunk and if you’re embarrassed about him seeing you like that…”

“Maybe I am?” He could latch onto that. He felt the rage heating his face. “But I told you nothing happened. He picked me up off of the floor and cleaned up. And I hate owing him something at this point. I saw George this morning and Gregor’s mother blames me for his death. I don’t need someone thinking the exact same thing as me. Grant won’t even look at me and he…” He felt his lip start to tremble. “He looks just like him.”

A gentle hand rested on his elbow. His right elbow. “If that’s all that happened, I can speak with him. You weren’t on duty. Breaking a few plates is a far cry from how it could have been. The main thing I need to see from you when these two weeks are up is that you have found constructive ways of managing your stress. We can’t let you come back without an eval. But I’ll keep Erso from telling anyone. If that makes you feel better. I can look the other way and blame how you look and how you’re acting on stress. And I’m not here to fight with you.” He sighed, shaking his head before running his hand across his beard. “Look, you’ve got two weeks. Please show us that you can come back from this because we need you; I need you. We need to get back to how we used to work together before...before all of this. Don’t give Tekka a reason to bench you because he’s already pushing for it. And I will never bend the rules as far as George has. I will bench you if I think it’s better for you, Kylo. I care about what happens to you.” The hand on his elbow tightened briefly, making him look at him. “And I am sorry about Rey. I’m starting to realize that maybe none of us knew her as well as we thought.”

Kylo dropped his gaze, staring at his shoes. He’d meant to buy new ones but now it seemed pointless. “I told her to leave. This isn’t on her. She left because she couldn’t take it anymore and I deserve this.” The thought that had started to solidify earlier started to reawaken in his chest. Could he blame her? No. It wasn’t right. But she still had promised to always be there. He was betraying himself by laying it all on her. Wasn’t he? He looked at Owen for a moment with pleading eyes, begging him to tell him what to think.

The shorter man shook his head. “She should know you well enough to understand that when you tell someone to leave, that’s when you need them the most. I know that and so should she.”

He let Owen guide him back towards his house, briefly noticing his father’s car in the driveway. And the patrol car still parked outside.

But the respite was shattered when he spotted Erso on the porch, smoking and speaking with Han.
The way he stood with his head cocked as Han was clearly telling him some embarrassing and personal story from childhood made him clench his jaw and pause in his step. His eyes narrowed and he shuddered when Erso put a hand on his father’s arm.

Falling. That falling feeling gripped him again. Rey was gone. Grey was gone. George was broken. He’d had to make his father lie for him again. He owed Erso the world. He’d lied to his partner. His heartbeat hammered quicker with every flashing thought.

“Kylo?” Owen rubbed his shoulders, leaning in to whisper. “I will help you through this. And I can keep him away from you. If that helps.”

“No.” Kylo’s eyes locked with Erso before he glanced back at his partner. “Nothing happened, Owen. I promise. I’m just...I didn’t like him seeing me like that when I should have...reacted better.”

Clearing his throat, Owen moved his hand and led him up to the porch. Kylo was silent as they joined the two men already standing there outside his house. At least it was a partial truth this time. He could live with that for now.

“Agent Kenobi,” Han said as he turned, stepping away from the hazel-eyed agent. “It’s nice to see you turn up here with everything you have to do.”

Owen smirked and shook his father’s hand. They all could put on different faces when they had to because the concern in Owen’s eyes had vanished as he greeted his father. “And I’m afraid that I will have more than usual over the next few weeks.”

“I’m sure you’ll be able to handle it.” His father glanced over at him for a moment and Kylo looked at his feet. “I’ll be in town for a while. Ben is already doing better. He worked out today. So, there’s that.”

“When things settle down, we’ll have to do something,” Owen said before looking squarely at him. “To take your mind off of everything.”

He nodded, meeting his partner’s gaze, even though his mind was on the silent man staring at him out of the corner of his eye.

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Kylo kept fiddling with the sleeve of his suit coat until he noticed Owen was watching and stopped. He readjusted the candle in his hand and shifted his weight, already tired from standing.

The incense and strange words had been overwhelming but he had to try to find some way to act normally. But there was no guidebook for a thing like this, the mixture of grief and emptiness that he felt, even though he could write one at this point. The last few days were a blur of talking and not really sleeping. Nightmares stalked him when he tried to rest at night and then he was living in active horror during the day. When he spoke to his mother, he’d asked if she thought Rey would be able to look at him again. Days were passing for her too and he longed to know what she was thinking, if there were any feelings left within her for him. And the answer was always no. He’d hear a door slam shut and his mother sigh. He needed to stop asking, even if it crushed his soul in the process.
Being shut off from her was permanent this time. The half of him that was gone made it hard to focus on the half that was still there. At this point, he wasn’t sure how much of his soul was left. He never wanted to put his father through this again but things just started spilling out and he couldn’t stop them.

So they started renovating the kitchen. It seemed like a good idea at the time. His father helped him pick out new cabinets and new counters. He was forced to leave the house to do something other than going to George’s, even if it was just going to Home Depot.

But the strength in his arm was almost back. Checking in with a private clinic, they admonished him for ‘doing it himself’ without medical training. It would heal jaggedly, but it would heal. It wasn’t infected. That had been a fear when some of the skin started looking more pale and sickly. He worked hard to keep it clean but there were some nights when he wanted everything to go away, including the constant reminder on his arm. He’d said it was a gardening accident. And they didn’t even care if it was a lie or not. They just took his money out of pocket and fixed him up.

The visit from OPR had been another sinking feeling. The day before the funeral, when he should have been at the wake, they showed up at his door. They had gone through his phone records. They had looked at where he’d been. He didn’t even have to argue that he’d been at the office; they knew that already. The time of death clearly ruled him out and it was chilling to be thankful for such a simple thing. But they did dig into his and Grey’s friendship. And he couldn’t lie to them. The last few days had been putting his future into perspective. He needed to stop risking so much by trying to soothe the ache in his heart. Grey would never want him to be dishonest. At least his father had been out of the room at the time. He might have been stupid to talk to them without a representative but he didn’t care. He just wanted to get it out and over with. But there was a part that stung deeply. They had spent too much time together. And Grey thought he was invincible so he took stupid risks.

Knowing that they’d spoken to Rey when he couldn’t talk to her built a ball of anger in his chest that wouldn’t budge. The two agents emphasized that they would increase his leave, possibly adding censure, if he didn’t clear a psych evaluation when the two weeks were finally up. There was only one week left and he had to get a handle on things. He had to find a way to fix himself with help from others when the two people he wanted most were gone. But he accepted it and finally found something to put his focus on: saving his career and reaching out to other people. Be a better agent and a better person.

The world kept turning.

And now he had to really say goodbye to Grey even if he wasn’t ready.

He had to stare at the strangeness of ritual around him. It was hard not to get distracted. He was there both to start letting go, as well as find anything suspicious amongst the crowd.

“He would have hated this,” Owen said, leaning over to whisper, keeping his candle steady. They’d already been glared at several times by the other attendees in the ornate church. Owen had an easier time brushing it off than he did. And Kylo was slowly working on not giving a fuck about what the other mourners thought of him. Being screamed at by Talia outside when he’d arrived had set his already sombre mood sour.

The casket was filled with too many pillows. Grey was holding a cross; at least that part made him look unrecognizable. Still, every time Kylo looked towards him, he saw the familiar head and thought the same thing as Owen. But, simultaneously, he understood that Grey would have loved being the centre of attention.
“He...he would have hated how his mother got her way. And that they’re letting him be buried like this with how...with how he was. But he...this is for his mother and his grandparents.” Slowly, Kylo shook his head, threading through the long conversations he’d had with George the last few days. This wasn’t what Grey wanted or believed in. He didn’t think there was any higher power. All of his philosophy and firm ideals made it hard to accept that George would let his son be buried like this, having a man with a long beard and a pointed hat standing over him. But George just shook his head. Grey was gone. There were no more opinions or sharp remarks. He was wearing a suit that Kylo had never seen before, but at least his hair looked good. That part he would have appreciated. This was for Talia and that side of the family. If anything, Grey would have at least laughed at it. “He would have thought it was funny that we’re all so uncomfortable.”

Owen raised his eyebrows but ended up nodding. The tension between them had also faded as Kylo opened up to him about that night with Rey and how Erso showing up had been the last thing that he had expected. He still left out the most important details, but at least Owen could look at him again without narrowing his eyes. “Have you spotted anything?”

He nicked his head again. “There are a few men that match the profile. They must have been photographed by now.”

And their arrivals would have been documented. Everything would come down to seeing who followed them to the graveyard and who didn’t. And who went where. He hadn’t spotted anyone that matched the sketch but he was beginning to doubt the accuracy of it. It had to be someone he knew.

The incense was starting to make his head spin and he shut his eyes.

The foreignness of half the words made it hard to tap into reality.

Grey wasn’t just going to get up and shove him, telling him to just stop being fucking sad. It’s something that happened, Ky. Don’t fucking get stuck in it forever. Just imagine how pissed I’d be at my fucking bitch mom right now, okay?

He lifted one hand and wiped his eyes and felt a firm hand support his back.

At least he didn’t have to say anything this time. That would have broken the uneasy calm that had worked hard to have over the course of the last few days, battling for position against the anger and sorrow. Maybe it wasn’t really any form of peace. Maybe all of his frustrations were locked in his chest and would be knocked loose sooner rather than later. He had a few more days. Owen had already given him a kindness by treating him like he was already on duty.

He turned his head and silently watched the back of George’s head. He stood next to Talia and took her hand every time she started weeping, loudly. Grace and Grant stood on either side of their mother. Even if Rey didn’t think he was capable of caring about other people anymore, the bits of his heart that were left went out to everyone around him at that moment. He wasn’t just focused on his own pain for one brilliant second and he set his jaw hard.

When could this all be over?

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He tried to slink to the side, near his father, when the procession reached the grave. At least he’d
be buried close by. The drive to Maryland should have felt longer but this time he’d have somewhere to go when he wanted to yell at him about something he’d done. This part was different. He wasn’t ash. They hadn’t shared five years of their lives being together in intimacy but instead in a friendship that had gotten out of hand and hurt them both. That part was different. He cherished them both in different ways.

And the way he felt about Rey also had to change into something new.

Kylo hazily listened to more of the melodic words as he stood next to his father.

“It’s all different,” he said, hardly a whisper.

Han rubbed his shoulders. “Yeah, it’s weirder. All of the chanting and the perfume…”

Managing a small smirk, he shook his head before biting his lip. “I don’t feel like I’m really here.”

He knew he was drifting into space. He needed to be sharp, he needed to watch everyone there, but part of him was just letting go. All he wanted was for Rey to be there, to be the one holding his hand; he wanted her to stop hating him and to stop hating two dead men just because he felt something for them.

This wasn’t the world he wanted to live in. At that moment, he shut his eyes and cried as quietly as he could. He felt guilty for every second he spent mourning his friend. All of the energy left his body and he leaned on Han to stay upright.

“Ben. You’re really here. This is really happening. It will all be over soon,” Han whispered to him. “He’s gone. It’s not your fault.”

He gave himself a few more seconds of floating, flying, before he wiped his eyes and fixed his hair.

He straightened his shoulder and scanned the crowd.

The part of him that wasn’t dead wondered why ritual brought such consolation to so many people. They celebrated Christmas and Easter, but they never really talked about belief when he was a child. He’d read about some children in similar situations to the one he’d been trapped in for seven years seeing Jesus during traumatic events. Deep down, he knew that God was something comforting for people who didn’t want to see the real world for how it was. The darkness and light in the world came from the balance of humanity, not some promise of salvation or damnation. When his head was clear, he was going to read all about what was happening around him. It would cement the memories in a different way than the other funerals he’d attended. Grey would want him to learn from this, to mourn him in a way that suited him: finding things to be pissed off about.

His wandering eyes locked with George’s and he felt new tears instantly. Maybe if he hadn’t walked out of that dorm room in a fit of betrayal and anger, he’d be standing in a very different place right now and this ceremony would be something completely different. He’d been a ghost when they’d planned Poe’s funeral; he had disagreed with everything until his mother arrived. That part made him straighten again, offering George a small nod, trying to tell him that he understood. This wasn’t for them.

Still, he longed for the moment to end, for time to be reset.

But those were immature thoughts. Again. More distractions. Again.
Lifting his head, he started sweeping the crowd.

He could make sense out of that role. He could turn off part of his brain and scan the faces of the mourners. Who matched the profile? Who looked like they shouldn’t be there. It was a group of forty people. Less than half of them were male. Half of that matched who they were looking for. But either the hair or eye colour was off; but those things could be altered. Five people matched the height and he narrowed his eyes at them. Why couldn’t there be something familiar about them? If he could fix this, he’d make everything right. The memories that he had could stop throbbing and he could go to Rey and show her that there was some good left in him.

A creeping thought hit him. What if she still walked away?

His shoulders went rigid and he swallowed, hard. He reached over with his right hand and drove his fingers into his healing wound until his father stopped him.

He didn’t want to approach the grave. He didn’t want to throw dirt onto the casket.

He only did it for George.

Following the line, he scooped up a bit of earth and stared at the half-covered casket. The polished wood stood out against the blackness of the soil. He watched as his weak hand added to the pile, not really seeing any difference.

But he’d stopped and stared for too long, holding up the line.

He heard the shout and he glanced up at the gathered family at the side of the grave and his heart dropped.

Natalia’s eyes flashed with rage, pushing by the priest and out of George’s grip. She screamed at him in Russian and Kylo stepped back, looking widely at George. The grit still clung to his hand and, despite her anger, he was still panicked that the woman would fall into the grave.

“Talia, stop!” George stepped around, pulling her away from him. He grabbed the veiled woman with wild hair by the shoulders. “It is not his fault.”

“George, no. It is. It is!” She kept her sharp eyes on him even as he stepped back into the silent crowd. “I hate you! I hate what you’ve done to my son! My boy is dead because of you!”

He turned and fled, still hearing her shouts in the background. He cut through the crowd and ignored his father and Owen. He had been avoiding Erso’s lurking all day and still caught a flash of those fucking cheekbones, judging him.

Walking until he was far enough away from the crowd, he could finally let out a low sob. Gasping, Kylo stopped to lean against a tombstone. His hand gripped the rough surface and he fought to ground himself in the moment.

His heart pounding, he took a steadying breath. He had to clear his head from the harsh and brutal words. He couldn’t take them to heart, but they kept trickling in anyway.

He was doomed to lose everything: either through death or his own mistakes.

The impossible monster who didn’t deserve love. Too broken to be able to pick himself up off of the floor. An empty husk who only brought destruction.

Accepting that he wasn’t officially on duty, he chose to hide. Maybe he wouldn’t be ready in the
next few days. It was impossible. He couldn’t last more than fifteen minutes without spacing out into self-pity or regret or a wash of pure and vitriolic grief. The blackness crept up his spine and into his head and he had to fight from biting his good arm and from driving his fingernails into the bad one. Good and bad. Always two sides.

He was never going to be the version of himself that Rey wanted but he had been enough for Grey.

Sobbing, he slid to the ground behind the tombstone. Hidden from everyone else for the moment, he ignored who he was and what he had done. He gave in to feeling the moment as it truly was. He pulled himself out of what he could have said or could have done. Only existing as a body, he watched himself crumble in the middle of such a peaceful place.

How was he ever going to pretend that this was going to get better? How was he going to get himself together and pass a psych eval? His heart started racing and he buried his head against his arms, giving in to the ache to drive his tears.

Kylo reached into his pocket for the note. He still hadn’t read it, waiting for a perfect moment that would never come. He’d carried it with him the entire day. In the distance, he could still hear voices but they blurred into the words on the page, written with an angry and messy hand.

Reasons why Kylo should be with me and not Rey: 1) I fucking listen to him and his bullshit. And I try not to judge the craziest of his fucked up ideas. 2) He’s not afraid to tell me when he’s pissed off about something stupid I fucking did and I’m not afraid either. Whatever keeps him from mutilating himself. 3) Great fucking sex. 4) I’ve never felt this way about another person before. The way he looks at me is like a fucking lightning bolt hitting me every time. And maybe he doesn’t feel that way right now but I know it’s in there, somewhere under the fucking mess in his head. 5) I’ll never give up on him. I should’ve let him keep talking and that was fucking stupid but once I’ve fucking calmed down, we’ll find each other again. She’s just going to shut him out and he’ll be desperate and I hate it when he’s fucking like that but Jesus Christ I don’t even fucking know why she has to act like this. Like the whole fucking world has to stop because he’s not fucking perfect and he’s not giving her a fucking fairy tale. Am I really the only fucking person on the planet to tell her to grow the fuck up? Christ, Ky doesn’t need this shit. So there’s another reason. So I guess that’s six. 7) See point 3. And even if he fucks it up, I want to help him through it. 8) I don’t know anymore. I want to hate him and feel like a liar for saying that I did even though I don’t. I want him to be happy even if it’s not with me. But I don’t even think he knows what happy feels like anymore. Reason eight is so I’m not a fucking liar. Why the fuck didn’t I do all of this earlier? Why the fuck am I like this? Just fuck. Fuck everything. He was never going to fucking choose me. We’ve fucked with each other’s heads too much. And I love him anyways.

Staring at the final line, he quietly folded the paper and shook his head as he rubbed his face again, trying to dry his eyes. George had warned him about the words and how much they’d hurt. But he had to deal with them. He couldn’t change the past and working through his remorse would be part of moving on. He had to find a way to do that.

But in that moment, it felt unbearable.

“How are you doing?”

His eyes shot up to Erso lurking over him. Shifting his weight, he shrugged, settling against the headstone as he tried to settle his raging heart. “I don’t know. Has anyone seen anything?”

“No. Not as far as I know.” Instead of continuing to look down at him, Erso moved to sit next to him. He rested his back against the broad tombstone before shaking his head. Kylo shifted away, feeling instant discomfort with how close he was again. “But there’s still a lot of vetting to do.
There were two suspicious cars that slowed down during the procession that we’re tracking down. There are a few strange faces in the crowd that we’ll find and question. There might be something here. I saw one man react when the fireworks went off just now. He might be interesting to speak to.”

He dropped his head and winced. “At least Talia has it figured out. It is my fault he’s gone.”

Erso eyed him, slowly shifting closer. Kylo didn’t pull away this time. “That’s a selfish way of thinking, Agent Solo. And from what we’ve discussed in the weekly meetings, it’s exactly what he wants you to think. Stop and consider the profile for a moment. I was brought in not to annoy you but to add another perspective. We won’t be able to work through this if you can’t pull back from the personal side of it. And I know that Agent Kenobi and SSA Jinn have reminded you of this many times. Even if it feels impossible, we all have the capacity to detach from the things that hurt us. Put it into that box in your head and set it aside until it’s time to deal with it, when you’re ready.”

“Is it...I…” His thoughts continued to be scattered and he drew his arm up to his chest, cradling it again. “How do I do that? How do I keep them out of my dreams? Him, Poe, Rey, Snoke...the other people who had to die to get my attention? How do I just make it stop?”

Glancing at how he was sitting, Erso raised his eyebrows. “Well, you have found one way of trying to make it stop.”

He left his arm where it was and took a shaky breath, tears still threatening to slip down his cheeks. Clearing his throat, he tried to wipe his eyes and find his voice again. Two or three breaths from his own lungs were all he heard. “I don’t know how I’ll be able to thank you for keeping this a secret, Dr. Erso. OPR didn’t say anything so I...I guess I have to trust you.”

Erso turned his head, looking out across the expanse of green and stones. Kylo shifted his eyes, taking in the man’s profile before glancing at his own knees. “How often do you trust someone the first time you meet them?”

He scoffed, weakly cleaning his damp face. “Since I got back, never. I hated George in the beginning. I thought Poe was annoying. I thought Grey was a selfish asshole. I thought Owen was cold. About the...about the only person I didn’t hate the moment I met her is Rey. I was in love with her the moment she was put in my arms. And I always thought that would be enough. And now her feelings for me are gone too. I’m drifting. I can’t think unless it’s about the case and until I get back, I can’t do anything to help.”

“You’re helping the case by not falling completely apart, Agent Solo.” Erso kept his eyes locked in the distance, studying something he couldn’t see. “You’re helping your mentor by reminding him that you can work through your problems to be the agent he wants you to be. Your deceased friend wouldn’t have wanted you to die on your kitchen floor. I helped you because I see your potential too. And I don’t want anyone to take that from you, even if it is yourself, Agent Solo.”

Swallowing, he bit his lip. “You can call me Kylo, you know.”

Erso turned, his eyes squinting for a moment. “Then, when we’re not on duty, you’re free to call me Galen. But I do,” he paused. For a moment, a true emotion crossed his face. It wasn’t just distant pity or hollow apathy. The concern he’d felt on the kitchen floor returned for a brief moment. “I do have a question about why you’ve kept the name he gave you after all of these years. I know you’ve just offered me a great deal of trust just now so I hope I haven’t crossed a line.”
“No, it’s fine.” Kylo held his eyes, reaching within himself for the answer after his initial abrupt reply. “I’ve thought a lot about it over the years. The doctors and nurses and the police called me Ben and I just screamed at them. George was the first one who understood. My teachers called me Ben at first and I couldn’t deal with it. I didn’t want to hear that name and I had to use it all of the time. It was on my license and it wasn’t mine. My parents say it to make me listen, when I’m going out of my mind or just being stubborn. But Ben Solo died when he was seven. He was raped and tortured. He died alone and afraid and then he turned into something else and that’s me. I can never go back to being him. Look at me now. Maybe I’ve been close at times, when I’ve been able to have a day when I...when things aren’t dark. On those stupid mornings when I can just roll over and drift in some fucking peace for once. On the days when I can be Agent Solo, I don’t feel like I’m a worthless monster who no one will ever be able to stand loving. But there are still days when I feel like a fraud by using his name. So, sometimes, it’s easier to accept who I am. Kylo isn’t a good person but he wants to be even though he will probably never get there as long as I’m like this.”

Erso nodded slowly, seemingly taking in his honest words. “Names are a curious thing. The majority of us don’t choose what we are named, but can decide what we are called. It shows a shift in identity and how we see ourselves. You never permanently and legally changed your name. So I think that there is a part of Ben Solo left within you even if you haven’t been in touch with him for a long time.”

Shaking his head, Kylo took a deep breath. “Owen thinks there’s something going on between us.”

Erso snorted, a sound strange emerging out of his throat. “Then he can take that up with my wife in California. Kylo, I am...I need to apologize again for being blunt with you at times. And for pushing you at other times. I never anticipated being here as the case took this...turn. But as long as I am here, and as long as you’re feeling this way, I shall try to help you. Loss is not an individual thing, even if it feels personal. You share it with everyone here today. I am...I am still an outside observer. Let me offer you a deal. As long as I’m here, I won’t tell anyone about what happened in your house while I was there. And you give me a chance. I see how overwhelmed Agent Kenobi is. SSA Jinn may never return. Your father can’t stay here forever. And Rey...Rey needs time. If I can earn your trust, I think that we can get through this.”

Kylo stared at the man beside him. “I just want this to be over. I want all of this to end. And be something better on the other side.”

The small smile he got in return started to settle some of his churning thoughts. It wasn’t like the broad ones he got from Owen, Grey, or Poe. It wasn’t like the gentle and warm ones he got from his father or George. And it wasn’t like the shining sun of Rey’s smile.

He was quiet as he watched the other man push himself to his feet, fixing his black suit jacket. He extended his hand.

Kylo took it, hoping he’d made the right decision.

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Being cleared for duty was one thing, but accepting who his partner would be was another thing. Despite the talk in the cemetery and the sense of wary calm it gave him, he needed more time to
work through his thoughts regarding Galen Erso.

And, at the end of the day, he was the last thing on his list of thoughts. Working with his father to install new cabinets and fixtures in his kitchen in the evenings, he’d run through how much he missed Rey. How he was getting better and wasn’t consumed by despair. Part of his world might have disappeared with Grey but he wasn’t tumbling further into that abyss. And how Han needed to tell her to at least call him once. The days had crawled by since the funeral but as long as his hands were in motion, and dad was there, he could keep moving in the right direction. Work towards being a better person for Rey. Figure out when and how to talk to her. Give her space and give her time and not give into throbbing hysteria. His feelings for Grey did bring out so many old thoughts about Poe. He hated himself for mixing the two. But Han would sit back, dust off his hands, and remind him that they were distinct people. Pulling them apart was the only way forward. They didn’t die hating him; they died in fear for their lives. He’d hurt them as much as he’d cared for them. Continuing to live, to be there for everyone else and be better for them, had to be central to his focus.

Still, there were nights when he’d roll over in bed, looking for comfort from someone and finding none.

Talia had left, probably still clutching the cross that had been in Grey’s hands to her chest like the last time he’d seen her. Johanna had left too, taking Grace and Grant with her. With his world suddenly sucked empty, George came over and started helping with the house. He had too much to think about and, still, there he was with his sleeves rolled up, doing something to take his mind off of an empty room in his house and another vacant home only a few streets away.

Taking away all of the pieces of Grey from the rental property was another few hours of his life that were lost in going through the motions of existing through hurt. He couldn’t handle packing up his life with Poe but this time he refused to leave George there alone.

Loneliness. Emptiness. When they were going through Grey’s books, his clothes, every stupid thing that had once belonged to him, those were the emotions he saw in George’s eyes and felt pulse in his heart.

They stood in the bedroom together, looking where the bloodstain had been.

Kylo couldn’t let him down.

He had been settled and calm when he spoke with Maz. He hadn’t self-harmed in the days since he was put on leave. That part was true. Even though the jagged wound was hidden underneath his sleeve, he had nearly a full range of movement by now. He could hold his weapon on the range and was almost back to where he should be.

He wasn’t sure what was driving him.

Maybe it was just all about pretending things would be okay again one day.

And then he walked into the office that would be George’s again one day and had to see Erso sitting in the chair opposite of Owen. He had to find a way of releasing the last of the tension that still lingered about the man to work with him in a closer manner. Of course Erso would jump at the chance for a more-permanent placement at headquarters, getting away from the field office. And Owen wasn’t going to turn down the opportunity to challenge Kylo.

This was the only way. This was the way.
Kylo was knocked into a sudden thought about Rey as he stared at his kitchen. The last pieces of the renovation had come together and he was standing there alone, hearing distant chatter of his guests from the living room.

Would she like what they’d done? Would the colours have been what she would have chosen with her careful eye? He imagined her running her hand along the countertop, stopping to turn and smile at him after he’d wondered about her day. She’d ask him to help make dinner not because she couldn’t do it, but because she wanted to spend time with him. The way he could reach out and touch her not because he wanted something but because she was there, filling his heart with warmth. There was no grief or sadness unless he made it that way.

The images were so clear that he had to force himself to blink her away.

Summer was about to end. She’d be back at school soon.

And Han had to go back to Connecticut.

Looking at the new countertops, how they glistened in the lighting they had difficulties installing, he sipped at his wine. Since June, since those horrible weeks, he’d quietly made his way through so much but it all felt like a blur. Working with a new partner and shifting his attention to new cases had helped; those moments stood out. Despite the still-recent death and the blood that still stained his hands, his entire focus couldn’t be consumed by those tragedies.

Han was leaving the next day, taking the cat with him. Kylo wanted to argue to keep him, but sending him home was also for the best. He’d be out of town and there was no one to take care of him, to drop by without asking and hang out on the back porch, flicking cigarette butts down to the ground for him to clean up. And even further away was someone who always made sure the cat got a kiss on his orange head before he got his breakfast.

George was leaving soon for North Carolina for the time being. Being apart from his other children had worn him down. But every time Kylo dropped by after work, when he wanted to talk through a theory or an idea he had, he saw some spark return to his eyes.

But his world was about to contract again. And this time he had to push through it.

He heard Owen clear his throat and Kylo turned to face him. “Have you finally found something wrong with it?”

Smirking, he shrugged. “We should have gone with brass knobs.”

“Well, you can always change that.” Owen stepped forward, running his hand along the countertop. “I still think you should have taken a break. I thought about ordering you to do it. We’ve all missed a beautiful summer.”

His acting supervisor rested his hip against the counter, sipping his glass.

Kylo mirrored him, stepping forward to lean next to him. “I’m going to. In September or October, I’ll go stay with my parents. When Rey...when Rey has gone back to school.” Fighting an urge to fidget, Kylo focused on the weight of the wine in his left hand. “She still won’t talk to me, Owen.
I’ve sent her letters, like I used to do, and Leia says she never opens them. She has to find them in the trash. I try to text her but she doesn’t answer. I’m still in the dark and it’s frustrating.”

A heavy sigh left the other man’s mouth and he reached over, putting a hand on his arm. “Give her more time, Kylo. Keep...keep doing what you’ve been doing and she will see that.”

He knew he was feeling more like himself when he had started arguing with his father more than begging to be held by him. The change had come in early July, when he could fall asleep without overworking himself, drinking too much, or taking a sleeping pill. There were still dreams that bled into nightmares, swirling eyes and faces that lingered in the early morning. But those visions meant that he slept. There were also times when he’d narrow his eyes and almost snap at Erso when he got cold, distant, or just annoying with a line of thinking or questioning.

And there were also times when he’d have to fight from hurting himself for not missing Grey more. There was a hole within him that would never be filled again but could heal with time. The regret flowed underneath the grief; flashes of a tilted head or the hint of a smile made both burn harder. He couldn’t go to Rey without creating more damage. And Grey was fading into painful memories.

“What are you thinking about?” Owen asked.

“Gregor,” he answered, without thinking. “If I had just stayed away from him...he would still be alive. And Rey wouldn’t have a stronger reason to hate me other than just being me.”

Dropping his eyes to the floor, Owen exhaled. “We don’t...we can’t be certain of that. Even before the spring, everyone read more into your relationship than was there. And even though you didn’t listen to me and I was upset, I think you have every right to still miss and mourn him. He was a complicated person. You are as well. That leads to complex problems.” Owen slowly looked at him, his eyes softening. “And, like I said, let Rey have time to work through her thoughts. And take the time you need as well. If you can find a way to come together again, then I don’t think you’ll ever let one another go. But if you can’t be the strength she needs, and she can’t be yours, then…”

“I know,” he interjected, finishing his glass. “I need a refill. We should get back to the others.”

Kylo left him behind, re-joining the other men in the living room.

There were some truths he wasn’t ready to hear yet.

He flicked his eyes to George as he filled his glass from the bottle on the coffee table and motioned with him to follow him upstairs. He didn’t know what the older man said to his father or Dr. Erso, but he knew he was behind him.

“I don’t want you to go to North Carolina,” Kylo finally said. He leaned against the railing that overlooked the living room for a moment before he kept going down the hall. He picked the room that Grey always used and sat down on the bed. “That’s so selfish of me to say and I’m sorry but I don’t want you to go.”

“It’s not selfish to say what you’re thinking. It’s only selfish not to be able to accept that things aren’t going to be how you want them to be.” Sitting beside him, George took a long drink of red wine. “And I know you feel that way. I don’t blame you but I have an obligation to my family. I’m still on compassionate leave. I’ve been able to help you over the phone before. And I will only be a phone call away.”
“Are you…are you going to come back?” He blinked back tears, feeling like the child he was.

“I was going to retire one day, Kylo. Maybe this is the push I needed. But I’m not selling my house tomorrow and moving forever; you can stop that irrational line of thinking. This will be…until they think I’m ready to come back. And I’ve given them enough excuses over the years to keep me from my position. You can ask Owen after three or four more glasses.” George looked around the room and a quiet smile touched the edges of his lips. “And I feel him here too.”

Dropping his head, Kylo gripped his glass. “Owen thinks I wasn’t ready to come back. I can see it in his eyes.”

Snorting, George shook his head. “I can’t say I agree or disagree with him. You were cleared by OPR. You look more energized when you have been working. When we talk about cases, I can see a difference. Owen sees that too. He is going to give you the chance you need. Just be steady. And continue learning to tolerate your new partner.”

It was Kylo’s turn to scoff. “Yeah, that’s another problem I don’t want to think about. He just stares at me sometimes. I don’t know how I’ll be able to deal with that when I’m here alone.”

“Well,” George said before sighing. “One step at a time.”

Staring off at the open doorway, Kylo forced himself to nod. “It will get better, won’t it?”

George found the same spot with his own eyes and sighed. “It will have to.”

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“Sometimes I think you live here, Agent Solo.”

Kylo turned from his computer to the voice over his shoulder. He managed a slight upturn of his lips at the other agent before lifting his coffee cup. “I would if they’d let me.”

Watching Erso take the desk across from him almost felt normal by now. It hurt more to lift his head and see Owen in George’s office than sit across from the other agent. But that was another almost.

September was nearly over. Another month had slipped by.

With no movement on the major case, they were working on other things; the world never stopped just because he wanted it to. The couple of times they’d been on the road together had been stiff but Kylo told himself that, like everything else, it would take time. And it was mostly his fault.

Kylo turned back to his computer, still watching him from the corner of his eye. He clicked through the report on a serial rapist in Oklahoma operating on a college campus as Erso organized his desk. He had a routine every morning of where he put his pens and notebooks. Whatever case files he’d taken home the night before would be stacked neatly. Kylo was tidy out of necessity: his mind would scream at him otherwise. Erso was neat to a point of rigidity.

Sighing, he left to get more coffee. He had taken two steps before he paused. “Do you want anything?”
Erso quirked his head. “Tea. If you would be so kind.”

Kylo nodded before he could read more into the look, making his way to the closest break room. He’d been in there only a half an hour ago to turn the machine on. Filling his own cup first, he watched the kettle start to boil as he fiddled with a teabag, lost in what it used to mean only a short time ago. Rey’s teas still lined a shelf in his pantry.

It gave him a few moments to drift.

He didn’t really think of himself as being numb anymore, but some days did feel like he only just existed. He hadn’t spent the summer wallowing, not like it had been eight years ago. The parallels stopped when he was picked up off of the kitchen floor. Work held a different focus than school. There was no graduation point to tie himself to, no checklist on the fridge. It was about finding a routine, one that wasn’t overly stressful. And when he did feel overworked, he had to find healthy ways of managing it. Maz, her face always showing a flash of hurt whenever he mentioned Rey, brought him back to why he needed to get back to things that had helped before. Writing. Exercising. Spending time with the people he cared about. Telling her about the two times he’d broken down and drove out to sit by Grey’s grave had made her flinch again. She emphasized again that it was better to write to him than try to go to him. Kylo knew that it was just a body there, not really his friend. And still, in those desperate moments, he wanted to be close to him again because he was fighting the urge to go and confront Rey. He needed answers and she remained silent to him. He’d still get calls from campus security every week, telling him that she was fine and nothing had happened. He clung to those conversations, knowing that she was at least safe.

She’d pulled back from his parents, the people who’d cared for her for fifteen years.

Thoughts like that would make him start to spiral but he would pour it into a notebook rather than hurting himself. The long sleeves had to stay on for a little while longer but new marks had not appeared. Step by step, it would get further away.

As long as the man who occupied the desk across from him kept his mouth shut.

Returning to his workstation, he put the mug over the short barrier between them. “There was no lemon in the fridge.”

It felt good to see a flash of surprise on the other man’s face. “You must be feeling better if you’ve been so observant. And I can live without it. Did you sleep well last night?”

“I slept,” he answered, sitting down. He chided himself again and forced an easier tone. “But I haven’t had a nightmare all week. So, there’s that.”

Erso took the mug, lightly blowing on it. “Tell me again about the latest one again.”

Kylo’s eyes flicked around the room, taking in the arrival of the rest of their colleagues. The lamp was on in Owen’s office so he had clearly arrived earlier and was elsewhere in the building or in one of the neighbouring ones. “I’m in the basement, and I know it’s Snoke’s even if it doesn’t look like it. It feels like it: the dirt, the grime, the smell. He isn’t there but I know he’s watching me. And the only way out is to dig and my fingers disintegrate but I keep going. I can feel them falling to pieces, the skin, the bones. But I start hitting the bodies along the way. Poe is in the dirt and I have to dig through him. I have to put my broken hands through him. Then, I see Grey and I have to keep going. I can feel their insides and I see myself tearing them up, ripping through them. And I wake up when I find Rey dead in the dirt, before I can start putting my hands through her.”
“Have you given further thought to what it means?”

Kylo shrugged. “It’s every life I’ve ruined. And my subconscious dealing with it and the regrets I have.”

“I’d say that’s very spot on.” Erso raised his eyebrows, putting his mind at ease with simple words. “I’ve sent over the partial profile of our serial rapist friend for you to look at. Please tell me what you think.”

Nodding, Kylo could get the dryness out of his mouth by drinking his coffee and the echoes of the dream out of his head by looking over the report.

Owen knocked on his desk fifteen minutes later, pointing at them both and then the office he still occupied. “He’s escalated. I need to brief the two of you before you head out.”

No matter how he tried, he never could break the habit of following a pace behind Erso. When he’d move with Owen or George, they’d be in step. That part could be better too. Whatever his next performance evaluation looked like, he had to get the teamwork aspect improved through brute force if he had to.

The least Owen could do was be more consistent with his shoes. They were different every day of the week. Sitting behind his desk, the senior agent slid over the police report. “They found the body this morning and knew we were looking at it for a consult.”

He let Erso take it. He’d written more of the profile at that point; Kylo had just stared at faces and names. Kylo folded his hands as the other agent started speaking. “I didn’t see him escalating so quickly. There was an increase at the start of the semester, but that was to be expected. I didn’t think he’d go outside of his comfort zone this fast. He also usually keeps to the weekends. This was on a Wednesday night. It could be another stressor, not related to our victim.”

“It breaks those patterns,” Kylo added, eyeing the man as he felt forced to complete his sentence. But he swallowed it down. This type of flow had to come between them at some point. “Do we even know it’s the same guy? He must have…when he started the assaults he was one type of unsub but now he’s another with a killing. We need to look through both the victims and potential suspects. If it’s even the same guy.” He was still so unsure of himself when it came to describing an evolution of an unsub. He had hoped that Erso would have said more rather than leaving it up to him.

Sighing, Owen sat back. “From what we can tell, it was a similar knife to the one the other girls described, and she was probably drugged with the same thing. We’ll know more once the autopsy is complete, but it looks like it’s consistent with a jagged edge. We’ll know more when the blood results are in when it comes to the drug. And it is within the geographical profile. I don’t want this to go any further and neither do the locals. It could be the start of a spree or there was something particular about the victim. We need to look at both angles. And get some justice for the other survivors.” Owen looked at him with raised eyebrows and Kylo nodded, knowing the look. It had been a good week—and good meant nothing had happened. “You’re heading out later this afternoon. Hopefully, by the time you get there, we’ll have more forensics to go on.”

It was go-time again. And it would be satisfying not to be sitting alone in his empty house for another night. Wrapping up some of his loose thoughts about other things, he started rolling through the routine of falling into a new case. He had hoped when the case started floating around on their radar that the suspect wouldn’t escalate. Or that the locals could get it under control. He’d known for a long time he would have to deal with sexual assault and rape cases. The training had been comprehensive but he had been chided initially for being not empathetic enough in interview
training. And when he’d changed his strategy, they said he connected too much with them. Even when he was clear-headed he had trouble finding the balance.

He absently looked at his phone, scrolling through his texts with Rey and then those with Grey again, taking five minutes to himself before he had to leave.

“Do you want to take my car or your car this time?” Erso asked when they were in the elevator, the morning finally gone.

“Whatever is easiest.” Kylo hoped that the other man understood his tone. The last two times they’d been called out, Kylo had driven to the airport. And that had meant discomfort upon returning. Even if he’d been awkward around Owen in the office, Kylo still hoped his partner would volunteer his car. He was growing to hate having him near or in his vehicle. There were too many things for him to look at and ask him about.

A memory of helping George sell Grey’s car darted across his mind and he shook it off. Someone would have to deal with that awful bumper sticker.

“Then we’ll take mine. I’m in the west lot. I’ll meet you there.”

Thankful for the few moments alone to get his go bag, Kylo put his hands firmly on the trunk of his car after he shut it. The last time they’d left Virginia it was just for a consultation on a cold case. And the time before that it had been to question a suspect in an arson-homicide. Owen was easing them into it. Okay, he was easing him into it. And challenging him at the same time with a case like this.

Okay.

One step at a time.

On the plane, he started zoning out, discussing which girl to talk to first, to go over some of the questions the locals missed and confirming if they were getting support or not. He started thinking about the last times he flew when it wasn’t for work and was drawn into the distant memory of coming down from distress, sitting across from Grey in the brightly lit airport cafe. He still had the sensations of Rey’s body against his while being nudged by his friend’s foot. Both of their smiles overlapped into one and he sucked in a sudden breath.

A long pause stretched on before Erso sighed lightly, closing the file and forcing Kylo to look at him. “Did I say something wrong?”

He quickly cleared his throat. “No, I was...distracted for a moment.”

After tucking the folder into his bag, Erso leaned back. “May I ask what about?”

He wished he could put on his headphones and ignore him but that wasn’t what he was supposed to do. “You already know who haunts my head these days. Take a wild guess.”

Smirking, the other agent folded his arms. “The dark-haired man and the bright-eyed girl. One of whom I met only once and the other who I spent an afternoon with while she was traumatized. I have enjoyed getting to know them when you tell me things about them through your eyes, but I can understand why they still trouble you. Have you spoken to her yet?”

“No.” He sat back, gripping the armrests. “But I know she’s going to school. I could follow her phone if I wanted but I won’t do that. I used to...” He paused, trying to wade through how he used
to think and wondered if he’d really changed. “I have had intrusive thoughts in the past that turned out to be right. It’s been years and I’m still working on untangling the coincidence of me being controlling, having favourite people, and someone actually out to get us. I just want...I’d like to talk to her. To hear her voice.”

To hug her. To run his hand down her arm. To see her smile and hear her laugh. To watch her put her hair up in a ponytail and tilt her head at him, wondering what he was thinking.

Erso shifted his hands to his lap and his eyes narrowed for a moment before he sat back. “The bond you have is extraordinary. The way you described it in your journal, I’m still very curious about the blinking language. But I’ll save that for another time. She’s shut you out before, you’ve said. Is it different this time now that you’ve been intimate together?”

He rolled his eyes, almost snorting. “I don’t know. I honestly don’t know. Maybe if she hadn't kissed me, wanted to be with me, we’d still be in the same place anyway. She said…” Kylo sat up, putting his hands on his knees, gripping them hard. “She asked again if I was gay. I thought I’d gotten that through to her, that she really understood. I really don’t get why that has to be a problem. The jealousy of me being with other people, yeah, that’s fair. More than fair, given how I act. That’s a real emotion that I’ve felt before. I was sharing something so personal with someone who wasn’t her. But that part bothers me. Rey hates the two men I’ve slept with. And even after the one other woman I’ve been with pushed me into an impossible situation, Rey still went and talked to her again. She couldn’t forgive Poe or Grey but Liza... I’ve tried to read studies about this but I can’t really find a reason that fits the circumstances.”

In their time together as partners, he’d never said that much to the other man before in one sitting. And for once, Kylo didn’t want to take it back. Even if all it earned him was another weird look.

Erso pursed his lips, tilting his head for a moment. “That’s...interesting.”

“What?” Kylo felt annoyance instantly wash away any of the comfort he’d felt from speaking so much about what he held inside. “For once, all you can say is just interesting?”

“No, don’t take it that way. Have you checked in on this other woman? Why were your two male sexual partners more important than the female?” Erso kept his eyes steady, even as Kylo shifted his weight, taking in the thought.

“When...when we found Grey, I called her. Even in all that chaos, I was...I was worried about her too. We don’t get along at all and I still thought about her. It’s like I was thinking about everyone else but Rey. Liza started talking about some sculpture she’s making and how’s she engaged and I hung up on her. But we sent a car to her place. And there’s been nothing suspicious.” Blinking, he swallowed before reaching for the bottle of water in the seat pocket in front of him. “He’s only killed men and boys. It’s only been the two...attacks on Rey that have shown he has any interest in women. I don’t see a sexual component. But we couldn’t get much from the bodies. So I’m probably wrong about that.”

Erso turned, blankly staring at the seatback in front of him. “For someone who has shown he is such a proficient killer, can we really call them attacks? And I don’t mean to correct you, but using a knife, in some circles, indicates a sexual component.”

Kylo had to nod, sipping his water. “We can...we can look over those parts of the profile when we’re done with this. Maybe now that I don’t hate you, we’ll be able to work through more of the thoughts that we both have. And now that I’m more,” another drink, “now that I’ve lost her and I’m not just walking around thinking that I’ll lose her, I might be more focused.”
“Well,” Erso replied. “The latter part is unfortunate, but the former I’m happy to hear.”

They locked eyes for a moment that seemed to stretch on for an eternity. Kylo liked to think that he could read people, feel what they were thinking or reacting to. There were times that he could pick up on small things, both through experience and through training, but the man sitting next to him appeared indecipherable at times.

And he stayed that way after they landed and got to the hotel. Even discussing the details of the case and arranging meetings for the next morning, the other agent kept shifting his eyes towards random things. By the time they ate dinner, Kylo was sure that he’d figured it out. He was dropping into other thoughts. Kylo realized that must be how he looked when he was spacing out. Whatever was going on in his head, it must have been more interesting than talking about what they were there to work on. And since he was the same, Kylo couldn’t even get angry with him.

Sleeping in the same room made them both more exposed. Erso had already seen the worst of him so he had to swallow his agitation when it came to the sweep of eyes over his bare legs and arms when he’d changed for bed into shorts and a t-shirt. Instead, he just scratched at the scar on his arm and shrugged before getting into bed. Hopefully, soon, he could pass it off as the old wound. Or maybe, at least outside of the office, people could mind their own fucking business.

Kylo kept glancing up from writing in his journal, studying what the other man was wearing. How he had his legs crossed in black sweatpants as he read through the case file again. When he reached for his phone, Kylo’s eyes flicked away, back to putting the thoughts he was processing into words. He never expected him to sleep in something so simple. Sweatpants and a t-shirt.

By morning they would have an autopsy. And it would be a long day.

After they’d said goodnight, and Kylo was sure the other man was asleep, he quietly hid the journal he’d been writing in under the mattress.

The trust issues could remain for a little while longer.

He managed to make it through the night without anything disturbing his sleep. It felt foreign to be well-rested on the road, to want to eat and make conversation over breakfast.

“How long have you been married?” Kylo asked, breaking the flow of talk about the case as he shredded a piece of bread with his hands.

Erso stopped to sip his tea and then sighed. “God. Almost twenty-five years. I don’t think I needed a reminder of my age so early in the morning.”

Kylo almost apologized but snorted away the feeling. “What does she do?” Was all small talk, all this getting to know a person, always so frustrating?

“She’s a medical doctor. We are based in California but she manages many charity missions to Africa, to provide aid through Médecins Sans Frontières. It’s been…a bit of the relief that she’s been away overseas since I’ve been here.” He drank from his cup again before raising his eyebrows. “Are you practicing again? Trying to ask more questions of others?”

A spark of aggravation had to be extinguished instantly and he blushed instead, dropping his head. “I’m…I’m better at questioning suspects than I am at…this.”

“Ah, well,” Erso started, turning his nearly empty cup in his hand, a dull squeak rising from the wooden surface. “You were isolated and held captive for seven years, seven very valuable years of development. I know I’m not telling you anything new here, but it’s worth hearing again. Despite
all of your setbacks, you’re still here. Many other people would have given up or taken an easier road to have a happy life.”

Scratching his eyebrow, Kylo stared at the way the mug twisted in the other man’s hands. “Maybe all I want is self-destruction. I’m always setting myself up to fail. My first…” He rolled his eyes at himself. “With my first boyfriend, I had no idea we were dating when I should have realized something else was there with how I felt about him. I attacked his father because I didn’t know where to place my rage. Even from the start, I was isolating him.”

“This was the boy from the journal?” Erso raised an eyebrow and his hand stilled. “Kylo, I know I’ve apologized for reading something so personal so many times…”

“No, I…” Kylo swallowed. “No. It’s part of the case.”

“I’ve been meaning to tell you that you can have it back, if you’d like. We’ve analyzed it. We have copies. I can imagine that you’d like to have a complete collection.” The agent tapped the table, getting his attention as he drifted into the empty space on his shelf. “And I believe it’s time we go and meet with our detective to begin our consultation.”

Kylo was thankful for the distraction of getting in the car and driving to settle his thoughts. Switching his brain into the mode of investigating someone who wasn’t himself, or trying and failing to keep a conversation about someone other than himself, was an instant reprieve. He was looking at a new town through the passenger window of another rental car. He was taking in how the police station looked and was organized when they arrived. Whether or not they were well staffed and well funded. Whether or not they were welcomed with respect or annoyance. These things were routine. There was comfort there.

Nineteen rapes by knifepoint in the last six months. In September alone there had been seven, including the most recent one.

As he watched Erso drive, he quietly started questioning why the other agent didn’t anticipate further escalation.

He had to hide a slight grimace at arriving at a college campus and entering another dorm building.

Owen was really throwing him into the fire here.

Walking through the compact crime scene, Kylo started watching Erso more than he was looking for evidence. It was a small dorm room. There were other people there, photographing and combing through things left over from the previous morning. She was twenty. A chemistry major. No roommate, like the others. He was watching his partner more than dipping into her life and had to stop from being preoccupied. A murder victim had no right to privacy but the living could be afforded some.

And just by glancing at the blood evidence, and hearing the dull thud of music from one floor up, he could make his mind up.

Stepping back into the hall, leaving the forensics team to finish their work, Kylo slipped off the protective coverings from his shoes and looked from his partner to the detective who had guided them there. “She was unconscious when he killed her. She didn’t fight back or scream. That’s the thing that stands out from the others.”

Whatever he was drugging them with, he’d given her too much. Kylo held onto that thought for the moment, knowing it was something he’d have to talk to Erso about when they sat down and put the
pieces together later.

Even while Detective Brass was processing the words, he caught the nod of agreement from Erso. “I agree. What have you heard from the other students on the floor? What did they see? Or hear? The brief was not very detailed.”

Folding his arms, the middle-aged detective only shook his head when the older agent spoke. Kylo stood up straighter, staring down at the shorter, bearded man. “The girl next door heard her come home around 2 a.m. The door opened and closed loudly once that she can remember. The girl across the hall had the same story. She didn’t hear any male voices. We haven’t found anything on the cameras about when she got home. We haven’t spotted her yet so it’s hard to tell if he came in with her because all of the kids look the same when they’re stumbling home.”

Stepping away from the two men, Kylo studied the hallway. Echoes of leaving Rey’s room made him pause for a moment before he sighed. “He’s going to look like he fits in. We’re not going to find anything suspicious on the cameras.”

Erso briefly narrowed his eyes at him before tilting his head. “What do you mean, Agent Solo?”

Again, he had to shudder away a wince. “Look at me. How I’m dressed right now, I don’t fit in. But if I’m not wearing the jacket or the tie and my hair is messed up, nobody looks twice at me. I look like a TA or a grad student. But I don’t look any different. You still get offered a student discount and you can get it if you have ID.”

Brass eyed him and then turned to Erso, making Kylo’s shoulders stiffen again. “So, do you think we are looking at a student? The rapes in the housing that aren’t the dorms had us leaning away from that angle. He could still be coming in from outside of the area.”

“He might not be a student, but he looks like one.” Erso’s eyes flicked from the detective back to him. “And I believe my partner had the idea, Detective Brass. And you should be addressing him.”

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Back in the car, Kylo let himself punch the dashboard once. “Why was he being so impossible with me?”

They’d interviewed five of the girls in and near the dorms the rest of the afternoon, all with Brass interrupting or openly ignoring him. Kylo had to work hard to place himself in the moment and not give in to frustration but it felt insufferable at times when Brass would clear his throat in the middle of a question or click his tongue and break Kylo’s concentration. He had to think about the girls; no, young women. The rest of them called them girls and he had to think otherwise. They’d all been drunk or high, coming home from a bar or party, waking up suddenly with him on top of them and a knife to their throats. They weren’t able to put together a clear description. Other than him being white and looking young enough to fit in on campus, or be a student, Kylo was beginning to understand why the locals couldn’t do anything with minimal or no forensics. He wore gloves and a condom. He didn’t leave hair behind; he was a non-secretor so they got nothing from the rape kits. The only consistency between all of the attacks was the knife. The girls remembered the blade more than they remembered him.

“You’re unfortunately young,” Erso answered as he settled into the driver’s seat. “Or fortunately, if
you look at it from another perspective.”

Rubbing his knuckles, Kylo gave himself a moment to sulk, dropping lower in his seat. They were sealed together by the secret from June. He’d been resisting being himself around him since *March* and then, with June, something had started to break within him. They were minor fractures at first, held back by mistrust. Then dad left. Then George left. And Owen had more to do. Hux and Paige had two kids and no time. And Rey had left him facing the void alone, driving the hurt she felt deeper inside of him with every passing day. It was overwhelming to only feel pain when he thought about her when there had used to be comfort.

And Grey was still dead.

He couldn’t start falling again and shook himself from the spiral.

“This is why I get my fucking suits tailored and dry cleaned. And I thought having this fucking scar would help me getting respect. Instead, I just get this.” Rubbing his eyes he sat up and adjusted his coat sleeves. Clearing his throat, he looked over. “I’m sorry. I’m not…I’m not supposed to get frustrated by things like this so easily.”

Again, there was a flash of caring from the other man. And it vanished just as quickly. “You’re only human, Agent Solo. And I tried to correct the detective as best I could. There is no lead on this investigation. We were brought in to help. There’s no excuse for how that man was acting. We need to work with him but we can offer to question the rest of the victims on our own.”

Shrugging, Kylo had to agree. Whatever made things easier.

There were only two other survivors left on campus. The others had returned home, recovering with their parents and families. There would have to be phone calls to the others, but that could wait until they were back at the station.

And even though Brass wasn’t with them when they knocked on the girl’s apartment door, he was met with another diversion.

For a flashing second, he was certain that Rey was the one standing on the other side of the threshold, clutching a stuffed purple elephant.

The shape of her nose. The colour of her eyes. The way she stepped back to look up at him. How her hair fell at her shoulders. The room behind her distorted, twisting into a hazy mixture of his parents’ home, his house, and Snoke’s basement as he took her in.

If he could just reach out, he could hold her. She’d be safe in his arms and everything would feel complete again. It was a breath away and…

A hand on his shoulder knocked him back into the moment.

“Beverly, thank you for meeting us. We’re Agents Erso and Solo from the FBI. May we come inside?” The other agent’s voice and hand started to ground him and he realized he was standing there, staring with his mouth open and he snapped it shut. “We only have a few questions that may seem hard at first, but we’re really here to help you.”

He managed to nod, trying to get his mind to keep moving.

“I guess so,” Beverly spoke and the aura of Rey started to fade. This was a different young woman. She had her own story and personality; she was a unique individual who only bore a superficial resemblance. He had to look away from that.
Because she’d been brutally attacked.

Okay.

He needed to calm his heart and follow the interview procedure. There were always things he could fall back to when the room turned hazy.

“...we got the text that someone else had been attacked. But I didn’t know she died.” Beverly’s voice guided him from where he’d wandered. He’d been looking out the fourth-story window of her small kitchen. From the outside, it didn’t look like he could have climbed up. He must have just come in the front door. But there was no forced entry.

“I’m sorry you have to hear it from us, Beverly,” Erso answered, sitting across from her in the tidy living room. Pictures of friends and family lined the walls, textbooks on the bookshelves, posters of African animals...He was looking at everything but her. “But we’d like to talk to you about what happened to you. If there’s anything new that you remember since the last time you spoke to the police. Retelling a story can help you get further away from it.”

Kylo caught her eyes and had to sit down and put his focus on his partner.

“It’s still...” she started, then paused. “It’s still the same. I have the same nightmare every night and I’m tired of remembering it. I’m only here because I have nowhere else to go and no one to talk to. I tried to talk to my friends and they got tired of me when all I could do was cry. Some of them...some of them told me to get over it. Like it was something easy to do. I’m failing everything right now and I’m going to lose my scholarship...I’m just so tired. I’m tired of being alive.”

Slowly, Kylo looked at her again, still struck by the similarities. But he also spotted how she tugged the sleeves of her sweater down. “It’s hard to get something out of your head when you feel like you can’t talk about it. And it hurts even more when you try to talk about it and no one listens.”

She hugged her stuffed animal again, slinking down more on the couch. All he wanted to do was reach out and put his arms around her. “It’s so...lonely. I feel so empty, like I’m not me anymore. Even when I talked to the cops, it’s like they didn’t really care. They kept asking me how much I had to drink and what I was wearing. And what time I got home and why I was too drunk to realize someone was following me. Why I didn’t lock the door. Why I can’t remember his face. It’s like it was my fault. They kept blaming me for not listening to the warnings the college put out.”

“They were looking for facts. And no feelings,” Erso said. “We’re here to walk you through this. If you want to talk to us.”

But her eyes stayed on him, soft golden-brown orbs shimmering, almost pleading for help.

“We’re here to listen to your feelings, Beverly. The good and the bad ones,” Kylo added, tilting his head and leaning forward. “Not just so we can find out who did this, but to start helping you feel better.” He took a quick glance at Erso, hoping he understood what he was asking. He got a small glare of caution before his eyes softened and he nodded. Slowly, Kylo removed his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. Beverly sat back at the sight of his forearms, staring hard before she looked him in the eyes again as Kylo spoke. “I’ve...I’ve also felt like I’m tired of being alive because of the things I’ve been through. But I’ve found people who want to listen to me. And reasons to get better and keep going. There are still good sides to life even if we feel like all we have inside of us is darkness.”
She glanced down at the animal she was holding, gripping it for a moment, before she nodded.

Even though her lip was trembling when she started speaking, Kylo listened to her voice grow firmer and more certain over time.

And he listened to every word.

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“Are you planning on making a habit out of this?”

Kylo was sitting on the balcony to their hotel room with a cigarette, a glass of wine, and his notes. Glancing over his shoulder at the other agent, he shrugged, trying to swallow another dose of irritation. “I guess it depends on how long we’re here.”

Taking the empty patio chair beside him, Erso put his own glass down on the metal table. “I don’t think we will be here long enough for that to happen. Have you spotted the pattern yet?”

“I’m working towards it. So I have to start with the survivors.” Kylo raised his eyebrows and sipped his glass. “They’re all young women in separate worlds. They don’t have common classes with one another. Few of them are in clubs. He fits in here but isn’t a student. The cops are looking in the wrong place by going through class lists and we need to fix that. He’s…hunting when they’re out. We have five of them leaving different parties from the same area and another five leaving the bars on the same street. He always goes back to what he knows because it works. He sees an opportunity and he takes it, but he’s planned in advance. He has a kit. He drugs them and they don’t remember it, but he must have spoken to them to know they didn’t have a roommate waiting for them at home. We’ve seen that with so many other…rapists. And the cops here didn’t want to do anything until someone died.”

He flicked the ash of the end of his cigarette and crossed his legs, waiting for the other man to reply. Blinking for a moment, he nudged the package on the table in his direction while he kept his eyes on the street below. He’d spent so many nights on the balcony with Hux, looking down into the darkness and smoking until it stained his hands, just trying to piece himself back together.

“I agree with all of that. I also think you did well today. There were a few moments when you were distracted but those can be overlooked.” Erso spoke as he took a cigarette and lit it, leaning back.

“You worked through the issue with Brass and then spoke very openly with Beverly and she responded well to that. We are closer to having a complete profile now. I’d say you deserve your little balcony ritual right now.”

Smirking, Kylo lifted his chin. “I knew that they partnered you with me to watch me, but you don’t have to rub it in my face.”

“I was the one who volunteered so I wouldn’t think of it that way. It was a chance for a change of scenery for me,” he said, flicking the ash from the tip of his cigarette. “And I’ve enjoyed getting to know you. It hasn’t all been bad.”

Kylo snorted. “You had to walk into my house and find me passed out on the floor in a pool of my own blood. And then you had to watch me have a breakdown during my friend’s funeral. That’s pretty bad.”
“Sometimes bonds forged during tragedy are the strongest.” The other agent raised his eyebrows, almost smirking. “Think about the one you share with SSA Jinn. Or your deep connection Rey.”

Kylo just stared at him. “I’m glad you saw the similarities too. I thought I was hallucinating.”

He licked his lips. “They were hard to miss. And your reaction was fairly…obvious when you were speaking to her.”

Sighing, Kylo studied the bit of scar tissue that peeked out from beneath his shirtsleeve. “Rey told me that I never listened to her. I know I tried but sometimes things just came out wrong. We used to share everything but then I had to teach her that sometimes you have to lie so…people don’t get hurt. I don’t know why I wanted to keep so many secrets. Poe never wanted me to lie and I did it anyway. And Grey was the same. They both must have thought I was ashamed of them but I wasn’t. I just wanted things to be easier. And that hurt everyone.” He paused, rubbing a small circle on his wrist. “The only place I can see them now is in my dreams. I’m going to forget how they sound one day. And then they’ll really be gone.”

“No one’s ever really gone.” Erso’s voice sounded distant, making Kylo look up. The other man took a deep breath and Kylo watched his face change. “A long time ago, when I was a boy, my father murdered my mother and escaped with me to another country. I was four at the time and didn’t realize what was happening. I was just a boy, filled with wonder for my father. He told me we were on vacation. We would change locations every time someone got closer to finding him. He made the only consistency in my life be him. There were many happy moments but I never realized he had my mother in the trunk of the car. And then he finally abandoned me at a train station when I was about five. I was too much of a burden for him in the end.”

“Did…” Kylo started then paused to glance at the dark horizon peeking out from between the buildings. “Did they ever find him?”

“Yes,” Erso answered flatly before lifting his wine glass to his lips. “And then I was an orphan. I went to live with my mother’s parents. And they didn’t want me either. I was too much trouble with too many issues, believe it or not. I was sent away to school and that was my home until I became an adult and could make my own decisions. That was a long time ago but, like you, I go back to it. And I still think that a father has a certain duty to his children. They don’t have to be perfect, but they should never harm them. And the ultimate damage is when a child is left alone in the world by the man he or she should trust the most.”

Exhaling, he nodded before reaching out to put a light hand on the other man’s back, withdrawing as quickly as he’d extended it. “I think…I think I understand your interest in the Snoke case now.”

Turning, Erso eyed his arm as he retracted it before tilting his head to study him. “It was fairly easy to empathize with what you went through. No one person has identical feelings but there can be moments when we can see through one another’s eyes. Past experiences give us that opportunity. You did that today when you helped that young woman start to find a path to healing. You heard her voice and put yourself into her feelings. Your own assault and trauma may lead to problems in your personal life but those can be very helpful in your professional life. It was another reason I pushed for the Bureau to accept your application. Although Agent Kenobi and I rarely see eye to eye, we agreed on that point.”

Kylo held his thoughts for a moment before he exhaled, swallowing down how it was becoming clearer how he’d never deserved to be there in the first place. But still, he was there. And he had to keep fighting: for Poe, Grey, and Rey. George had always believed him. He couldn’t start doubting him now. “They don’t like it when I overextend myself. And now that work is all I have…it’s been hard. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night and wander into the room where Rey used to
sleep when she was younger. I imagine that she’s there, drawing or painting. She wants to talk to me and I can tell exactly how she’s feeling by what she’s creating. I don’t know when I stopped being able to see that. Other nights, I go to the room where Grey used to spend a lot of his time. I keep expecting him to be flipping through some book I forgot I owned and him looking up at me with some strange rant he’d been building in his mind. And him just talking for a solid hour.” Smirking, he shook his head, drifting off into a type of conversation that would never happen again. “He’d only stop when I told him to shut the fuck up.”

Looking out at the night, in the silence that his words left them, he was sure that somewhere in the distance, he could still hear a wind chime.

Closing his eyes, he tried to accept that it was only in his head.

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After another three days, they’d narrowed down this suspect pool, quickly finding the gaps in the locals’ investigation and filling them with their observations. There hadn’t been any hairs found at the scenes because he shaved himself. The thought struck him in the middle of the night of the second full day. It was almost liberating to wake up Erso with an idea rather than a nightmare. The similar stories from all of the victims, and the evidence given through the story of the final woman’s death, all started to come together in his head. He was a hunter who didn’t want to be found, stalking his prey and then taking what he wanted. It was a ritual. All of the attacks were identical. He had a routine that he needed to follow. The last attack falling outside of those lines still bothered him but at least they could start there.

They were looking for a man with no hair.

He fiddled with his university sweatshirt and adjusted the hood, keeping his head down. “Anybody look good?”

Glancing askance at the entrance to the bar across the street, he absently sipped at his empty coffee cup as he waited for the reply in his earpiece.

He glanced around before looking at the textbook he’d brought with him, highlighting something in the used history reader that he’d picked up used that morning. The other students hadn’t looked at him twice, too focused on their own work. Good.

“We have two possible,” came the scratchy reply of the cop inside. “Have you spotted anything?”

Sitting back, he closed the cover of the book and crossed his arms. He picked up his phone and brought it to his other ear. Standing, he left the table with his book in his other hand.

“One guy in a hat, couldn’t tell.” He slipped outside and put the textbook under his arm. He squatted down, lighting up a cigarette and putting the tomb on the ground. “Do you see him inside? Black hat, yellow triangle logo? Approximately six feet. Black sweatshirt, dark jeans.”

“I’ve got eyes,” came the officer’s voice on the other end. “That gives us three. We’re watching them.”

He’d wanted to be on the inside of the bar too but instead he was dealt the task of being more mobile. Pressing his finger to his ear again, he sighed. “I’m heading over to the other site to check
in there.”

The cops had run other stakeouts, watching these same bars before, but without a depiction of a suspect built from a profile and the lack of evidence, they’d just been following random guys who looked sketchy. This guy fit in enough to slip through their fingers. That was the problem. Monsters always hid in plain sight. And now he knew what he was looking for.

It bothered him that he couldn’t get his real thoughts out as he walked to the next bar. He could already hear the different music from down the block, clashing in the night. It could be any street near any college campus in the country. The faces and the actions were identical. But something about the woman who the suspect would be looking for this weekend would be important to him. He’d be looking for a weakness that wasn’t just impairment. He’d been piecing it together since talking to all of the survivors and, unfortunately, about himself. Whatever had drawn his killer to him had been a flaw that he had kept hidden under the surface, not even realizing what it was. He hadn’t figured out what it was yet but it would have to come to him in order to find who was hunting his loved ones and other innocent victims. But whoever had been stalking them over eight years ago and had been following them again in the spring, saw something that most people couldn’t see. Hell, he was still fucking blind to it himself. His killer was able to find the others he’d murdered through the same means. How could he pick someone and know he’d be able to kill him without anyone noticing until it counted?

It was all about being in another person’s shoes. Lowering his shoulders, Kylo tried to walk without purpose. He glanced at his phone, pretending that he was waiting for someone, as he thought about how he’d pick someone in order to get into the other man’s head. This monster had got a taste in the middle of the week so he wouldn’t be overeager; or, he’d be almost in a frenzy, less careful and about to make a mistake. He’d slit the last girl’s throat. The first time that blood is spilled, the savoury rush of power that taking a life gives one, would be more what he’d be thinking about. Kylo had tasted that rush too. He’d wrapped his hands around Snoke’s throat until they cramped and then he threw all of his fury into his fists and left a bloody, gaping hole where the monster’s face had been. The gratification of the moment was buried underneath the ache of the last fifteen years. But there was a demon within him too. It had come out when he was first screaming at Rey in his bedroom, then in the kitchen, before he used grandma’s china to carve up his arm.

And now he had to let that part of him out again.

He stopped outside the second bar and lit another cigarette, leaning against the wall. He watched the group of girls smoking outside before looking at the car parked across the street and nodding that he was in place.

“Do you have a light?” A soft voice caught his attention and he turned, smiling lightly at the blonde woman who stood with her arms crossed next to him. “Or were you just waiting until one of us came up and talked to you?”

He pulled the lighter from his pocket. “Maybe both.”

He forced a smile, but inside he couldn’t hold back pure fear for the young woman who’d accepted him standing close enough to set her cigarette alight. There was a rapist out there. There were other dangers. And she’d walked up to him and was so close that he could smell the soft tones of her perfume. The way she swayed, he could tell she’d already been drinking. It would be so simple to lead her inside and keep her going. Petite. All of the girls had been small. Their suspect must be his size or bigger; that was part of the profile. And he also must have presented himself in the shy way he’d just done, lowering their guard.
“What are you studying here?” she asked. “Besides the girls.”

He smirked, pocketing his lighter again. “History. I’m a grad student. You?”

“I’m finally almost done here. I couldn’t imagine being here for longer. I did languages. My dad thinks that I should go to grad school but, ugh. No.” She had a way of rolling her r’s that made Kylo’s smile more genuine. “How’s the history department?”

He shrugged. “Boring. Stressful. I don’t get much sleep.”

“Yes, you look tired.” She reached out and brushed his arm. “When are you defending or whatever?”

“Soon. I hope.” He eyed the touch and tilted his head. “I was actually trying to find a friend of mine. He’s not answering his phone because we got into an argument about post-colonialism earlier and he just took off. Guy about my height, bald. Doesn’t have any eyebrows.”

He must have also plucked out all of his eyelashes while he was planning his next attack.

Standing up straighter, the switch was flipped within him. “Did he leave with her?” And why didn’t you help her if she was impaired?

“Nah, he’s still inside. He’s basically pouring drinks down her thr—”

He left her before she could finish her sentence, his hand instantly going to his ear. “He’s in site two. Do you have him in there? I’m going in.”

“The place is two stories and packed with kids. But we’ll check the dark corners…”

_Morons._

He only had to eye the bouncer before he let him inside. They _knew_ they were there. It had taken a day of arguing to set it up; the cops had almost burnt their chance to see the predator amongst his prey. And now Kylo knew that _he_ was there.

He could save this one.

He pulled down his hood when he got inside, sweeping the dimly lit bar. The festivities from the start of the semester hadn’t died down. And weekends brought out the worst in humanity.

Too many faces held too many similarities to people he knew and places he’d been. He had to let his eyes lose focus and take in his surroundings. He had to breathe it in and not be rocked by memories of people who were gone or far away.

The place was styled to resemble a library, walls of books weakly illuminated by ornate lamps. The dark wood finish reminded him of the bar Hux always dragged him to in grad school.

Things sounded louder upstairs. There was a dance floor up there. He could hear the sounds of feet constantly moving, even over the music that started to overpower him.

He was moving around so many bodies but he didn’t really see them anymore.
Because in a small nook, in a far corner, he’d spotted him.

“I have a visual,” he had to turn away, taking a deep breath and raising his voice over the music. And when he turned back, he locked eyes with the monster he was hunting and the target he had in his arms.

He had a fraction of a second to react. Fight or flight could never be fully trained way. Taking in the slowness of the moment, feeling the students jostling him but no longer distracting him, he started reaching for the weapon he had hidden underneath his sweatshirt.

And then time snapped into motion with an act of violence.

With both arms, the suspect tossed the drunk woman on his lap over the table and onto the next, knocking over glasses and drinks and furniture. Screams and shouts and stomping feet cascaded over the music and chatter, all heads snapping in one direction as he stood frozen for a moment, trying to break out of his indecision.

And the suspect bolted, pushing through the gawkers straight for an emergency exit.

Of course he’d be sitting near an exit point. That’s where Kylo always tried to sit in case anything happened.

“He’s on the move, I’m in pursuit.” Moving without thinking about where he was going, he gave chase. Out the back door, down another alley. Heartbeats and footfalls. He called out directions with his gun only raised when he thought he could get off a shot, not wanting to fire wildly in a darkened alley. He wasn’t going to miss but if the bullet went straight through, it could ricochet. No one else could get hurt because of him.

He called out again for him to stop. That he was FBI. He was demanding him to end this.

Rounding a corner, he fought to get his breathing under control as he remained only a few yards behind. They were away from the party street now. But he had to get faster.

“Is anyone going to help me?” he snapped into his earpiece.

He still had eyes on him even with his heart pounding in his throat.

“I’ve got him going into the park, near the entrance to campus. I need help.” He heard his anger and wasn’t holding back now. This must be Brass telling them to hang back: don’t follow the dumb, young agent when he needed support the most.

“I see you,” his partner’s voice, also breathless, finally sounded in his ear. “Keep going. I’m right behind you.”

Keeping his eyes forward, he followed the back of the bald form ahead of him down the dimly lit trail.

The man finally stumbled and Kylo screamed at him to stay down, firming his stance and skidding to a stop.

Getting up from the dirt, the suspect took out his knife and locked eyes with him. He slashed at the air, sweat pouring down his face. “Stay the fuck back, man.”

Keeping his weapon level, Kylo steadied his breathing and ripped out his earpiece. *Fuck* the locals. Setting his face blank, he nodded. “I’m going to do that. If you put the knife down, we can have a
conversation. Can you tell me who you are? We can start there. I’m Agent Solo.”

There were still no sirens, but he heard another set of feet behind him and the cocking of another gun. Kylo didn’t even glance over his shoulder to know who it was; he could smell the same aftershave he’d seen him put on at the hotel that morning. “We’re FBI and we’re going to help you. But we can’t do that until you put down the knife.”

“I didn’t do anything to those girls!” the man screamed. “They wanted me.”

“You can tell us all about that at the station, okay?” Kylo took a slow step forward. And then another, the gravel crunching in the early autumn air. “We’re here to listen to you. And help you. We want to know what you have to say.”

“Oh no you fucking don’t!” The bald man gritted his teeth, lowering the knife slightly. “You’re just going to believe those whores. And how they’ll say they didn’t want it! They did want it.”

Kylo couldn’t stop staring at the man as the words reverberated in his chest. None of those women had done anything wrong. None of the children had done anything wrong. Standing still in the silent park, he felt a memory shudder loose that he couldn’t pull back from. Him on the couch, being ravaged. The sound of Rey’s cries when he was locked in the closet where he couldn’t protect her. The distance in her eyes when she came up the stairs from the basement, begging him to erase the violation her body had been forced to endure again. Then, the fresh tears that stained new cheeks this week, too young to be burdened with such defilement, pressed hard on his mind.

And so did remembering Beverly’s lost eyes. And how she looked so much like Rey.”

“We can talk about that.” Erso was still a pace behind him, a voice when he had none. “You just have to put the knife down so we can have a conversation.”

But the man stepped forward and Kylo reacted, catching him in the leg with a quick shot.

A shout. A cry of pain. But he still had the knife in his hand. So he took another shot, hitting him in the hand. The knife fell and he took two strides forward, aiming to get him on the ground. He heard his own voice scream at him to get down but he was just clutching his hand to his leg.

A fresh and full image of the suspect holding it to Rey’s throat, breathing against her neck as he shoved himself inside of her. Hearing her screams build to a sharp ringing in his ears, he saw the vision change.

Kylo saw himself holding the knife and raping her.

He was frozen in the vision, just staring at how the suspect was reaching for something, when he saw the red explosion surge out from behind the suspect’s head.

As the man dropped to the ground, he fell too.

On his knees, he didn’t hear anything. His chest ached and everything shook into a throbbing mix of white and red and black. Dizzy. Everything distorted except for a single point. He just stared at the nearby man, dead on the ground, blood started to stain the dirt path.

“Kylo.” A firm hand gripped his shoulder. “Please stand up. Please stand up now. He was going for a gun.”

His eyes were darting everywhere but he still registered that it was Erso standing above him. “What did I do.”
“You didn’t do anything. He was reaching for a gun. And I took the shot.” He saw the agitation cross the other man’s face as he forced him to his feet, dusting him off. “You gave proper warning. You fired your first shot to injure, to subdue him. You repeated your warning and took the second shot, disarming him. He continued to be a threat, had a weapon, and your partner used his best judgment. Repeat that back to me.”

In the distance, he heard sirens. He swayed, forcing Erso to holster his weapon and grip him hard by both shoulders.

“Repeat *that* back to me.”

Blinking, Kylo felt himself start to suck down breaths. “I killed someone. I killed a suspect. I killed him because…”

“No, Kylo, I did.” The hands that held him dug into his flesh. “*Repeat* what I said.”

He could still hear the gunshots rattling in his ears, reverberating in the small grove of trees. The still branches started to swirl around him, the dying leaves drifting to the ground as autumn took hold: a grove of decay.

But remembering a tiny prick of red explode into carnage behind a person’s head gripped him hardest.

Breathe. That’s what the hands were telling him. But his heart was in his throat and he was only taking short inhales through his nose. The ache spread in his chest and his head kept getting hazier.

His mouth shook open but no words came out. The hand on his shoulder squeezed hard for a moment and he finally found them. “I...I gave proper warning. We had identified ourselves. My first shot...was to subdue him. I shot him in the leg, but he didn’t go down. I said it again, to drop the knife. He threatened me, came at us with it and I...used my best judgment and took the second shot.” The words that had just been said to him were jumbled. He pulled the easiest ones he could find from his pulsing head. “He was coming at us, Galen. And he had a gun. You took the shot.”

Loosening his grip, Erso stepped back. “We’ll make this right. They’ll be here soon. I want you to stay calm and follow whatever I say. I’ve been...I have been through this before. Now please, we need to follow procedure here. Remember the rules and listen to me right now, Kylo. And things will be fine.”

He didn’t fall when the other agent let go. He stood up straighter when he heard the police cars skidding to a stop on the street just beyond the trees.

Okay.

Okay.

Secure the scene.

He’d have to wait until he was back at the hotel that evening, whenever it would be, to lose his mind.

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“…it’s an automatic six-week suspension, with pay. For you both.” Owen sat down behind the desk and sighed, finishing a sentence that Kylo had heard before. So he’d zoned out, staring blankly at the wall until he knew he would be sitting down. Coming back to himself, he just watched as the other man kept talking. It was like Owen was pretending he could handle this, strengthening Kylo’s confusion. “Even though I think that some of it should have gone another way, this is how it is. But you should come out the other side with a clearer head this time. We’re handling things with OPR and the full investigation shouldn’t take that much time. We have both of your statements and this is just…procedure. You’ll be cleared soon.”

He shook his head, trying to make the sound fully come back to the room.

Everyone had been talking to him the last few days and he hadn’t really been listening. He knew what they were saying, and he remembered it, but he felt like he wasn’t really there. This was happening to someone else other than him. The second he watched a man die, he felt like he was only observing himself going through the motions. OPR seemed to make the decision randomly earlier that afternoon and he didn’t have the energy to question it more, viewing himself from a distance. Six weeks compassionate leave for him, without censure. Six weeks of administrative leave for the man who’d pulled the trigger, also without censure.

He wanted to ask Owen to explain it but didn’t know how to make the words.

There were other things to focus on. He needed to make himself talk, to try to say something. He needed to start being alive again. “I was still there when someone was killed, Owen.”

“Didn’t I just say that this was procedure?” Owen’s sharp tone made him look up.

Everything kept blurring together in sounds and colours. He’d filled out the paperwork. He’d given his accounts, however twisted they were. He steadfastly avoided saying anything about his feelings to Erso on the journey home and the other man had seemingly accepted his silence. OPR had sucked them both in and were in the process of spitting them out. The part that troubled Kylo the most was how numb he felt to it all; the distant feeling wouldn’t go away. There was a healing cut on his arm that he didn’t remember putting there. It was just a scratch so he blamed his fingernails and trimmed them even shorter in a fit before he got to the office that morning.

Kylo blinked for a moment and then he nodded. He didn’t want to drop his head, or at least watch himself do it. He didn’t want to be weak again even though he was sliding into how strange he felt. Instead, he lifted his chin, continuing to battle the oddness in his chest. “I know procedure.”

“Good,” Owen said, relaxing for a moment. “I thought you might have forgotten.”

“Owen, I…” Kylo started and his mouth went dry. He was torn between telling the truth and losing his job on one hand and then the worry that the feeling would just continue into eternity even if he did rested on the other hand. Everything had stopped in that moment in the park and he couldn’t pull himself back from it. “Can you just…go outside of procedure for a second?” Can you please tell me what you really think?

For a moment, the playfulness that used to hold Owen’s eyes swept in, like they had been in
training, like this wasn’t reality. Maybe it wasn’t. Maybe none of it had really happened. Still, Owen’s kindness faded and Kylo tried to pull himself forcefully into the moment.

“Your partner killed a serial rapist and a murderer who was refusing to be taken into custody.” The senior agent, and he really looked it by how his shoulders were angled, placed his hands on the desk. There were pictures of Silla there now, not George’s family. Owen looked at him firmly for a moment before he shook his head. “But you were part of a confrontation in which someone was killed. He may have been a violent offender but this still doesn’t look good. And I’m…” Owen trailed off and Kylo felt himself weakly nodding, knowing what he was going to say.

“I told you to take longer leave. I put you on easy cases because you weren’t listening to me. I wasn’t the one to partner you with Erso but I went with it because I didn’t have a choice. And now there’s this mess so I don’t know who to blame and I can’t exactly ask George about it.” Owen sighed and Kylo stared at his hands. How would have George handled this? He knew that Owen saw the same things that his former supervisor would be seeing in that moment. Or maybe they couldn’t. Because he wasn’t really there. This wasn’t about Grey or Rey. This was about so much more. And he hadn’t been ready for it because of what had happened at the start of the summer.

He should have taken more time.

And Owen kept speaking. And he had to keep trying to be real. “Kylo, you were showing progress. And now we are really and truly in some serious shit here. I don’t know how they are only giving you six weeks but I’m…I have a greater duty to George. I promised him I’d take care of you. So I’m going to keep protecting you for him. I know…” Owen’s eyes had turned hard but, like they always did, a look of softness broke through. “We’re friends. And I want to keep being your friend. But right now, I have to be your boss too. And it’s hard to sit here and know how guilty you feel for being there when a life was taken. But there are rules I have to follow. We have your statements. We have ballistics. It was…it was a justified shot, according to OPR. And I’m going to have to believe that you both genuinely felt threatened and that there was nothing going on in your head. Because if there was, there’s no way I’m letting you back behind that desk.”

Kylo licked his lips and finally nodded. It made sense that Owen disagreed with OPR but was still forced to accept their decision. Still, the thought was already burrowing into his mind: he didn’t deserve to be there. And like always, he kept talking to build more lies. Or, at least, he thought he did. “There wasn’t. I read the situation. I used…I used my best judgment. So did he.”

Sitting back, Owen eyed him. “Take the time you need to recover, Ben. Really, this time.”

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“You didn’t tell them that I froze up.”

He found Erso in the usual spot outside, where he usually went to lurk behind their building to smoke.

“Because you didn’t,” the other man answered, looking at him with slitted eyes. “Not from my perspective.”

What he had been holding back with Owen, what he’d been keeping within him since they got back from Oklahoma, surged in his chest and he grabbed the other man by the collar and slammed him
hard against the wall. Everything thundered in his chest: the odd conversations, the strange looks, the promises without really asking for anything in return except for trust… This man wanted something from him and now he had even more power. The guilt about costing so many people their lives pounded hard in his chest and he poured the feeling into his clenched hands. He had ended up protecting him too because Erso had kept his word when he shouldn’t have.

He’d deserved to lose Rey. He’d made so many bad choices and only kept hurting her.

He’d deserved to lose Poe and Grey. They’d loved him blindly and he’d only hurt them and got them killed.

The last thing left was losing his career. This man was standing in his way and he couldn’t figure out why. George, he understood; the same went for Owen. But whatever Erso wanted remained so fucking unclear that it had brought him to this. Fuck the fucking small talk. He didn’t know him at all.

“You need to stop trying to protect me or whatever it is you’re doing. I never should have asked you to cover for me in the first place. I don’t deserve to be here and I never deserved it in the first place.” They both needed to stop lying so the truth could come out. Losing everything was almost for the best at this point, Kylo thought but didn’t say. He’d frozen up; there was more blood on his hands. He couldn’t do anything without making mistakes. Was it even worth fighting for now? Was this normal? No one was telling him what to do.

Only a brief flash of fear crossed the other man’s face as he held him in place. Still, he shook his head, defying Kylo’s rough hands. “I think you’re missing the bigger picture here, Agent Solo. We never would have found him if it wasn’t for you. And we never would have caught him if it weren’t for you. A moment of weakness…”

“But we didn’t catch him!” he snapped. “We killed him!”

“I killed him. To save you and now I’m protecting your career again!” Erso yelled at him. The sound of the raised voice made him snap back to the shouts in the park, the echoes of the gunshots, and the growing pool of blood.

He froze for a second, panting as the images faded. Somehow, he found the will to shout back at him. “Well, maybe you should fucking stop! What do you even want from me? I have my…” His breath caught in his throat. He was about to start screaming about his own pain. He was just being what Rey said: he was looking for someone else to blame. Gripping the man’s suit one last time, he lowered his voice. “Just leave me alone.”

Glaring, Kylo let go and pushed off of him, dropping him to the ground.

Turning, he stalked away, not knowing where he was going or if the other man was watching him leave.

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Sitting on the top step of the back deck, Kylo put his elbows on his knees and exhaled the smoke from his cigarette through his nose.

Staring at the trees, he watched another leaf drift to the ground, falling silently onto the lawn.
No wonder George wanted to leave. There were too many ghosts here. He stared at his name on his phone as he scrolled through it: the personal number, not the professional one. In the murky zone of them both being on leave, he didn’t know which number to call.

He had Owen’s private number too. J followed by K.

He ignored the name in between them.

Scrolling up rather than down, unable to really look at those other names at that moment, he got to the H names. Paige Hux-Tico. It was still strange to see even if it had been like that for a while. He had actually changed Hux’s name to Armitage Hux only a few years ago, trying to be more adult. The faint, far away high school and college memories of double dating and hanging out and things being hard but not this fucking hard was almost soothing.

So he kept scrolling up until he hit D and dialled. He got the familiar voice mail that he was still paying to keep alive. And even if it had been so many years, he kept hoping he’d answer. Even if the phone was tucked away in a drawer upstairs, there was still a chance.

“I fucked up again, Poe. I…” He trailed off, realizing that he’d have to delete another desperate message from himself later. Despite that, he sobbed. “I don’t even know anymore. You’re still fucking dead and I’m still fucking alone with another person’s blood on my hands. You died for nothing because I’m still…I’m still the same. Rey hates me. Grey is gone and I…I miss you. I love you. But I don’t know who I am anymore. I…fuck.”

He ended the call and dropped back hard onto the wood of the deck to stare up at the sky. Hissing at the brief flash of white that spread from smacking the back of his head, he rose up and smashed down again. And then one more time. Just to feel something.

His phone started ringing and he jolted up for a moment, praying for a hurtful millisecond that it would all be a dream and his voice mail was being returned. Rey wasn’t answering his calls but maybe someone else could.

The name Luke Skywalker made him want to go upstairs and unlock his gun safe and fucking shoot himself.

The conversation was going to feel like death anyway so he clicked answer and numbly laid down again. “Yeah?”

“Wow, I’m surprised you actually answered.” The dull tones of his uncle’s voice made him roll his eyes and bit at the cuticle of his thumb instantly. “That doesn’t seem like you.”

“Maybe I’m not myself right now.” He pulled the digit from his mouth and stared at the blood as it dripped down onto his white button-up shirt.

He actually heard Luke shift and sit up. “Didn’t I tell you this would happen?”

Scoffing, Kylo bit harder, tearing up more glossy skin. “Why do you just drop into my life when I need you the least? I have a lot of shit going on and I don’t need you right now.”

The heartbeat of silence made him scrunch up his face and grit his teeth, knowing what was coming.

“Then why’d you pick up the phone, Ben?”

He swallowed, the coppery taste of blood hitting his tongue. “I was feeling sorry for myself.”
“You’re always feeling sorry for yourself. That’s nothing new. What’s up?” Luke smacked his lips and sat back, his chair creaking. “Don’t you have Rey to lean on? Or your fuck buddy?”

Kylo sat up and planted his right hand on the deck. “Don’t you fucking know anything? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

“Your mother won’t return my calls! I saw something happened in Oklahoma and then from ‘FBI agent shoots suspect in campus rapes’, I put the pieces together and knew it would be you. So… until your mother and father can answer their phones, I needed to check in with the source. Have they fired you yet?” The chair squeaked again and Kylo felt his jaw instantly start to ache.

Sucking in spit between his teeth, he forced himself to stand, to start pacing. To do something. “No, no, they haven’t fired me. I still have a fucking chance with them.” He was arguing with his uncle as much as he was with himself. “And Rey…I pushed her away when I needed her the most to try to protect her and she accepted it. She hates me now so you got what you fucking wanted. I didn’t…I didn’t expect that. I’ve been trying to find myself and then this happened. Gregor is dead, Luke. The man hunting me took him too. And,” he paused to catch his breath. “And you know fucking what? I’m glad I’m the one to tell you. You were fucking right and I’m fucking alone. Rey loved me and I lost her and I just want her back and I don’t know how to do that. He tried to kill her again and I still want her back. And my job is on the line and you were calling to fucking gloat about it. What the fuck have you done in your life, Luke? I…”

A scoff and a sharp voice cut him off. “So you’ve killed another one?”

“What?” Kylo stopped to breathe. He gripped the railing. His fingernails, clipped and bitten down to the quick, dug into the damp wood.

“Maybe this is what I’ve always been afraid of. Maybe this does go beyond you and Rey and all of that shit. You aren’t just dangerous because of what you are, Ben, you’re dangerous because there are people out there who will always die because of you. You’ve brought this dark cloud with you since you came back. It took me a while to see it and I had hoped…I hoped that maybe that other poor boy you got killed would keep Rey out of this. You always talked about protecting everyone or, hell, maybe that’s something he said. The two of you just blurred together for a while there.” Luke paused and Kylo just breathed into the phone.

“Your parents shouldn’t have let him move in there. Your parents should have protected him from you and they should have done the same thing with Rey. This person hunting the people you love? He’s only hunting you. He’s not going to stop and you keep putting people’s lives at risk. This other boy, the one you said you weren’t fucking but, Christ, Ben I saw your eyes. Whatever you felt for him got him fucking killed too.” Luke took a deep breath and Kylo watched his backyard fade to tones and vague shapes rather than the depth of reality.

“You’re just putting people at risk. And you’re still walking around with a gun and a badge. You’re a fucking monster at work too, Ben. You probably took a risk or something got into your head. You may not have pulled the trigger but you might as well have. You are just going to get more people killed. And then you tell me things like how you want to be with Rey, how you love Rey. That’s horseshit. You’re going to keep being a manipulative asshole that just sucks people into the void that is your heart. Do you really hate Rey that much? You want to be with her so you can get her killed too? She’s better off without you. Or maybe you won’t be happy until she’s dead too? Maybe you won’t be really free until everyone is dead? Do you want your godson to die? Do you want your parents to die? I know you wish I was dead so I know you don’t give a fuck about me. But if you really cared about the people you claim to love, you will have to find a way to end this.”

His uncle took a long pause and Kylo just slumped to the deck, teeth tearing into his bicep.
“If you want to know what I think, it’s that he’s not going to stop. And I know you never listen to what I think so it doesn’t matter what I just said. Because you are a coward, Kylo. You’ve never been able to face yourself and you’ll never be able to face him. Everyone will be dead and you’ll still be crying out for someone to save you because you’ll never be able to save yourself. Just don’t send him after me. But I’m probably already on his list.” Then the call went dead.

And he was moving without thinking.

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Leaning against his rental car, he fixed his dark hood and slowly pushed off from the cold metal to start walking, staring across the campus.

Another man was dead because of him. He didn’t know how it would end up if he even wanted to come back. Put all of the deaths he’d been a part of together, he was beyond Manson numbers. He might as well just be following orders at this point. He hadn’t killed anyone except Snoke, but he had played a central role in so many deaths. His eyes started quivering when the thought struck him and that’s when he’d started driving.

And he went to find the only person he could find some relief from.

Now, in the chilly mid-October air on another college campus, he watched Rey walking and talking to a blond boy. He was hardly taller than her with a thin face and a beige jacket. This boy would sometimes walk a few paces ahead of her before turning so he could see her face and laugh about something he couldn’t hear. They’d left one building, the one he’d watched them walk into an hour ago, and now they were crossing campus again.

And Rey was smiling.

Kylo kept following, trailing from a safe distance.

And then Rey’s hand brushed the strange blond boy’s and Kylo clenched his fist.

Standing there, frozen, in the middle of the path, the steam from his breath snaked around him. He didn’t even feel himself exhale.

They kept walking. She kept walking. Not even knowing that he was there.

The buzzing in his pocket finally broke him from his stillness. “Yeah?”

“Is this Ben Solo? This is Garret from campus security. Yeah, um, we just got a call about some weirdo on our campus. We’re supposed to call you if anything suspicious…” The voice on the phone snapped him completely out of his state and he turned, stalking back towards the car. “I don’t know. The guy has been hanging out, not going anywhere, all day. I just wanted you to know that we’re still watching out for Rey and…”

Biting his lip, he forced his head down. “Thank you, Garret. I’m sure it will be fine. Thank you for calling.”
The knock on his car window jolted him awake.

Hux, in a pink, fluffy robe and holding a newspaper, sighed at him as he rolled the window down. “Why the fuck are you sleeping in my driveway in a rental car?”

Rubbing his eyes, he sat up. “I was tired?”

Pursing his lips, his friend cocked his head. “What are you doing here, Kylo? Your parents told us what happened and I’ve been trying to call you. Is it...is it really that bad?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” He opened the door and stepped out into the frosty morning. “But I think it’s really that bad.”

Looking him up and down, Hux shook his head and licked his lips. “I have to be at the school in an hour. Come in and...have breakfast. And call your fucking parents.”

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Pushing Benji on the swing, he found some ounce of relief from the everyday as the afternoon sun started to erase the mistakes of yesterday.

Paige shifted Anna in her arms, studying him. They’d been staring at him all morning. When Hux left, he had spent most of his time in Benji’s room. They went through and organized all of his toys by colour until Paige forced them outside. It was a nice day, after all.

His friend cleared her throat. “Kylo, I feel like I need to apologize for so much right now.” She looked from her daughter back to him and frowned. “Maybe I didn’t really listen to you either.”

He’d needed to talk about anything but the shooting. So he’d gone back to those days in June, suddenly feeling them crystalize into something else after seeing Rey with someone else. Replaying the moment she walked out the door overlapped with the suspect’s head exploding, bleeding into Grey’s lifeless eyes. And hanging above all of it was his uncle, glaring at him.

He slowed the swing and reached out to stroke Benji’s hair, hearing the boy giggle. He met his eyes and blinked, Mom and I are just talking. We can play more later. “No. In the end, everything she said was right. It was like...it was like I should have really hated myself all along. Everyone was wrong when they told me not to do that. I think she would be happy if I was dead. And now I just wish I was.”

Paige reached out and gripped his arm. “Never. She would never hate you Kylo. Not like how you’re thinking. And she never wants you to die. And,” she took a deep breath, rattling off quickly in broken Spanish that his godson was there and he wasn’t a pet or doll; he could hear him. And even though her words hardly made sense, and the grammar was awful, his heart still shuddered at the meaning. He needed to stop talking that way; he was going to give the boy nightmares. And that’s what Poe would have said too. When Kylo finally blinked that he understood, Paige nodded. “She’s been here and we’ve been talking...”
There was really no way of knowing what she was thinking at this point. It made no sense. She was just so cold, cutting him off just like he’d imagined and, in the end, deserved. His dread spiked again. He’d let her out of his life and told her to move on, to get away from him and all of the hateful things he had inside of him. He hadn’t expected the pure agony of seeing her with someone else to burn so hard.

“What have you been talking about?” His voice fell.

Paige’s eyebrows narrowed in sympathy as she set Anna down on a playmat on the grass. “I really don’t know how she feels about you anymore, Kylo. She talked…I mean during the summer she’d just sit here and cry to me and Armie about how much you hurt her. How you lied to her about Gregor. How you were a different person around her. The way she described you…I didn’t know that person either. You were…closed off. That’s not you.”

Benji tugged on his hand. “Keep pushing, Kylo.”

Looking down, he bit his lips. “Sure, buddy. Hold on.” He leaned down, lightly shoving his godson in steady motions. “I started to feel like a different person around her, Paige. I felt like everything I said or did was wrong, or I would start to panic about it. I overthought everything and I never do well when I do shit like that. I would question everything I said and did and it just started to get to be too much. I couldn’t talk to her without her getting angry with me or I was constantly afraid that she’d shut me out. You should have seen her. She was so angry. I never…I never meant to stop listening to her. And I did. This is all my fault.”

Focusing on Benji, he continued to roll in how he remembered the start of summer. It felt like a crater in his mind, one that he hadn’t been able to climb out of. Whenever he reached the edge, something like this would make him slide right back down. And now there were fewer people there to catch him.

“Can you not tell my parents I’m here?” He turned, knowing that he’d just asked another person to lie. So he had to cover it with one of his own. “I’m going to call them before I go.”

Paige instantly shook her head. “Armie and I can’t do that for you. You were just…Kylo, you just saw a man D-I-E. You rented a car and drove all night across the country and then you slept in our driveway. You are not okay. Kylo, I can see your wrist. When did that happen?”

“After she left,” he said with a shrug. “I pushed her away, she had to go, but I didn’t want her to go. I needed her so much. And she left me. I deserved it. I’ve left her alone so many times and now…” He stilled the swing again, not feeling steady on his feet. “Poe is gone. Grey is gone. Rey is with someone else. I need to figure out how to get my head together so I can find this man. And then…” His eyes went blurry and he just stared out at nothing as the thought burrowed deeper in his brain.

Reaching for him, Paige gripped him closer to her into a hug. “Kylo, we’re still here. Your parents are here. You can’t leave us.”

Inside, he felt himself crumbling. “What if I’m already gone?” Everything Luke and Rey said about me was right.

Her arms tightened. “I can feel you. You’re still here.”

Shuddering, he didn’t know if he could believe her or not.

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Kylo woke up around 1 a.m. and wandered into Benji’s room. He ran his hand through the boy’s dark hair and silently stepped back to shut the door before the boy could hear or feel that he was there. Too many frustrations hid under his skin even long after dinner.

But a small voice stopped him. “Kylo?”

“Hey buddy,” he said as he turned. “I didn’t mean to wake you up. Try to get some sleep.”

Benji shook his head and Kylo felt his body sag. He crossed the floor, sitting on the edge of the bed and taking his hand.

“Kylo, why’d you say you wanted to be dead? Dead means gone and then we wouldn’t be able to play together.” Benji was still studying his palm, pressing his fingers out. Kylo’s looked enormous compared to the boy’s tiny one. “Are you sad because your friend is in heaven?”

“Yeah, Benji, I am. It hurt to say goodbye to him but I’m trying to get better. I’m also sad because Rey won’t talk to me. And I also…I also made a mistake at work and I’m in trouble for it.” He sighed. “It’s why you should never lie to your mom and dad. Or your teachers. Even if you get in trouble, it’s never good to lie. You’ll be a better person if you’re honest.”

“I want to be a good person. Just like you.” Benji said then frowned. “Daddy is worried about you. He talks about you a lot. Are you still his best friend?”

“I hope I am,” Kylo said, hardly feeling the words leave his lips. “It’s why I came here. Sometimes it’s good to talk to your best friend when things are hard.”

Nodding, the boy smiled, a bright light in the darkness. “Can you be my best friend too, Kylo?”

“Of course.” Kylo didn’t hold back a grin, even as his heart was breaking. “When…when I’m here more, we can do everything together.”

“Just don’t think that you want to be gone.” Benji’s small face turned serious, a thunderous look on an innocent face. “I don’t want my best friend to be gone.”

Shutting his eyes, Kylo nodded. “I won’t leave you, buddy.” He leaned over and kissed the top of his head. “Do you think you can get back to sleep? I can read you a story if you would like that.”

“No, I’m okay.” Nodding, Benji yawned. “Yeah, I’m pretty tired. Good night, Kylo. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Leaving the boy, he wandered outside into the dull chill of the air. He leaned against the playhouse he’d bought for his godson, willing himself to feel nothing except the cold. Blinking away tears, he realized he was going to break another promise to the small boy upstairs.

He was lighting another cigarette when his phone finally blazed with the name he’d ached to see for so long.

“Are you okay?” he answered, his heart about to burst out of his throat into his mouth.

Instead, he was met only with giggles.

And his stomach dropped when he recognized the voice.
“We’re fine, Kylo.” Liza made his internal scream flame into a sunburst in his throat. “So how’s your dead gay boyfriend? Not the first one but the other one? I guess…the new one? Can you tell me who was better in bed? Him or Poe? No, wait, whose dick was bigger? Was your dick the biggest? Oh, no wait, I mean you are the biggest dick. Sorry. I misspoke.”

He wanted to drop his phone but instead, he took two heavy exhales, grinding his molars together. “Where is Rey?”

“Oh,” he could hear Liza’s grin as she spoke, “She’s here. And she’s doing great Kylo. We’re out here having fun and she’s with a boy. How does that make you feel?”

His headache shifted from his temples directly to his oddly shaped nose. He opened his mouth and silently screamed into dull air, hoping to get every demon out before he could speak again. “Liza, just make sure she gets home okay. Can you do that for me?”

“Oh what? You’ll shoot me in the head?” Liza’s words made his mouth go dry again. “Okay, this was like, fun, or whatever. But we’re okay. Bye.”

“No, wait, I need to talk to Rey, I…”

But the other phone had clicked off. And no one answered when he called back.

Done with being quiet, he let out a low scream through clenched teeth.

The only thing that kept him from burning up his legs was seeing Hux emerge from the back door. The other man narrowed his eyes and motioned with his head at the playhouse.

“Is shit that bad?” Hux asked, handing him another cigarette when they sat down at the table that looked even smaller with the two of them looming over it. “Who were you talking to?”

“No one,” Kylo answered, accepting the smoke and the light before he started wiping off the table, dusting away the ash. He got a glare in response and sighed. “It was Liza and Rey. Liza sounded drunk and…I guess Rey must have been too. And it’s my fault again.”

“Christ.” Sitting back, Hux slowly sucked in his cigarette. “Liza is fucking poison.”

Kylo almost smirked. “She was in your fucking wedding party.”

“That’s Paige’s fault.” Hux didn’t miss a beat. “But you were the one who almost fucked her again.”

The words made him feel like Grey was at the tiny table. Even though he had his eyes locked with Hux’s, his shoulders sagged. “We’re looking at that for the case. We can’t figure out why…why everything is the way it is.” And he also didn’t know how he’d ever be able to look Erso in the eyes again, but he left that out.

“That’s not…that’s not what I meant.” Clearing his throat, his friend leaned forward. “You know yourself, Ky. And you need to keep being yourself if you can just wear down some of the edges. Whatever Rey made you feel, you are not wrong in liking what you like. And that asshole who took you didn’t make you this way. You need to…” Hux exhaled again. “Remember when we were in the locker room when we were sixteen? And you thought I was going to beat the shit out of you because of what Poe said?”

“Whatever I like just feels wrong right now.” He shut his eyes. All of his choices had gotten him there and it was nowhere. “And if I had just gone home, he’d still be alive.”
“Kylo, stop. It’s just…” Hux stopped and sighed. “You need to stop trying to do this alone. We didn’t go home that night. I went with you and even if shit was totally fucked up, I had your back. You’re not alone. Once you’ve worked through this, you’ll be able to talk to her again. And we’ll help you. Benji and me can come stay with you over winter break. And it will get better.”

That was a lie, Kylo thought as he looked at the fire between his fingers. “You saw me at dinner. I might not be able to push myself through this. There are too many voices screaming at me in my head. Luke, Grey, George, Owen, Galen, Rey…And if I don’t get him, I’ll never be able to be anything. She let Liza call me and I could hear her in the background. Rey hates me. But I still…I still need to fix this even if I don’t really know how.” Taking a deep breath, Kylo shook his head again. “But I’m just…I fucked other people in the past. And she’s never done that until…until now. Her only other boyfriend assaulted her and I kept putting that in the past while I focused on what hurt me. I shouldn’t be sitting here crying about it because I was the one who was wrong.”

The light look on the redhead’s face vanished in an instant, shifting into pure concern. “Ky, I didn’t mean…what just happened was shitty. But you need…you need to take some time to work on yourself. We love you and we are so worried about you. You showed up here and spaced out the entire time. You are allowed to cry about losing people you loved. Rey has her feelings and you have yours. If she moves on, you can get through that. You’re so…Kylo, you never expected Gregor to come into your life out of nowhere. That can happen again. Right and wrong, whatever, healing is important for both you and Rey right now. Even if you’re not together, neither of you are alone. But most of all, you need to feel better. I mean, what are the problems in her fucking life right now? She got a bad grade in art history? We’d know if she’d talk to us too but it’s been silence since the summer. But you were there when someone died. And it was a fucking rapist asshole. I’m really trying here right now but I don’t know how to make you see that you shouldn’t be crossing the country and not sleeping. I don’t…I wanted you to treat her right but after hearing her all summer, I don’t really know anymore. I’m…I’m sorry I didn’t see everything before.”

Looking at his hands, Kylo shrugged. “It’s not your fault. I just lie to everyone. And I make other people lie for me. I probably manipulated you too. And until I catch the man out to kill us, there won’t be anything worthwhile for anyone. I won’t be able to focus. I’ve put you and your family at risk just by being here. And I…I can only have the police here watching you. I can’t be here all of the time. I need to find him. I can’t just sit and do nothing. People will just keep dying and it will be my fault.”

Hux put his hand on his shoulder. “Kylo? You’re not making any sense right now. Come on, let’s go to bed. We can talk in the morning.”

Kylo was guided inside and nothing seemed real again, shimmering and shaking into colours and shapes. He was gone before everyone woke up.

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He found his father in the garage and made him jolt when he greeted him with a low grunt. “Fuck’s sake, Ben. What are you doing here?” His father blinked for a moment before his eyes locked on him. “You weren’t supposed to come until next week.”
Shrugging, Kylo ran his hand along the workbench, eyeing the over-turned lawnmower and his father’s greasy clothes. “You’re never going to fix that engine on your own.”

“Doesn’t mean I’m not going to try.” Han quickly wiped off his hands and reached for him. “When was the last time you talked to Maz?”

Folding his arms, he looked at his shoes. He’d just grabbed whatever was by the door before he left. They were the same scuffed up sneakers he’d been meaning to throw out. “Before I came here. When I was sitting with OPR. They cleared me but I’ll need another eval when the six weeks are up.” He dreaded the next time he needed a physical but that would really blow the lid off of everything, as it should.

“Owen said that it was a clean shoot, whatever that means.” Han rubbed his elbow, small circles dully reminding him that he was alive. “You said it was too. And now it looks like that wasn’t the entire truth.”

“I don’t even know anymore.” He should have just admitted he was a liar again but he didn’t have the energy. Instead, he traced the dirty laces of his shoes with his eyes, finding every fray and trying to will material to fall apart further with his mind. “I saw Rey.”

Han sucked in a long breath. “What did she say?”

“I don’t know. I just…watched her. She was with a boy.” _She also called me and she was drunk. I taught her that._ He narrowed his eyes. Couldn’t his shoes just disintegrate? Maybe if he concentrated hard enough, it would happen.

“Son, why don’t you come inside? We can sit down and talk for a while. I didn’t…” Han swallowed. “I should have come up again when you called about the shooting.”

“Dad.” His voice was sharp even if he didn’t mean it. “I shouldn’t _need_ you all of the time. I should be able to take care of myself.” _I’m going to find him and kill him myself_, he thought. Kylo stepped back, moving out of his father’s reach. He rounded the corner to stare at the house. He looked up at Rey’s bedroom and shook his head. “I’m just…I’m going to go to George’s for a while. I can’t breathe here or there anymore.” _Or anywhere. But something there will help me find him. This is all I have right now._

Han was behind him, putting his hand on his shoulder. “Did you call him, to tell him that you’re coming? Or are you just going to drop in and surprise him like you did me?”

“I haven’t decided yet. I’m going to… I’m going to stop at home along the way to check on the house.” His eyes went out of focus again as he imagined Rey being eleven and climbing out that window to try to find freedom. He’d shut her out then by his selfish actions. And now he’d done the same again. He’d just keep hurting her. It was better that she was with someone else. “I might talk to Owen again. If he’s not pissed at me anymore. Luke called me and… I’m… I’m tired of everyone hating me even if I deserve it. He keeps saying these things to me, dad, and I…”

“Ben, can you just come inside for five minutes? We can have a cup of coffee…”

He met his father’s eyes, shook his head, and walked away back to his car in the alley.

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Johanna offered him another cup of coffee and he nodded, not knowing how to hold his shoulders.

“Thanks, Johanna.” He tried to smile at her, but he was just too tired to make the gesture seem less hollow.

Across the table, George put his elbows down. “You know what I’m about to say, Kylo. You could have called first. But I’m…it is nice to see you. It would be even nicer if you didn’t look so tense, but I can understand that. I think you just might break my record for visits from OPR in a year.”

Kylo actually smirked. “I still don’t believe you were ever like me.”

The older man glanced at his ex-wife. Kylo saw her nod out of the corner of his eye. “I’m going to go check on the children.”

Leaving them alone in her kitchen, George slid over a chair closer. A warm hand squeezed his knee and his head dropped further, knocked back to another familiar touch. “Kylo, my first fatality was not as clear as yours. From what you’ve described, you both did the right thing. It’s not always right to use force but sometimes we have to. You shot to injure, not kill. And then a senior agent made a decision that I would have made if we were in that situation and one that Owen would have also taken. There was a weapon. You froze. While I don’t agree with the fact that Erso did not divulge that to OPR, they can read between the lines. They always do. These six weeks are to work through the stress and decompress. We put ourselves in life or death situations every day. You have never fired your weapon before and you did not do it in anger. You weren’t reckless. And freezing up is something human.”

“You wouldn’t have froze,” Kylo mumbled. “Owen wouldn’t have froze. Erso didn’t freeze.” I don’t deserve your compassion.

Sighing, George shifted his hand back to the table. “That comes with experience. You can’t force that, even if you want to.”

“I…” Kylo kept his eyes on the other man’s hands. “I drove up to Connecticut and followed Rey around campus. I didn’t know where else to go. I couldn’t go to Grey. He would have stopped me. And he wasn’t there.”

Swallowing, George shifted his weight. He sat back and rubbed his beard. Kylo flicked his eyes to take in the motions before looking at his coffee cup. Maybe this time he could make something explode with his mind.

Still, George started speaking. “He would have. So, why didn’t you listen to his voice in your head and not do something so impulsive? Our memories aren’t there to only make us sad or happy. We can use them to guide our actions, living how those who have…passed would have wanted us to live. Grey…Grey would have wanted me to be here, spending time with Grant and Grace. He thought I never had time for him and, truthfully, I didn’t. I treated him very much like my father treated me. I don’t see this as a second chance because I’m not an idiot, but it is an opportunity to get to know my other children in a new way. They also lost their brother and, now, they need their father.”

Kylo managed a slight nod. “They do. I should…I feel like I’m going to keep you from them too with how much I need you.”

“Well,” George said before nudging him with his elbow, making Kylo look at him. “We can work on a balance there. When I make the decision about whether or not I’m coming back, we can discuss it. But what I want you to do right now is to go home and rest. Don’t drink too much. Don’t
try to poke around in the databases. Sit down. Write out your thoughts. Work through them. Talk to Maz or one of the other therapists. If you want a task, you can go and see if my neighbour has actually cut my lawn like he promised. I’m going to go back in a few weeks, when the children have fall break, but it would be nice to be prepared.”

Looking into his supervisor’s eyes, Kylo saw the ghost of his dead friend but refused to turn away and avoid it. “I can do that.”

A firm hand rubbed his shoulder. “I’d really appreciate it, Kylo. I’d also like you to stay the night. Getting some rest is also something you could do for me.”

Tugging at the sleeves of his sweater, Kylo nodded. Maybe if he’d worn something else, he’d finally stop lying to George too.

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He’d made conversation over breakfast and made further promises to drive straight back to Virginia. He assured George that he was starting to untangle his thoughts.

It all felt like lies. He hadn’t slept at all on the couch in Johanna’s well-furnished living room.

He hugged them all. Grace clung tightly to him. Grant at least accepted the gesture, even if his arms were limp. Johanna looked at him with sympathy he didn’t deserve. And when he was in George’s arms, he didn’t want to let go.

He drove down the long driveway and towards the highway but turned off because he couldn’t hold it in anymore.

Sobbing, he put the car in park and put his head on the steering wheel. Alone in the car, he let himself scream until his throat hurt. There were no clear feelings in his head anymore. Everything was a giant jumble of tears and blood. Rey’s tears as she left his house in June. Grey’s unshed tears the last time he saw him alive. Seeing his own red-rimmed eyes when he looked in the mirror after the funeral. The blood on his floor. The blood on his wrists and ankles. The way it had stained Erso’s suit and hands. The pool of deep crimson that spread out on the ground in the park. His tears when he got home after the shooting, both of sadness and rage.

As the images started to pound, his phone plinged. Now he was going to break it. He was going to throw it out the window and watch it shatter and be rid of all of the memories, pictures, and texts that it contained. Anything happy there couldn’t belong to someone like him.

His mouth went dry when he looked at the text.

It came from Grey’s phone.

Wherever you are, I feel like you have forgotten about me.

Blinking, he wiped his eyes and instantly tried to call.

The phone rang once and then shut off.

Fuck.
Inhaling in rapid snorts, he tried not to concentrate on how he might have just let the man slip through his fingers again.

Another text plinged after five endless minutes. *I do not think it is a good idea for us to talk just yet.*

Gripping his phone, he composed his reply as quickly as possible, trying to keep his fingers from shaking. *Then tell me where you are so we can talk.*

Another interminable wait.

*Why don’t you find me like I’ve always been able to find you?*

The thought rocked him as he stared at the text.

Maybe his brain wasn’t completely broken.

Reaching over for his laptop on the passenger seat and flipping it open, he brought up his details from his case files. Scanning all of his *endless* notes, he again rolled his eyes at himself at how overly detailed they were when he was focused.

But there it was. He finally found it. It was something he’d overlooked at the time but now that he could see the pattern. Even at the depths of his current agitated state, it all stood out with burning clarity.

Aside from the children, everyone had either booked a flight or had just returned from travelling by air. It’s how he’d found Poe; he’d booked the tickets to Florida that week. It’s how he’d found Grey; he was going to fly to California only a week after he’d died. It’s how he’d found Rey in Mexico and then again in Virginia.

But since Kylo drove, he couldn’t find him now.

The dread rocked him as he pulled up and studied the sketch again. Finally, there in the eyes, he saw the echoes of the man in the airport from that day years ago, after confessing to George that he’d slept with his son. After spending a weekend on the edge of falling in love only to have it snatched away from him at the last second.

*He’d called him Kylo, not Ben.*

No one *knew* that. No one outside of his friends and families and the few chosen colleagues, it had never been in the papers.

Scrolling through the list of parents, he finally found it.

J. Dixon. Father to a boy murdered by Snoke, but blood was on Kylo’s hands too. And he was a high-ranking official at the FAA: another federal agent who had been able to slip through their fingers.

And he divorced from his wife just over ten years ago.

Swallowing, he looked back at the empty road that would lead him towards home, then back to his laptop.

Because there he was. When he compared the sketch to the photograph, he finally registered it. He’d changed enough about his face that most people would have missed it. And *most* of the
people around him hadn’t encountered the man within the last five years as he had.

This was it.

Now he just needed to find him.

*I know who you are,* he texted. *And I would like to talk.*

But at the same time, he picked up his work phone and called Jannah, begging her for a favour to ask for a trace on Grey’s phone.

“Kylo…I, you’re suspended and I don’t even work in your unit.” He could hear the woman turning at her desk, dropping her voice. “Do you think it’s really him?”

“Yes, Jay.” He didn’t recognize his own voice as his eyes remained glued to his personal phone. “Please. Please just do this for me and I’ll call it in.”

She sighed. “I’ll…I’ll get someone to run it. I’ll text you the GPS or at least the nearest towers and then, when you call back, I want to *know* that you called it in.”

“Thanks, Jay. Thank you for everything.”

Kylo drummed his hands on the dashboard after he hung up, instantly impatient for the location. If this man, this monster, knew he was suspended then he wouldn’t expect it. But he knew who he was now. Just looking at the name *Grey* at the top of his phone made the sorrow hard to fight again. He *had* his phone. He *took* it from him when he’d killed him. The stab wounds showed so much unnecessary violence. He was prone on the floor and must have been screaming and crying out. Kylo had seen his hands. They looked just like Poe’s. He’d tried to fight him off. In his mind he imagined them both calling out for him like he would be able to hear their fear from a distance. He *should* have felt it but didn’t because his mind was elsewhere.

And then the text from Jannah arrived. And he had the location: middle of nowhere Nevada. Close to where Luke was.

That made his heartbeat quicken.

This was something he needed to do on his own; that’s what his uncle had said. He had to protect him too, no matter what he expected of him. Owen didn’t trust him anymore. Erso couldn’t be trusted. And George needed to be with his children. And Kylo couldn’t be the coward Luke thought him to be.

So he drove. And drove. There was no better way to hide that he was coming if he drove. Even if he didn’t catch him where he was, he *would* be able to see where he’d been. The states blurred into a jumble behind him as he crossed the lines. The only places he really saw were gas stations. And he paid in cash. His phones were off. He was suspended. He was driving a rental car. He was free to hunt and *kill* this man. He’d only turn his private phone on when he reached Nevada.

At each rest stop, he saw hints of everyone he’d left behind or lost. The young woman behind the counter in one state had Rey’s smile. There was a shudder of regret as he drove through Oklahoma, remembering Beverly at the same time. The man who helped change his tire on the side of the road in Amarillo had Poe’s hair and easy charm. And the man who woke him up with a jolt outside of Albuquerque shared the combined eyes of Grey and George.

Still, every mile got him closer.
Until he finally had to turn his phone on again.

One new text stuck out from the rest of the painful messages from his family about where he was and what he was doing.

If only it could really be Grey texting him.

Instead, he was going to meet his killer.

He tried to call again and, like before, the phone went dead.

Hissing, he kept driving towards where he thought it would be.

Over two thousand miles. It was finally going to be over. Or at least he’d be close enough to figuring out the next step. Whatever that would be.

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Looking around the flimsy shack, the water from the river roaring in the distance, Kylo adjusted his vest and kept his head up. There was no back up here. He was there alone and had put himself in that situation because that was life. He had always been alone and was going to end up that way. People would either die or leave him. Rey had said she would never leave him and she’d walked out the door and was with someone else now.

He turned off the safety and scanned the area, prepared to look around the corner.

As his focus intensified, so did the images in his head. George taking his hand by the fountain, promising that he’d always help him. Poe’s shining eyes when he’d proposed, giving him a glimpse of a forever he’d never know. Grey’s flirtatious eyes in bed as he rolled over and kissed his chest, complaining about the birds chirping and how morning meant more annoying shit they’d have to deal with. And Rey. Rey looking at him like the most important, central, person on the planet until she fell in love with him and he became a constant frustration and broke her heart.

Kylo had destroyed all of it.

But if he got this man, maybe Rey could at least look at him again. He wouldn’t have to be following her from a distance, watching her fall in love with someone else.

Setting his breathing, he listened for movement. Satisfied there was none, he took another step forward around the corner.

Grey’s phone was in the dying grass outside of the shack.

Flashes of him texting, texting in that fucking annoying way, fluttered across his mind. He reached for an evidence bag in his pocket and took another deep breath. With his own phone, he photographed the placement, setting his measuring stick down to approximate the distance to the shack. He took a hundred photographs without thinking.

The scuffed-up phone, with its broken face, because Grey was never the type of person to give two fucks about how his things looked, was calling to him and he finally knelt and exhaled. It was still silent around him as he reached out to put it in the evidence bag in his hand.
Looking around again, he felt rage spike in his chest again. He’d been too late. He was asked to come here and he’d been *delayed* by distance.

But he had the phone now. That mattered. He had the evidence. The pictures of the placement would hold up. If the Internet had stopped lagging, they’d be uploaded by now. Taking long strides back towards the structure, he decided to study it further. It was part of procedure and even though he was on leave, caused by a catastrophic mistake, he could at least do that.

Frowning at his phone and how the pictures hadn’t been uploaded, he glanced down.

He took two unfocused steps and then his entire body spasmed into cramps, originating from a jolt of pain to his neck.

He hit the ground and fought to catch his breath, trying to turn over, to get a shot off. He fired wildly into the sky as his arms went numb.

Pure agony reached every corner of his body even as he forced himself to turn and lock eyes with the man who held the stun gun. His own weapon was jostled from his weak hand. It was him. It was Dixon. All he had to do was get up and...

He reached out to try to punch him away and was met with a third barrage, this time driven even harder into his throat.

And then everything went black.

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**Chapter End Notes**

*Warnings: Self-harm (past and present); suicidal thoughts; funeral depiction; descriptions of sexual assault and murder; and the wounding and killing of a suspect by law-enforcement officers.*

Tags will be updated soon as I work on Rey's side of this chapter. And given how long the chapters are getting, and my current workload at my job, we're looking at monthly updates now. The next few chapters will entirely be Rey (and maybe maybe two other characters for one chapter) so don’t worry!

Take care of each other and thanks for reading!
Chapter 61

Chapter Summary

Rey is questioned by the FBI and remembers things about her past that might help her heal from her time with Kylo.

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry for not posting for so long! And, with the coming university term, there's going to be another big wait for the next chapter. I apologize in advance!

This chapter took a lot more work than I was anticipating. It changed forms many, many times. I think that, for context, it's good to explain some things. It's not a linear chapter so things will jump around. It's important to think about Rey's point of view here and her state of mind, especially in a sort of interrogation. That's what I'm trying to reflect here by making things...jumbled around. I also think that this type of chapter was important for Rey's character and for her "becoming" herself and dealing with some of the traumatic events from her past so she can be "free" in the next chapter.

Thanks for reading!

“Rey, why would Kylo be in Nevada?”

Hearing Kylo’s name shouldn’t send her into sadness anymore. All of the healing since June was about finding solutions to keep her heart from reaching a point of aching panic yet again. One of them was not to talk about him; part of that included not speaking or writing to him. Another was only to remember how he’d been before they’d started dating. And, still, another was to collapse in on herself and give in to the empty ache of not knowing what he was doing and how he was feeling, so far outside of her bubble.

And all of those solutions weren’t going to work for Rey at that moment.

The world that she’d tried to give up when she’d walked out of Kylo’s house in June had started with narrowing her contact with the FBI. Having that choice thrust back in her face again made it hard not to be knocked back to who she had been months ago.

She should be stronger than this.

Forcing herself to look up at Agent Kenobi in the empty lecture hall, she shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t know why he would be there. I think Luke lives there now but I haven’t talked to Kylo in months.”

And it had been even longer since she’d spoken with Luke. She wanted to care about him but was
afraid of what he would tell her about Kylo. If there was someone the FBI should be talking to, it should be him instead of her.

Fiddling with the sleeve of her sweater, she hoped that Owen would be the one to continue the questioning. Instead, the other agent with the cool voice leaned forward.

“But he has been texting you. And sending you letters. And communicating through his parents.” Agent Erso didn’t look as annoyed as Owen. He just looked bored. It had been strange to shake his hand again only minutes ago; Rey had battled inside of herself to keep from being yanked back to sitting in the ambulance with him. She could almost feel the shock blanket on her shoulders again as she sat across from him. “Rey, you have to understand that we are the FBI and we have a missing agent and a lot of questions. This might take time. You really can’t leave anything out right now.”

Owen narrowed his eyes and he crossed his arms. She dropped her chin, only listening to the rustle of clothing. It was more important to remember where she was and focus on her breathing. Both of the agents had come in as class was ending, she reminded herself. August had touched her arm and she’d turned, gasping as the suited men suddenly invaded her space in the late afternoon.

They spoke to her instructor.

And then locked eyes on her and asked to use the room.

Owen cleared his throat and she glanced up. After only a second of looking at him, she wanted to look anywhere else. Her shoes. The blue sneakers. Look at them instead. Remember putting them on that morning. Remember buying them with August a month ago. Kylo really couldn’t be gone. Kylo really couldn’t be…

“Rey,” Owen’s voice got harder and she shut her eyes. “We came all of this way to inform you in person. I’m sorry for…I’m sorry about before. There really isn’t much time and I’m frustrated.” At his tone, she slumped down, wrapping her arms around herself. “We didn’t want this…shock to be delivered over the phone. We’ve already had a long day and at some point, I actually do have a plane to catch. So, can you just tell me about the last time you spoke to him? Or the last text message? It’s very important for us to establish a timeline and for you to be completely honest with us. If you tell us what we want to hear, we will be out of your hair and on to more important things.”

Looking up, she tried to search for his usual kindness. Agent Kenobi’s eyebrows furrowed; he was there to work. And he was already losing patience with her because she needed time to come up with how she was going to answer them. The angry looks on their faces made her stomach hurt.

Reaching for her phone, she unlocked it and gave it to him, willing her hand not to shake.

“Thank you.” He swept back his hair before he scrolled through her messages. “When did you get this?”

“This morning.” She stared at him, remembering being awakened by the text. She hadn’t ignored it; part of healing was not replying to messages like that, she reminded herself. Despite what happened with Liza, it had to be her choice to talk to Kylo again. She couldn’t let what happened a couple of days ago guide her life.

But somehow, they were there. And a hateful dread was creeping up her spine. She had just been in class. She had just felt alive. She didn’t want to be there.

“Do you give us permission to go through your records? That will save us time and we wouldn’t
need a court order.” Owen checked his watch and sighed, looking at the other agent for a moment. “If there was anything else that you’ve deleted, we’ll be able to find it. There is absolutely no reason to lie to us about it. But to save time, has there been anything else? Anything at all? Even if you don’t think it would be helpful…”

“There used to be more but…” Biting her lip, Rey lifted her head. “Someone else deleted them all. Those are just…it’s just that one left. And yes. You can look at them.”

They probably already had. Kylo had found her phone once without her asking. Who knows what he knew about her now.

“Someone else. Okay, so, someone else deleted them.” Sighing, Owen rubbed his eyes. She dropped her chin as he took a deep breath. He was holding her phone out, pointing it at her. “Rey, I understand how hurt you’ve felt. Since June, I’ve felt that pain as well. The last time we talked, I was very short with you. You never called back so I haven’t had the chance to apologize. I’m doing that now. But I’ve spoken to Kylo often these last few months. He’s always thought about you on top of everything else he’s been dealing with and, Rey, there have been so many things. But right now, this isn’t about whether or not you like him. Or if he broke your heart. It’s about someone who is missing. Someone who is a human being who you still have feelings for. Because even if you hate him, he’s in your thoughts. You would have deleted this message if you didn’t care. So I know you do care. And this would be so much easier for all of us if you could help us.”

She could only feel her eyes blinking, about to sink into nothing. Owen spoke quickly and firmly. Kylo cared. She already knew that. Kylo was missing. She didn’t want to know that. She didn’t hate him; she was only hoping that he didn’t hate her. Owen was mixing up her thoughts.

“Someone else did delete them!” she forced out. “And I don’t…I don’t hate him. I just wanted to get on with my life. I was going to call him but…”

“We aren’t here to listen to what you were going to do. What we care about is what you actually did.” Owen was staring at her phone again, turning it over in his hand. “We already know that someone, someone who I’ve already spoken with, told you not to.” He levelled another look at her, forcing her to keep her eyes up. She wanted to hate him but he looked so tired. She’d never seen him like that before. “He thought it was for the best and, at the time, I would have agreed with him as well. You weren’t wrong in listening to him. But, Rey, five days later and a text like this…you should have alerted us. I warned you before that these are the things I need to know about.”

She could almost feel tears in her eyes when Erso shifted in his seat. The sound of his chair moving reminded her of how they walked in and stopped her from leaving, occupying the now empty amphitheatre. Things kept shaking in her head and she gripped her legs again. This should have been where she felt safe, continuing to find reasons to get up every day. The world couldn’t always revolve around Kylo. She dug her nails into her thigh, forcing herself to keep breathing.

And then, the other agent’s voice surprised her.

“What I think Agent Kenobi is trying to say,” Erso said, leaning forward, “is that, since the shooting, we have had to make many hard decisions ourselves as well. Kylo was cleared of fault, and that was examined to the smallest detail. However, we did that as a team, as a group of people working together to uncover the truth. You were alone, Rey. With these conversations and this message, you had so much on your shoulders. This would have been a choice you had to make by yourself about whether or not to respond to Kylo or inform us, or tell someone else who you trusted. And you didn’t. So, now we have to wonder about you and the timing of the phone call Kylo received from your phone.”
She shuddered at the words but nodded. The truth would be easy once to found a way to talk about it.

Owen kept his eyes on the other agent for a moment before standing. “I need to make a call about this, to say that we have approval for her phone as well. Please keep her talking. I really don’t have time for this.”

Her heart dropped as he briefly glared at her before leaving the classroom. All of Owen’s compassion had vanished and now she was trapped there with the other, still unfamiliar, agent. She wanted to push back the last times she spoke with the strange man. It would only pull her into a haze of anxiety, one she’d been fighting all summer.

Smoothing his hair, Erso sighed. “I’m afraid he hates flying and has been in a terrible mood all morning since…since we confirmed that Kylo has disappeared. Rey, we really don’t have much time here. And we have many more people to question.”

He looked at her with gentle eyes and Rey managed to nod. “Really, Agent Erso it wasn’t…the text didn’t seem any different than the others. I knew what happened with the shooting and I thought he was trying to apologize to me or trying to get me to apologize.” Swallowing, she let a dark thought shudder through her mind. “When did he…Agent Erso, what if he really did finally kill himself?”

A sharp glare made her sit up straighter. Lifting her shoulders, she needed to stop herself from shaking. The corners of the classroom were getting fuzzy. Desperately, she looked down at her bag. Studying the zipper, she reminded herself of what day and month it was. It was October. It wasn’t June, July, August, or September. She’d just been in class with her friends, listening to a lecture about art criticism in practice. She’d taken notes and felt like she understood how to be objective and accept critique on her own pieces. Other than the text and wishing she could help Kylo that morning, it had been a normal day.

“Well,” Erso answered, reminding her that he was there. “That makes me wonder why you would say that. And remember what you said the last time we spoke. You trust me, don’t you, Rey? Is that still true?”

Part of her realized that Kylo had been right when he kept certain things about cases from her. She truly had never understood Kylo’s world because it had the empty cruelness she was facing at that moment. But when he told her about questioning a witness, he’d always said how he’d taken care of people, making sure they told the truth and felt safe. She had to try to put her hopes in those distant stories from before her world fell apart.

“Of course I still do.” Just as he was entwined with Kylo by helping him the morning after she left, now she had a reason of her own to keep Agent Erso on her side. “But do you…don’t you feel guilty? That you helped him and then helped me too? If he finally gave up…”

She was beginning to understand why Kylo complained about him so much. He seemed to hardly blink, gazing at her with sleepy eyes. It reminded her of some of her classmates when a lecture dragged on for too long.

“I think that’s something we can discuss later.” He narrowed his eyes at her before he licked his lips. “And I don’t appreciate you changing the subject. Rey, this is very serious. I had my suspension lifted in order to aid in this investigation and that is something that the FBI does not do lightly. Can you answer my first question? Why do you think he, as you said, ‘finally’ killed himself?”
A flash of Kylo screaming at Niagara Falls shot through her mind.

Another of Kylo with his arms stitched up.

All of the bruises and cuts over the years, making her heart ache for him.

If no one was there to stop him, he would have let the darkness take him.

And Erso must have known all of this if he had really been the one to pick him up off the floor.

Playing with the edge of her sweater, she chewed on her lip. “After everything that happened, maybe he finally wanted it to be over. He thought I hated him and he…maybe it was too much.”

The words hung heavily after they left her mouth. Erso’s face turned unreadable again as he studied her, letting her drift in her mind. The weight of her memories was about to press down on her again. The last time she had seen him had been in the police station, all those months ago. She was so close to having her own life now and Kylo was only dragging her back. It never changed. They always found a way to need one another.

Silence swept in, tempting her to feel more for him than she should.

She found a moment to breathe in that emptiness, but she almost couldn’t feel it.

The even ticking above the whiteboard broke her thoughts.

And she saw Erso’s head turn as she looked up at the clock.

The room was about to twist when Owen finally returned, the door opening and making her jump. He handed her the phone and shook his head before taking the chair across from her again. The sudden rush made her reach out for anything to keep her from slipping into terror again. It felt awkward to be sitting on one of the uncomfortable plastic chairs that normally sat behind the wide tables of the lecture hall. She had to lock down on that to keep herself in the moment.

“Sorry about that.” After checking his watch, Owen stroked his beard and then nodded. “Let me be clear with you again, Rey. You are not a suspect. You are, in my opinion, hardly a witness at this point and I would much rather be in Nevada rather than wasting my time here with you if you can’t give us anything. Kylo was doing better and, before the incident,” he shot a quick glare at Erso, “he was working hard to become a better agent and a better person. And do you know why he was doing that?”

She looked between the two agents. “Because he wanted to keep his job? It was the only thing he had left.”

Owen rubbed his eyes, looking down and sighing. He weakly waved his hand and Erso nodded before speaking. “Because he wanted to come back to you as a better person, Rey. We spoke about you often. He understood that you needed to heal and that you were still angry at him, but he has a lot of caring for you in his heart.”

“Even if it appears that you do not at this moment,” Owen added. “He’s missing and you’re not answering our questions.”

Her eyes went wide. “I gave you my phone. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before, but I told George and he said that he would handle it.”

Owen’s eyes were hard, drilling into her. “Since when has Kylo been easy to handle? You weren’t
able to do it.”

The ticking of the clock took over again. The steady rhythm flooded her thoughts. Instead of giving in to her tears, she lifted her head. It was better than staring at her twitching hands. She shoved them under her thighs, dropping her shoulders again.

“Agent Kenobi, I don’t think that’s very fair.” Erso’s voice made her pull out of falling into herself. “Rey, why don’t you tell us about why you think we’re here. Because we sent other agents to speak with Han and Leia and the Hux family. And Luke Skywalker. Agent Kenobi and I could have gone to one of those homes and, instead, we came to you. Please give us your honest thoughts about that or about why you think Kylo went to Nevada.”

Looking at her bag again, she licked her lips. “He must have found something. Or figured something out. He wouldn’t have gone to see Luke.”

She still didn’t know if what Kylo had said about his conversation with Luke was true. Luke could have told him anything, if that really happened.

“Well,” Owen said, making her lift her head. “What would you think if we told you that he went alone? Does that give you a better idea about why we’re here?”

Her heart sunk. If he had gone alone, if he’d been pushed by the phone call, he might have taken a stupid risk. Or, he might have finally killed himself. “You think it’s my fault?”

The agents kept their eyes on her as she tried to keep her head up, looking at Owen as he straightened his shoulders. “And why would we think that?”

Closing her eyes, she decided that there was no way out of there if she didn’t tell them what happened. “I wasn’t the one to call him…”

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Liza ordered more wine while Rey and August shook their heads and shared an eye roll. The evening had stretched on until after midnight. And they were still there, trapped and exhausted.

“Are you sure you guys don’t want anything?” she asked again when the server brought her the glass. “You guys are so boring, just drinking tea.”

August nudged her under the table and Rey shook her head. “We’re fine, Liza.”

She tried to smile, ignoring August’s tired eyes. He ran his tongue along the front of his teeth, before looking back at Liza. “So, if we sell anything, we wouldn’t have to pay for the space at the gallery? I need a place for my Bachelor’s project and that sounds perfect.”

As Liza started bragging again, Rey turned away from the conversation to look around the well-lit café. She loved coming there; all of the art pieces kept her in the moment, not letting her slip from who she was. But her eyes were getting heavier even as she looked at the art on the high walls. Still, all of it was a welcome distraction from thinking about Kylo. His texts were simple but always threatened to send her into another downward spiral. He’d ask how she was doing. He’d say he still loved her. Other times, it would just say ‘good morning, I miss you.’ They weren’t hurtful things but they made her feel a familiar pressure in her chest all the same.
Looking at a painting made up of a series of overlapping shadows, with each shape changing in between the next layer, her mind drifted further from the two people talking at the table.

Liza and August had mainly chatted about her work in the gallery before Liza would flash her engagement ring and grin. August would find a way to change the subject back somehow but at least two hours had gone into talking about the wedding. They’d sometimes talk about the gallery on the phone, with Liza always encouraging her schoolwork and her future. Having a spot for her art was something she could picture for herself.

And maybe she’d be able to see Kylo again when she had that life, just beyond the brink of the present.

“Rey?” Liza asked, drumming her pink nails on the table. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head and sipped from her cold cup. “It’s…” She turned to August and, finally, he shrugged.

“Something happened with Kylo. Someone got shot, a suspect. We’ve been…we’ve been trying not to talk about it.” August shifted his weight, raising his blond eyebrows. Sighing, she nodded: yes, she owed him big time now. “We sort of made up a rule about him. It needs to be a good day if we’re discussing him.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Liza said before pursing her plush lips. “Rey, it’s been months. He’s…I mean he’s probably still hot and great in bed because things like that don’t change but letting go of him is exactly what I’ve been trying to tell you. He wanted that stupid job and now he’ll have to live with always having blood on his hands. And invading everyone’s privacy and all of the other stuff that the government does. I can’t believe my taxes are going to him being allowed to have a gun.”

August looked down for a moment. He knew that Rey wanted Kylo to keep the life he’d sacrificed so much for. When she sat down and told him last month about what she’d read in the journals, August listened with so much kindness. She couldn’t blame herself for his feelings, nor how he tried to talk himself into their failed relationship. Whether or not he’d had an affair with Grey couldn’t hurt her anymore.

Almost.

She’d already decided that tomorrow—well, later today or whatever—she’d call him and ask how he was doing. It would be good to hear his voice, even if it was only for a few minutes. She’d waited long enough.

“I tried all summer to hate him,” Rey admitted, trying not to cross her arms. “And part of me is still hurt. He put me in danger, he lied to me, he made strange and selfish choices…but if he wasn’t ready for a relationship, then I can’t hate him for that. We have…too much of our past is tied together for me to hate him forever.”

With the simple words, August gave her a small smile. She didn’t know what she’d do without him. Even though he didn’t want to date her, she was learning that love came in so many forms.

Liza flipped her short hair before she nodded. “I guess if that makes you feel better. He’s...he’s, I don’t know if complicated is the right word. But I think when you finish college, Rey, I can totally get you a job at the gallery. We could work together. I can’t wait for you to sell your first painting.”
That was another reason to talk to Kylo again: to get her paintings back from Virginia.

“I’d like that too, Liza.” Rey smiled, pushing down the tempting idea of climbing into his bed. Even if nothing happened, all she wanted was to be held by him when her thoughts scratched the bottom. There had been so many nights when she’d reach out, wishing he’d somehow be there.

Without more than a smirk, Liza leaned over and hugged her, taking her breath away. “I believe in you, Rey. Just don’t let Kylo ruin your life.”

“I won’t.” As the blonde sat back, Rey tilted her head. She’d already promised that she wouldn’t let that happen. “I’m going to call him soon. If he’s upset about the shooting, it might be good to talk to him now that I’m…better.”

She hadn’t had a full panic attack in over a month. There were small and big things that she did for herself and she was thankful every day that she was able to breathe. Reaching out to him wouldn’t be a step back, but a way to continue to work on herself. By Christmas, she’d be able to be close to him again. It would be worth it.

“That would be…okay. I guess. It’s your life, right?” Liza looked like she was going to say more, meeting her eyes as she sighed. Finally, she stood and fixed her skirt before shoving her hands into the pockets of her sweater. “I have to go to the bathroom and get more wine. You can order something, you know? More tea?”

Her heels clicked away and Rey sighed when the woman reached the counter. Turning to August, she shrugged.

“She’s kind of pushy. And I wanted to go home, like, an hour ago.” August ran his hand on the edge of his teacup. “I mean, it would be cool if she could get you a job but she could have guessed what you were worried about.”

“I just want him to be okay.” She looked at her cup, playing with the teabag. “I do miss him but I can’t be responsible for everything he does.”

The mantra from the last few months was repeated yet again.

“It’s, I mean…” August sighed. “I sort of get who he is a little better, but he really seems to need other people a lot. I think I understand why you’re…why you were so heartbroken when you came home. I hope I never feel that way about anyone.”

“If you do, I’ll help you. Like you’ve helped me.” It would be such a good feeling to give back to someone else who was hurting. Kylo had taken up so much of her thoughts. She needed memories that just weren’t about him.

August yawned, reminding her of how long they’d been sitting there. “Sorry. I think she needs more friends if she has to ask about wedding colours.”

Rey felt herself grin. “Yeah, she had so many ideas about Paige’s wedding. Some of them were just bizarre. She wanted goldfish as centrepieces. They would have died. Her and Kylo fought the entire time and I…” She sucked in a breath: dancing with him that night; how his hand had smudged away the chocolate; finding Liza crying outside of the hotel room; Kylo’s haunted eyes behind the door. “He almost kissed me that night. And now I’m so glad that he didn’t.”

The paintings on the wall seemed to shake and she shut her eyes.

“Hey,” he said, his soft hand covering hers. “You still had fun that night with him before things
The words drifted to her ears and she lifted her head.

“I know…I know you’re right but it’s so hard to know what he wants.” She looked at the painting again, tracing the shadows. “Maybe I was trying to change him into something he wasn’t when the person I really wanted was just meant to be my…I don’t know. Friend is still the wrong word.”

If she ever figured out what the right term was, deep down she knew that Kylo would have come up with the same idea. Maybe that’s what he had been thinking about when they were together too.

Even as he was nodding, August yawned again. “Yeah, he’s…yeah. Not a brother, not a father, kind of a crappy boyfriend…I guess he’s just…a Kylo.” He took off his glasses to rub his eyes and she nodded to herself as he returned them to his face. “Hey, what time is it? I might leave now because I can’t sit here through more wedding this and wedding that to try to get her back to talking about sculpting techniques. No wonder Kylo doesn’t like her.”

Sighing, Rey reaching into in her purse.

Her throat tightened.

“Did you see where I put my phone?” Her heartbeat ripped through her, sucking all of the sound from the room. “It was right here a minute ago.”

August quickly peered across the table and then under it. “Maybe it’s in a different pocket? Or your jacket?”

She raked her hands through her purse, hoping it would be there. She picked up her jacket and shook it. “Can you call it?”

He already had his phone out, pressing it to his ear. “It’s…busy.”

Their eyes locked and they both turned. Liza wasn’t at the bar. The server was alone, wiping the counter before disappearing into the back.

“Why would she take it?” Rey couldn’t breathe, even as August was shaking his head and speaking. “How can she know the passcode?”

“It’s Kylo’s birthdate.” She stood, hoping that she could make it across the floor without collapsing. Time slowed as she took the short steps towards the only washroom. Her hand was quivering as she knocked on the door, feeling it waver before her eyes. “Liza?”

The door opened instantly, blond hair and blue eyes filling her senses. “Yeah?”

Shaking, she exhaled. “Do you have my phone?”

Liza tilted her head and then reached into her pocket, a grin spreading across her face. “Yep. And I think I solved a problem for you.”

Problem. Kylo wasn’t a problem. He was a person. But from the look on Liza’s face, she thought he was nothing more than something needed to be crushed.

August was at her side, glaring at Liza instantly. “What do you mean? What are you talking about?”
Shrugging, Liza walked by them to the counter. She drummed her fingers, waiting for the waiter. “I
called Kylo. Told him that Rey was out with a boy. Oh, and he pretty much admitted that he was
sleeping with Greg. So, there you go, Rey. And, honey, you shouldn’t use your ex’s birthday as
your pin. It’s so junior high.”

She never wanted to feel time shudder still again. But it did as Liza rolled her eyes and acted like
she hadn’t driven a knife into her heart.

She clenched her hands. She wanted to collapse and fall in on herself.

Instead, she did something else.

“Liza, you fucking bitch!” Rey shouted. “Why did you do that! I don’t…I don’t want him to hate
me! He’ll think…he’ll think I made you call! Why did you do that?”

The blonde rolled her eyes as she pushed away from the counter. “This place sucks. I’m going to a
real bar. Have fun with your freedom, Rey. And stop dating gay guys.”

She couldn’t hold back. With two quick strides, Rey walked up and slapped Liza, her hand stinging
instantly at the strike. “Why did you do this!”

Holding her face and gaping at her, Liza stumbled back. Rey felt a hand stopping her from hitting
her again. “Because he’s an asshole, Rey. He is sick and fucked up and good dick isn’t worth all of
that. And if he doesn’t stay away from you, or you stay away from him, then he’s going to get you
killed or screw you over again. You say you don’t want to talk about him and then he’s all you can
think about! I’m trying to save your life, you stupid bitch!”

Trembling, Rey could only stare as August held her in place.

“Liza, leave us alone.” August stood up straighter. “You have no idea how Rey feels. And how
important Kylo is to her. You’re just a jealous cunt. Get the hell out.”

Her hand remaining on her face, Liza stalked away, grabbing her jacket and purse.

When she walked out the door, Rey let herself slump to the floor. “He’s going to blame me for
everything. I left him. I left him alone. And he’s alone now, I...”

August dropped to his knees and pulled her into a hug. “Rey. Rey. Please listen to me. Don’t let
this undo everything. This summer, you were almost there. Don’t let her ruin how far you’ve come,
okay?”

She let herself be picked up. “I need…I need to call him back.”

But when she looked at her phone, she saw what Liza had done. All of his texts. All of it was gone.
Both of his numbers were gone. Holding back a scream, she looked at August with wide eyes.

“Rey, it’s okay.” August gripped her arm. “He always calls and texts. If he’s not okay, he’ll call
you. Okay? Or you can call someone who has his number. Someone who can talk to him.”

Swallowing, she could only shake her head. There was one person who she could always call and
she’d been avoiding him for too long.

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“We already have Liza Schultz on our list. And we’d like to speak to your friend August as well.” Owen looked up from his notebook before he exhaled. “You have to understand that we will have to compare their stories to yours. It’s part of the procedure in creating a timeline. Kylo must have told you about this. We’re only looking for the truth here.”

She nodded, her chest already aching. “I know. They’re not…they won’t lie to you.” She had only meant for August and Liza to meet, not to be dragged back down into worrying about Kylo. It was supposed to be something normal, following what her therapists told her. She had to heal. She had to have friends. But doing something so simple had brought her back down to how she’d been during the summer.

Dread was settling thickly in her chest. They wouldn’t be asking so many questions if it wasn’t her fault.

But Erso was looking at his notes, underlining something that Rey couldn’t read. “We’ve already spoken with SSA Jinn. He’s on his way to Nevada right now. We understand his relationship with Agent Solo. But now we are wondering about the state of your relationship with him.”

“He was the first person Kylo trusted when we got out,” she said, her voice feeling weak. “He’s always been there for us and…”

But as she lifted her head, her mind was dragged somewhere else.

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“Where’s Kylo?”

Looking up from the plastic dolls that she was organizing, Rey tilted her head at Agent Jinn. She was sure that he must be the tallest person in the world. And it felt good that he was like that: he could watch over them better.

“He’s doing talking,” she answered, looking back at the toys. She didn’t mind spending time in the playroom alone because Kylo and Leia knew exactly where she was. And there was a door, so she was safe there. She didn’t mind sharing the toys with the other children when they were there. It was just like back at the house: everyone took care of what they had so they could keep having it. If anyone had something that was just his or hers, Snoke would hurt everyone for it.

The only thing she had that was just hers was Kylo.

“Ah,” the agent said as towered over her. “Would it be okay if I played with you while we wait for him to be done with therapy?”

She flipped over a doll with blonde hair, fixing her dress. “You’re my friend so it’s okay.”

“He still doesn’t like therapy that much, does he?” He knelt across from her, picking up one of the other dolls. She had a bright red dress and dark hair. There was one girl there who loved playing with that doll and Rey liked thinking about her. She was really sick but the doctors were going to make her better too.
She nodded. “That’s why he’s just doing talking. He’s not really talking.”

He hummed for a moment, bending one of the doll’s arms. “Well, we’ll have to help him work on that, won’t we? Talking is very important part of healing. Sometimes, we take medicine for our bodies but for our hearts and minds, there are other ways we can work to feel better. It will take time, but I believe in him as long as you do. And I know you are very good at explaining your feelings to Maz and the other doctors. But are you worried about being here alone without Kylo?”

“I’m not alone. You’re here.” Rey looked up and tilted her head. “And I know all the nurses. Kylo doesn’t like them but they’re keeping us safe. So, I like them.”

“Yes,” he answered, looking over the doll. He sat it up, across from hers. “Yes, of course. This is a very safe place. It’s also very big and that can be frightening. How are you feeling about all of these new things? The words, the people, the medicine?”

She shrugged, scooting her doll closer to his. “I don’t know. New is better than same. And same means hurting. And we can cry now if it hurts and no one will make us gone.”

“I see.” He nodded before gazing at the dolls again. “Your doll is dressed nicely. Where do you think she’s going?”

Running her hand through its hair, she frowned. “I don’t know. She’s…she’s going to a house.”

Meeting his blue eyes, Rey watched him smile at her answer. She must have gotten it right. Kylo always got upset when he did something wrong so it was good to get the answers right. When she was alone with Maz, she tried to remember what Kylo told her to say because that was the truth. She liked the hospital but somewhere, Han and Leia had a house. It would be another new place with more things to share.

“Does she live with anyone in that house? Her family maybe?” Agent Jinn asked. “I think my doll lives with her family. And it’s a very nice and safe house. She also goes to her job at a school. She works very hard to teach her students about the world.”

Chewing on her lip, Rey nodded. Kylo talked about school. He was going to teach her how to read so she could go there. The other kids would sometimes say how much they missed school and their friends. But she didn’t know that adults went there too. “Kylo’s going to make sure I can go to school. I can’t read but he will help me.”

He shifted his weight. She liked his suits. He looked different from the nurses but he looked like some of the other police, but not like the ones with hats. The first police they met had hats and were all black. And in the ambulance, one of the doctor people tried to touch her arm and Kylo screamed at him. Someone with plastic hands was prodding her. Kylo wanted help but didn’t want them to take her away from him. But he’d said everything would be okay; they were just taking care of them. His eyes had been afraid, but he kept saying that everything would be fine. When she got medicine, she started feeling better. So it couldn’t have been all that bad.

It was weird to know she was four years old. Kylo was fourteen. She still didn’t know what that meant, but the nurses and Leia said it was important to know her name and her age. When she had been in the house, she didn’t know her age but she knew her name. When she was outside for the first time, maybe she had been three years old because time got so much longer. The new people maybe made everything stop. It wasn’t a bigger, taller kid but something Kylo called an adult, a grown-up. And they weren’t going to hurt them and they weren’t going to be gone. Kylo was telling her not to be afraid even as he hugged her too tight. Kylo was still covered in blood and couldn’t stop crying even as he tried to make everything okay.
Maybe the people on the road made time stop so Kylo could start feeling better. She saw a road and a car for the first time; they weren’t just stories from Kylo or the other kids. The sky was too big. It stretched on forever and she’d wondered if they were going to drive into it. It meant that maybe the rest of the world was real too. She had already seen a playground and a butterfly, so she guessed that horses and dogs were out there too. All of the songs Kylo had sung had come from someone who loved him, someone out in the world. And those were his parents. And they’d be going to a house with them one day.

The new adults weren’t Snoke with his evil hands and crooked teeth, making everyone gone. He made her tummy ache every time he touched her, scratching and biting her.

“Do you live in a house?” Rey asked, even though Agent Jinn looked like he was going to say something else.

“Yes, I live in a house. Maybe you can visit it one day.” He smiled at her. Kylo liked his eyes. Whenever they would draw together, he always helped her with that part.

“Who lives in your house? Do you have a dog?”

He shook his head. “No. No, I don’t have a dog. But sometimes I wish I did. I live alone right now but sometimes my son stays with me. I used to live with him and his mother but she…she’s gone to live in a house of her own. Most families live together in a house, but sometimes families live in different places. But that doesn’t mean that they don’t love one another any less.”

Han and Leia were a family and they lived together. How many houses were there in the world? “Did Snoke take your son too?”

After blinking for a moment, Agent Jinn shook his head. “No, no he’s just…deciding where he wants to live. He’s only a couple of years younger than Kylo and he...” He stopped to sigh. “He’s having a hard time and I can’t make decisions for him. He doesn’t like it when I’m away and I’m trying to help him understand that I still love him even when I have to work.”

“Do I get to pick where I get to live?” Her dolls forgotten, she reached for his hand. “Does Kylo?”

“Well.” His hands were so big. It wasn’t that she was too small but he was just too big. “Han and Leia have missed their son very much, just like I miss mine. When Kylo is doing better, when he isn’t just ‘doing talking’ but actually talking about his feelings with more people than you or me, he’s going to be sent home with his mom and dad. Would you like to go with them too?”

“Yes,” she answered. “I don’t want Kylo to feel alone and I don’t want to feel like that either. We have to help each other.”

He nodded. “That’s true. It’s very important to help the people we love. But remember what I said, Rey? About my son? I love him very much and I won’t love him any less if he lives far away. And I will still try to help him and care about him. If you had to live somewhere without Kylo, how would that make you feel?”

The other kids played games that were all in their heads sometimes. They were imagining, Kylo told her. It was something normal. In the house, there hadn’t been time to play pretend. Everyone was only thinking about somewhere else, looking at their memories. She didn’t have memories from the outside. She only had Kylo’s. Imagining shouldn’t be hard if everyone else could do it.

But trying to think about being somewhere for a long time without Kylo didn’t make sense.

The first day, when the doctors had fixed her arm and the nurses told her how brave she was, was
when she got to learn what clean and safe really meant. It wasn’t only Kylo helping her after Snoke bit her. Water was supposed to only be for drinking but sometimes the hurt needed to be washed away. There was water everywhere now. And so much food. She knew what so many new things tasted like. And all she had to do was ask and she could get something. The lights always worked in their room and it was never dark. Even if she saw the shadow people, all she had to do was reach for Kylo’s hand and they would go away.

But there were also places where she couldn’t go with Kylo. He had to see other doctors or talk to the police. Leia held her hand and told her that he’d be right back. There were always a lot of meetings and too much talking in the outside. She liked it most of the time; it sounded nicer than screams. Sometimes she heard them when everything got too quiet. It happened to Kylo too so it had to be a little bit real.

“I don’t know,” she finally answered. “I think I need to do more talking to know how I’d feel.”

Agent Jinn smoothed her hair, making her smile. “I think that’s a very good idea. You’re going to have plenty of time to learn how the world works, Rey. And I will always try to help you and Kylo make sense of that. I’ve promised him that and now I’m promising you too.”

She looked at him again. Kylo trusted him so it was important for her to do that too. “Okay. Can we play more now?”

By the time Leia came to get her, to take her to Kylo and eat lunch, Rey had figured out that she never wanted to live anywhere without Kylo. He could explain things to her and keep her safe, even if something new and scary came along.

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She couldn’t help it. Tears filled her eyes and she quietly sobbed, leaning into her hands. In the dull illumination at the front of the classroom, she wept for what they had been as children and the choices that they had made.

“Rey.” A gentle hand on her shoulder made her look up. Her vision was filled with the soft hazel of Agent Erso’s eyes as she accepted the tissue. “You might not think this is part of the case, but it is. We have a profile of Kylo that goes back for years that shows him as a potential victim of another crime. Now, we need to re-examine it all to see him and you in a different light. This is important to us. We know he got a phone call from your number. We know where he was when he got it. Do you understand? We’re really only looking for the truth here.”

The fingers left her arm and Erso stepped back to take his seat.

But Owen tapped his notepad, making her sit up straighter. “There is more to your relationship with George now, isn’t there, Rey? Now would be the time to tell us what you discussed in that phone call. And, keep in mind, George is also desperate to find Kylo. He has no reason to lie about what he said to you.”

Blinking back more tears, she tried to take even breaths. Owen and Silla had always been kind to her. Silla had helped her through that horrible day before Kylo arrived home. And Owen had trusted her. With the thought in her mind, she bit the inside of her cheeks hard.

“Why would…why would I lie to you?” she asked, her voice feeling weak. “I still care about him
Erso made a noise in the back of her throat. “We believe that, Rey. And we know that you’re going to tell us the truth. Now, if you would be so kind as to tell us what you discussed with Agent Jinn.”

“Rey? What’s wrong?”

She felt a tightness twinge in her chest at his voice. Anxiety had driven her to call, but the emotion only bloomed the second she heard George’s voice. “I…” she started. “Would Kylo ever hate me? Is there anything I could do to make him hate me?”

“No, never.” She heard George sitting up and clearing his throat. “Can you tell me what happened? What would make you think that? This is a late time to call but I can try to…try to help you.”

Tears stung her eyes as she fought back the memory of the last time she saw George. He had been broken, but still possessed so much kindness and strength. And all she’d done was avoid him since then. “I heard…I heard about the shooting. I tried…I was going to call him but someone else…Liza called him and must have said awful things to him. I don’t know what she said but…”

Her mind was still racing at anything hurtful that Liza could have thrown at Kylo. Deep inside, Rey had hoped that Liza had changed. It seemed like she had. She had said all of the right things and made her feel like a real adult. But now, all she saw was herself much younger again, trapped in that hallway: the flurry of yellow and the smeared make-up; hearing that hateful word shouted at someone who was struggling with who he was. Whatever Liza had burned Kylo with now must have gone straight for anything that the woman could imagine would leave him shattered.

She’d tried so hard all summer to hope that Kylo wouldn’t need her again, that she wouldn’t want to run to him. Liza wasn’t trying to protect her from him; she was just playing another mind game.

“Oh, Rey.” George sighed. “That’s a bit of a complicated situation. I still haven’t spoken to him but if he is in a crisis, he will call me. We’ve already spoken since the shooting. He’s…Rey. He’s missed you. And I’m trying to respect your need to heal but…” George took a deep breath and Rey’s head swam. “I never expected you to let him push you away.” His voice turned sharp but still retained his unmistakable tone of caring. “After all of these years, that moment was when you chose to leave. And only now are you asking for my help.” He paused, clearly choosing his words carefully. “Before I help you, can you try to explain to me why you couldn’t answer any of my calls?”

She sat down on the curb, still feeling August at her side. He stared at her as she shook her head at her phone. How could she tell him that she wanted to avoid the people who reminded her of Kylo?

A deep sigh on the other end told her that he was waiting. “Rey, you know how important the two of you are to me. That night…that night was absolute chaos. If I had the presence of mind in those hours, I would have seen to you, to make sure you were being given the attention you needed.” George took a long breath. “What you walked into, it’s not something a person just forgets. And I’ve always done what I could to protect the two of you from things like this. I can’t imagine what you must have gone through and continue to go through.”
He must also know that she hadn’t accepted help from the Bureau. She’d found another way that was her own.

But in her silence, his voice softened. “But Rey, you have to understand, regardless of what may or may not have been going on between Kylo and Grey, Grey is, was my son. And now he’s gone. I am reminded of that daily when I look at my other children. My loss is not my own. But that night, my focus wasn’t entirely on you or Kylo. Maybe it should have been, maybe if I had been able to look outside of my own pain, I could have seen…”

Rey sobbed, feeling a final wall break inside of her that therapy had never been able to crack. Healing from that night had been about talking about it. It was never about reliving it. She had fought so hard to deal with it and she should have gone to George long ago.

“George it was terrible. I never wanted Grey to die.” But she’d said the words. And she’d meant them at the time. “Not really. I didn’t really mean them. I didn’t know what to do. I couldn’t think. All I could see was how he…” How Grey laid there in a pool of blood, eyes staring at her, staring past her. Like the nightmares, Grey always tilted his head and smiled at her whispering that Kylo loved him more…

“Rey.” George’s stern voice shook her from the image. “Rey, talk to me.”

“My head wouldn’t stop making me see him. Seeing them. I…” She wanted to let go, to fall into panic. But August’s arm kept her there. She’d made it this far. She had to keep fighting. “I couldn’t keep arguing with Kylo, George. I didn’t want to leave, but I had nothing left. I don’t even remember half of what I said anymore. I’ve been trying…trying to find a way to still love and care about him but not be in love with him.”

If there was one rule, it was to never lie to George. Kylo, despite all of the half-truths he gave her, always avoided lying to him. She couldn’t either.

She let out a sob. “But I was ashamed. I’m still ashamed. I knew I shouldn’t have left and talking to you…it just reminded me of every mistake I made that night. I let you down. I let Kylo down.”

Maybe this was supposed to happen. Maybe this was the last push she needed to be herself.

“Rey.” George sighed as she wiped her tears. “You needed to take care of yourself. No one is angry about that. At least, not anymore. Time can heal some wounds but some things need more time than others. You aren’t used to handling scenes like that. It’s hard, even for professionals. But I need you to understand my confusion. I can’t tell you what to do, Rey. But I think that if you were to call Kylo now, he’d be more deeply hurt. You’ve been silent to him and he…it is hard to recover from an on-the-job shooting. But I will listen to him when he reaches out to me again.”

Rey took a deep breath, feeling everything crashing inside of her. “I just…I don’t want him to hate me.”

“Life isn’t as simple as love and hate. If it were, there would be far fewer complicated people in the world. Continue taking care of yourself. I will…when I speak with Kylo, I will find a way to keep him steady. If he wants to discuss this phone call, I will be prepared for it.” He was pacing the room, Rey could hear, and he finally stopped. “Now, I need to get some rest. My children have school in the morning. Goodnight, Rey.”

Staring at the sidewalk, she nodded. “Bye.”

August took a deep breath. “So, what did…what did Mr. FBI have to say?”
Looking up at the stars, she tried to find any familiar pattern. “To keep taking care of myself.”

Quietly, she hoped that Kylo was about to make the same phone call to George.

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“I’m still a little confused, Rey.” Erso tilted his head at her. “You could have informed Han and Leia about this phone call. You could have informed Kylo’s other friends and colleagues who you are close to. Did you expect that SSA Jinn would just clean up the mess?”

She blinked. “I didn’t know that Kylo was going to disappear. I thought…I don’t know what I was thinking.”

Scratching at her leg again, she didn’t want to tell them how she’d struggled all summer. The last thing she wanted to admit to anyone other than her friends was being hospitalized and treated for months after what she’d been through. All she wanted to do was go back to class the next day and pretend it didn’t happen. Inside, she had hoped that Kylo would listen to George.

Breaking her thoughts, Owen’s phone rang and she swallowed, her throat dry from speaking. He glanced from her to the other agent as he stood. “Excuse me.”

The classroom door shut and she could exhale again. Left alone with Erso, she asked if she could take out her water bottle. He eyed her for a moment before nodding. “Please let me know if you need anything else. We can get you more water or something to eat if you get hungry. All you have to do is ask.”

Taking a sip, she tried to find a way to steady her heart. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t understand what I can tell you that will help you find Kylo.”

He pursed his lips. “That’s for us to decide. There are a great deal of things that we need to investigate in order to get a picture of your life apart from Kylo, while still maintaining a connection to him. We know a great deal about…” He trailed off, glancing at the door for a moment before he leaned forward. “I can’t tell you what we know. But it is extremely helpful to our investigation if we look at the people around you. My question is why would Liza make such a phone call. In the times I’ve spoken with Agent Solo about his personal life, he did not mention her at length.”

“It’s because he hates her.” She looked at her bottle. “They didn’t get along. I thought…I thought Liza had gotten over it. She was good to talk to but I shouldn’t have trusted her. I think she’s still mad that Kylo doesn’t want her.”

Erso raised an eyebrow. “It seems to me like you had something in common with Liza when you established this friendship.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He crossed his legs, tapping his notebook. “From what I heard in my conversations with Agent Solo, you were in a conflict with him over his relationship with Mr. Jinn. Other than attending his funeral, I only met him once. He seemed like a complex individual.”

She had to shake her head. “I don’t want to talk about him right now.”
“That is fair.” Erso turned a page. “There are other things to discuss. So explain why you were friends with Liza. I am very curious as to why you apparently reached out to her when you were so angry with Mr. Jinn and his past relationship with Agent Solo.”

The words made her bite her lip, almost tasting blood. “I just ran into her and it felt…good to be able to talk to someone who was…” She trailed off, focusing on her hands.

“Someone who was also hurt by Kylo but doesn’t threaten you?” Owen’s voice made her head snap up. “Someone you could relate to without feeling jealous? Rey, I have always tried to understand your relationship with Kylo. Before I met you, you were a very special case on a computer and in a filing cabinet. And now that we’ve known one another for several years, I want to understand why you could be friends with Liza while Grey was such a problem for you.”

Lifting her chin, she shook her head. “I really just ran into her one day…”

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She needed new paintbrushes. She needed something. All of her creativity couldn’t vanish completely because of the endless summer of hospitals and therapists. She tried talking to Hux and Paige and it didn’t feel right anymore. She spent time with Rose and Kaydel and that felt better. She’d talk to August on the phone and she could spill more feelings to him. Leia would talk to her and Rey would try to talk about anything but Kylo. It was what her therapists suggested. She needed to try to listen.

Han wanted her to try to talk to Kylo. And she’d hear him and Leia arguing on the phone. She hoped that when he got back from Virginia, they could find a way to speak again. Kylo would be back at work soon. If he had the job then he would find a way to be happy and maybe he would stop texting and writing her. She needed to have her own life. She wanted to tell him that but, like talking about Grey, she couldn’t find the words. It haunted her nightmares and flooded her mind during the day, but she couldn’t find a way to make it all come out.

Staring at the racks of paints and brushes, she longed to be back at school. She should have taken summer classes. It was too late now, but next summer she would plan better. Now that all of her summers wouldn’t be spent with Kylo, her life could begin.

She stopped in the middle of the aisle, recognizing a familiar laugh not that far away.

“Oh, hold on, I just ran into someone I know.” Liza tilted her head and waved. The cascade of blonde locks was shortened to a bob, framing her face. She quickly apologized to the person on the phone and turned to smile fully at her. “Wow, Rey. Nice to see you!”

Liza had been right all along. And Kylo had hurt her too.

That was the first thing she thought of as Liza stepped closer and pulled her into a hug.

Tears hit her eyes the moment she was pulled into the embrace.

“Rey, oh sweetieheart,” Liza said, her voice soft in her ear. “What’s happened?”

“You were right.” Rey blurted out, all of her pain pressing on her to collapse in the aisle of the craft store. “I should have never fallen in love with him. I tried to date him and he didn’t want to be with
only me. He was…the guy who died, Gregor was…he was this guy that was always around. Kylo was probably sleeping with him at the same time he was with me. Nobody thinks that but me but he…he didn’t even want me to know that he was talking to him. And now he’s dead and I found him. I found him and then everything just…” The words kept coming out and she finally stopped to gasp.

Grey was gone and not coming back. She couldn’t take back the things they had said to one another, but it had really happened. It was a memory and she had to frame it in a way that wouldn’t make her heart start racing.

“Oh, Rey. I didn’t know.” Liza gripped her arm. “Come on. Don’t fall over. Try to breathe. I’ve been out of the loop totally. I didn’t even know you were together.”

She shook her head. “For about a year. I kissed him and I thought we’d always be together. But he didn’t want just me.”

“Yes. That sounds like him.” The other woman shifted her hand to her back, rubbing small circles. “It’s just like I told you. But how long have you been in town? I’m here all of the time so I’m just surprised that we haven’t seen each other before. Do you like my haircut?”

“It’s nice.” She managed a small smile. “I’ve been back for a couple of months, I guess. I was trying to live in Virginia for the summer but he sent me home after…after Gregor died. I was the one who had to walk into that house and find him dead on the floor. And then…” She trailed off. Maybe Liza didn’t need to know that she’d been so twisted up inside because of Kylo that she’d had to be in the hospital for far too long.

“At least I knew about that.” Liza scoffed lightly. “All I got was that strange phone call and Kylo tried to tell me I was in danger too. He sounded so serious and called himself Agent Solo. Like, sure you are, you freak.”

Sighing, Rey lightly shook her head. “He’s…he really did it.”

Missing the tone of her voice, Liza smiled at her. “Let’s go talk about this. I have time right now. I’ve never found, like, a dead body but maybe if you start focusing on yourself, maybe some of those feelings will start making more sense?”

“…and then we were sort of…friends the rest of the summer. Whenever I…she let me talk about Kylo differently. I sort of couldn’t meet his friends because they didn’t feel like mine anymore. Hux and Paige would try to tell me how he was thinking and it didn’t make sense. With Liza, things felt normal. Because I knew he’d hurt her too.” Rey folded her arms, remembering the quiet evenings with Liza. He could only sleep with her when he was drunk. Liza had a lot to say about that. “I don’t know why she made the phone call. I didn’t tell her to do it or anything like that. It’s like I told you. She wanted to make sure I couldn’t reach out to him. Or maybe she just wanted to hurt him again.”

Owen nodded. “Yes, well, we will speak to her. I, frankly, don’t think I can get through a conversation with her so, hopefully, someone else can handle her. There has been nothing suspicious from what we can tell at her work or her home. But there needs to be a reason why she
took your phone, called him, and then deleted everything.”

Glancing at Erso, she tried to figure out his expression. It was strange to watch him think through whatever she had given him. “At any point, did you see Liza as someone you idolized? Or looked up to? You said hurt Kylo again. When was the previous incident?”

She crossed her arms and looked out the window, watching an ochre leaf drift by in the breeze.

“It was at the wedding.”

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“Ugh, have you seen Kylo?” Liza let the washroom door slide shut as she stepped inside, hiking her yellow dress as she moved. “We can’t find him anywhere.”

Rey glanced from Liza back to the mirror. She’d just fixed her lip-gloss but just looking at the other woman made her want to redo it. “I saw him sneaking around with Hux and some of the others. I think he finally apologized for punching that guy.”

Rolling her eyes, Liza let her dress flow down to the dark tile. “Well, that’s Hux’s problem, isn’t it? If Kylo had gotten his way, Hux wouldn’t have even had a bachelor party. They would have just been sitting in his room, talking about high school and their stupid feelings.” Liza took a compact out of her small purse and started patting at her face. “He really doesn’t want to do the first dance with me. I am trying to look nice so he’ll at least try for five minutes.”

All Kylo had been doing was trying, Rey wanted to say as she played with a strand of hair. He’d put so much of himself into helping Hux and Paige. Rey was finally seeing how close their friendship was. Part of it was heartbreaking and the other part made her so proud of Kylo. Even if he had been in a fight, he had apologized. His speech had been beautiful but it reminded her of who Kylo was missing that day. Paige had cried that morning before the ceremony, captured in a picture that Rey hoped the photographer would delete. Her mother patted her cheeks and whispered words to her in a language that Rey didn’t understand. They were supposed to be getting dressed, having their make-up done, and smiling over drinks. Instead, Paige was thinking about her dead friend.

It made Rey wonder why she didn’t miss Poe more.

Maybe it was because she had other friends now.

And so did Kylo.

She checked her hair again and sighed. “He is trying, Liza. I keep telling him you’re nice and he doesn’t need to act like this, but he’s...”

“Fucking stubborn, ugh.” Liza leaned against the counter and shrugged. Rey saw how perfect her neckline was, how she filled out the dress. Again, she thought about how flat she was, despite the new bra she bought for the wedding. There wasn’t much to look at with her body, but there was so much more to Liza.

If someone looked for too long, Rey felt uncomfortable and embarrassed. Liza could walk into a room and find it flattering when someone stared at her. When they were planning the wedding, going through what they would wear, what they would do, and how everything would look, Liza
would always stop to talk her through some of her thoughts. The woman would smile and tell her that it was all about confidence. Ransolm had tried to teach her that too. She really needed to start believing in herself again.

Liza stepped back, adjusting her breasts. Rey glanced away, staring at the sink. “Well, whatever they’re doing, I hope it calms him down. He’s been so tense since pictures after church this morning.” She smacked her lips and smiled at herself as she fixed her hair. “And hey, you look great too, Rey. I wish I was your age again. I miss being able to sleep on my chest.”

With a grin filled with perfect white teeth, Liza left her alone. Taking her hands to her chest, Rey tried to find the hint of some cleavage. Seeing her breasts meeting in the elegant dress, even for a moment, made her smile for a second but it faded just as fast.

Maybe Kylo wouldn’t want to dance with Liza, but he would dance with her. Even if she wasn’t as glamorous, Rey knew his heart in a different way than Liza could ever understand.

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She realized she was back in the classroom and turned her head to try to finish answering the question, drifting out of explaining the memory. “After Poe died, Kylo was sleeping with her. They weren’t dating or anything, but they had sex a few times. After Hux’s wedding, he was drunk and upset. The entire time, he was trying to do too much and it got to be too much. She got into his room and he kicked her out after they started arguing. She was drunk too and when I saw her, she called Kylo a fag and told me not to fall in love with him.”

She tried to focus on the pattern of Owen’s tie. She needed to stay in the room and not slip into memories that reminded her of how much of her life had been tied to Kylo.

“I need to leave soon.” Owen glanced at his phone, frowning at it before he turned to her again. “You’ve given us some…things to question Liza about. It might be nothing, or it might help us get closer to a suspect.”

Licking her lips, she frowned. “Do you think she might have something to do with it?”

The two agents exchanged looks, expressions dropping from their faces before they stared at her again. As she focused on them, she realized that they’d positioned their chairs across from her to block the door. Kylo told her about that all of the time. It was a technique to keep people talking because they’d be too afraid to try to leave.

“We can’t tell you that,” Erso started. “You have to understand, Rey, that things like this are complicated and take time that we don’t have. We knew they had a history, but not necessarily your role in it. We had no reason to suspect her before so we have to rule out if this is another matter of coincidence.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, looking from one agent to the other. “Owen? Please, you know me. I’ve only told the truth and…”

She watched him bite his lip, the mask slipping. He raked his hand through his hair as he took a deep breath.

“Rey, we can’t ignore some of the inconsistencies we’ve already uncovered in this investigation.
Friendship and trust are important, so I want you to keep trusting me. The difficult thing at this moment is whether or not I trust you and what you’re telling us.” His eyes remained firm and she swallowed. “We can’t ignore the fact that you and Kylo had an argument the day before Grey was murdered. The more we look at this, the harder we’ve had to examine the facts as we see them. You left Kylo’s house. Your friend, a daughter of an FBI agent who has been vetted and cleared, received a text message that only asked for you. Why did you go to that house alone, Rey?”

“I…” Her mouth fell open, panic sending her rigid. “I wanted to talk to him. I didn’t think he was dead. I told,” she snapped her head to Erso, “I told you all of this!”

He tilted his head, the look making her shiver. ‘But we can’t ignore how you acted afterwards, Rey. Some would think that cutting ties with Kylo may be a reaction to the end of a relationship or, perhaps, a sign of feeling guilty regarding the death of a romantic rival.”

Rey leaned over in her chair. “Why don’t you believe me?”

“Because this is really happening, Rey!” Owen’s raised voice made her wrap her arms around herself, desperate to breathe. “For all we know, you called him and are shifting the blame to Liza, saying it was her. You called him and told him what you really saw in the house that day!”

Sucking in breaths, she shook her head. “No.”

“How did the journal and the ring end up in your hotel room in Mexico, Rey?” Owen dropped his voice. “And how can the same man, who has killed two grown men, fail to kill you twice?”

“No! I’m telling you the truth!” Finally, she pushed off from her chair, forcing herself to her feet. “It was the same man! He ran after me! I could have died twice and…”

“Rey, please calm down. Sit down.” Erso raised a hand. “This is not an argument or an interrogation. It is a conversation. And Agent Kenobi may have been a little,” he paused to eye the other man for a moment, “sharp with you right now, but it’s only because we’re very concerned about Kylo and how this is connected to the wider case. We have your initial statements still and we will be going over everything. All we appreciate right now is that you tell us the truth. That’s all we want to hear. Why don’t we talk about something else? What happened after you left Virginia?”

She looked at her shoes and weakly nodded as she slumped in her chair again. She could feel the air being sucked out of her ears as she dipped back into another day of pure misery.

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Staring out the window of the plane, she wondered if the pain in her chest would ever go away. Crossing her legs only made it shift; half of her was missing. She knew where it was, but she didn’t know if she ever wanted to have it back. When the officer had taken her to Brianna’s the previous night, walking her to the next block, her eyes had been dry. The ache must have been the reason why everything felt blocked. She’d wanted to have a full breakdown, but all of the words that Kylo had shouted at her were keeping anything from emerging.

He didn’t feel like he deserved her love. So maybe Kylo didn’t deserve more of her tears.

Beneath the damage, she also knew that he was going to hurt himself. And because Kylo was
Kylo, someone was going to come and help him, wondering where he was. And since he didn’t want it to be her, what did he really expect her to do? She’d only listened to him, falling under the weight of the power that he held over her still.

She didn’t know where to begin telling Brianna what happened, thankful that her suitcase was packed and ready. Her father had looked at her with confusion, but he probably knew more about what was going on than Kylo would ever tell her. She was so sick and tired of the FBI too. None of them had ever really been her friends. Maybe George’s kindness had all been insincere too, even from the beginning. He had been only looking for Kylo, after all.

Her entire life, she had only been an addition to Kylo. The people he chose freely to be around mattered more than her.

She felt her lip trembling and shut her eyes, trying to picture anything other than seeing Grey on the floor. Having to repeat the description so many times at the station had made it all start to feel like it hadn’t actually happened.

When she had weakly hugged Brianna goodbye at the airport, she wondered if she’d ever see her friend again. She had tried to make Virginia hers too, to make it her own. But now, Kylo’s head would be filled with his twisted memories of Grey and Poe; he wouldn’t be thinking about her and what she’d left behind.

Leaving would protect her, that’s what he’d said. They could never find the man doing this but he still thought she was safer somewhere else. Even talking to Silla hadn’t felt the same. Her words were comforting and the shower had taken away the blood, but the situation hadn’t changed.

Everything kept tightening the invisible band around her chest. Kylo would keep finding reasons to lie to her, even if he promised he would change. Even if he did run back to her this time, looking for forgiveness, she had to find the strength to tell him no. She didn’t want to. She didn’t want to lose him but it just hurt too much.

Kylo’s room was still going to be across the hall. She’d have to take off her shoes and see his runners that were by the backdoor. In their year of being a couple, all of the times that he’d kissed her, hugged her, or told her that he loved her hadn’t meant the same to him as they did to her.

Inside, she imagined him saying the same things to Grey and that made her hands clench into fists. She would have to fight with another memory of a ghost. She imagined the children at the library finding out that he was gone and almost felt tears come to her eyes. The same went for Grace and Grant. Even if he was only pretending to feel things, he mattered to others.

“Miss? Are you okay?”

Turning, sound sucked back to her ears and she exhaled.

“Yes,” she answered the flight attendant, her words hardly leaving her mouth. “I’m fine.”

The re-circulated air of the plane hissed lightly as she breathed in and out, bringing herself back to where she was and how she’d gotten there. Brianna’s father had driven her. It hadn’t been Kylo.

She’d checked in her bag by herself and stood in line without a familiar set of sharp eyes watching her as she went through security.

The dark-haired woman in the light blue uniform tilted her head. “You were breathing heavily. I was just making sure you’re not scared of flying. I can sit with you for a while, if it makes you feel better, or I can get you some water. It’s perfectly safe to fly but I understand it can be scary. You’re actually safer on a plane than you are riding in a car.”
Sitting back, she realized that her fingers were firmly dug into her legs. She glanced at the empty seat beside her and slowly shook her head. “I’m…I’m just nervous. I’ll be okay.”

If she could get off the plane and go anywhere but home, she would be closer to feeling something other than misery. She was still looking for a place in the world that was as comfortable and made for her as Kylo’s arms had been for the first four years of her life.

“Are you sure? We’re only in the air for a bit longer.” She stood back, looking at her with concern in her brown eyes. “You can hit the call button if you need anything.”

Rey licked her lips, wanting to let the trapped words spill out of her mouth to a total stranger, but nodded instead. “I’m fine. Thank you.”

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“So, the thoughts and feelings that you’re describing, you didn’t tell the flight attendant? Do you remember her name? Or if you spoke to anyone else on the plane?” Owen leaned forward, pulling her back from the memory. “These are the details we are looking for. Did you notice anyone following you?”

She licked her lips. She’d been too distraught to remember Kylo’s old lessons about how to spot strangers. And now that her head was swimming with confusion, everything was even vaguer and less real.

“I don’t think there was anyone. And the seat next to me was empty and I only wanted to be alone.” She looked between the two agents again and closed her eyes. “It all seemed normal even if I wasn’t myself.”

She could almost smell the flight attendant’s soft perfume as she shook her head.

“Rey, we need…we need to go over why we think someone might have been following you. And I think you know what we’re talking about.” Agent Erso’s voice made her lift her head. “There was another time in your life when Kylo was seeking out someone else for comfort. Part of our investigation is extending to that as well.”

Rey firmly shut her eyes and she shook her head. “Do I have to…do I have to talk about him now?”

She heard Owen sigh but didn’t want to look at him. “Rey, tell me about Poe Dameron.”

“Why?” She felt herself slipping away again even as the question left her mouth.

“Because we know that this started before his death. Kylo’s work has shown us that much.” Owen answered. “And we need to know how you feel about him.”

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“Where’s Ky?”
Rey’s hand stilled at the voice and the steps up the back porch. Glancing up from her drawing, she smiled at Poe. “Mom made him go to the store.”

“Why? What did he do?” Poe wrinkled his eyebrows before hopping up to sit across from her on the wide railing of the porch. He started swinging his legs, waiting for her to answer. She knew it was okay to tell Poe what happened. He was Kylo’s best friend. She liked being around him. Just because she knew that they liked to kiss one another didn’t make him bad. Kylo still thought she was the best girl he knew. So what if Poe was the only boy he liked being around?

“He punched a wall,” she said before shrugging and looking at her drawing again. “And mom said ‘cause it keeps happening, he has to learn to fix it himself. I think mom knew you were coming too so Kylo just went. And dad will help him anyways.”

“Huh. I thought…I thought that was getting better, you know? The whole wall-punching and phone-throwing thing.” Poe started running his hands along the wood, keeping himself balanced across from her. “Did you not want to go with him?”

“I’m not allowed in the car if he’s alone. Kylo says he doesn’t care but then mom has to tell him it’s not safe. I’m fine on my own because he’ll be back soon.” Her pencil crayon was still in her hand, drawing another line. “And it’s been a long time since he broke something. I think it’s good that you’re here and you’re his friend.”

“Yeah, I like being his friend too.” Poe pushed himself to his feet, his sneakers balancing on the edge as he started walking down to the next support beam. “I’ll have to tell him again that it’s okay to call me if he’s pissed about something. He seemed normal when we were texting this morning. Do you know what happened? Like, was it bad?”

Even with his arms outstretched, he swayed slightly. She put her drawing down and moved from the wicker chair to take a few steps towards him. It was pretty far to the ground outside and the wooden slats of the deck would hurt if he fell the other way. He wasn’t really careful. With all of the bruises he had, he must fall a lot. It was good that Kylo took care of him to help him feel better too.

He had looked upset when he left, but had stopped to blink that he would be able to calm down on the drive to the hardware store. He also didn’t want to make Poe wait for him so he would be back as soon as he figured out exactly what he needed to buy. It wasn’t even a big hole. Kylo had made bigger ones before.

“He remembered he lent Hux a book and he wants it back. It’s something about dead people and it had a really long title…” she started.

Poe stumbled and she gasped before he caught himself at the last second, steadying himself on the beam at the corner. “It’s fine, sweet pea. I’m quick like a cat. And yeah, I know that book. It was the Ancient Executions one. I can’t remember the rest but it was long, you’re right. He was complaining about that to me last night but I told him we could talk about it today. Shit, I should have said something else if he got, you know, that mad.”

His face fell slightly and he hopped off of his perch to land with a thump. Rey could breathe again even as she shook her head. She reached for his hand and he smiled before he took it. She had to try to keep him on the ground. “I think he got mad at mom. She told him to ask for it back and that Hux would give to him if he just talked to him. But Kylo doesn’t want to talk to him because he hates him.”

“Yeah, the guy is a dick.” He smirked for a moment before he winced. “Don’t tell Leia I said that.”
“You’re allowed to swear, Poe.” She let go of his hand and got back on her chair again. At least this time, he dropped to the ground across from her, poking at a hole in the knee of his jeans. “Mom said it was okay.”

“Yeah, I know but… I think it’s still bad. My dad swears at me all of the time but hates it when I stand up for myself so…” He shrugged before leaning up to glance at her drawing. “What are you working on? That looks nice.”

“It’s my homework,” she said, handing him the paper on her favourite clipboard. It was hard to draw outside without it. “We’re supposed to make what we want to be when we grow up.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “This looks like a guy in a suit. Do you want to be a guy in a suit when you grow up? Like a lawyer or something?”

She shook her head. Sometimes, he didn’t understand what her drawings meant. “No. That’s Kylo. When he’s in the FBI. I don’t know what I want to be when I get big but I know what he wants to do. So I’m drawing him like I remember George looking. I still have to do the gun but I don’t know how to draw them.”

“Want help?” Poe asked. She grinned and gave him a black pencil from her case. “I used to draw tons of guns when I was a kid but then my mom got freaked out. I’ve only seen a couple of guns up close so she was worried for nothing. And now Ky likes watching cop movies so there are tons of guns there. I just don’t tell my mom. It makes things easier.”

He balanced her clipboard on his knees and quickly sketched the gun into her figure’s hand. It had black hair and a dark suit. She knew that Kylo was pretty tall now and would keep growing because they had tons of food to eat, even if he didn’t want it most of the time. Their stomachs hurt for similar reasons. She was getting better because she was talking to Maz and Ahsoka. Kylo was getting better because he had Poe.

“Look, I can do something right. It’s pretty good, I think. Your drawing is better but I think I got the gun part right.” He handed the red board back to her. “It looks good, right?”

Studying the small black sketch, placed at the edge of her drawing’s hand, she nodded. The boys in her class, including Finn, sometimes drew guns and made stories about fighting. Learning about war in school had been strange in a different way from the normal confusion about learning something new. She didn’t like to read about other people being hurt. No one in her class, not even her teacher or her helper, understood that she could hear about someone being in pain and she could feel it like it was her own. She didn’t want to know that there were so many bad things in the world.

That’s why Kylo wanted to be in the FBI. That’s what he said. He wanted to fix some of the hurt that so many people felt.

“Thanks, Poe. I think it’s perfect.” She kept filling in the red for the tie, wondering if it was the right colour. She felt Poe’s eyes on her and glanced up to smile at him. “What?”

He shrugged, breaking out into a grin. “No. It’s nothing. It’s really nothing.” She had to roll her eyes at him to say what he was really thinking. “Okay. It’s like this. I’m wondering why you aren’t drawing what you want to be? I mean, yeah, Ky’s going to have a cool job but that doesn’t mean you won’t have a cool job too.”

Licking her lips, she put her pencil down again. “It’s ‘cause I don’t know what I want to be. I don’t know a lot of jobs. Rose and I play sometimes and we want to take care of animals. Sometimes we
want to be teachers or fix people’s hair. Sometimes we want to be astronauts but space is really far away so I don’t think I want to be an astronaut.”

“Astronaut would be sweet. I wanted to be an astronaut for a while when I was really small. All I wanted to do was fly away and find a place for me and mom…” He trailed off quickly, shaking off a look that made Rey frown. He was grinning again right away but she was sure it had been there. “I’m too short to be an astronaut. Ky could be one if he wanted to. And so could you. It’s a lot of work but you get to find out so much about the world. Plus, you’re a hero too.”

She wrinkled her nose. “How are you a hero for going into space?”

He rubbed his chin, thinking. “That’s a good question, sweet pea. I think that they’re heroes because they’re doing something that will help us figure out how our planet works. Like, we only have one planet and we all have to get along to make it last as long as possible. They also have to ride in like really powerful rockets. And that must be fucking scary.”

Slowly, Rey looked at her picture again. “So heroes are people who aren’t scared when they do scary things?”

“Nah,” he answered. “They must be scared. They must be really scared. But they keep going because there’s something important to be done. It’s like how Ky is your hero for saving you. He’s my hero for that too. He didn’t know what to do or how to get you out of there and he was afraid, but he found a way out so you both could come home and be safe.” He reached out, grabbing the red pencil again, lightly shading the empty spaces on the tie. “But even heroes need other people too. I read this book about medieval knights and they needed, like, flag bearers and guys who could make their weapons so they could go to war and protect their lands. They needed farmers to plant crops so everyone could eat and those farmers needed the knights to keep them safe. They needed their families so they’d have somewhere to come home to and people to love. I thought it was pretty cool. Ky…just liked hearing about the sword part.”

She watched him draw a tiny heart into the tie before he quickly started sketching over it. “So maybe my job can be…” She looked up, following the lines of their house. “Maybe I can be Kylo’s family. He can go do his job and I’ll be there for him.”

He grinned again. “Yeah, I guess that’s a job. It’s a hard thing to draw. My mom tried to do that but she was never really happy. But I think that it would be cool if you had your own real job. I don’t know what I want to be so I’m not going to force you to make up your mind now or anything. But you’re good at baking and cooking. Maybe you can be a chef or work at a restaurant.”

Rey nodded as she thought about what would she do at a job like that. “I might like that. I could make people food so they wouldn’t be hungry.”

“See? Yeah.” Poe reached out, quickly rolling onto his knees to hug her. “You could make them happy too because people like hanging out and talking and eating. That always happens when I’m with my grandma. She makes food and we’re a big, happy family.”

The warm embrace made her almost able to imagine what that life would be like. But when it didn’t fully come to her mind, she shrugged a little. “I can’t make it be in my head. So maybe it’s not for me. But for someone. Someone else would be good at that.”

Poe looked at her and nodded. He leaned back to rest on his elbows, thinking again. “Well, you like animals. And you and Rose already play the vet game. Maybe you could make other people’s pets better. I think that’s a really cool job because animals can’t talk. You have to listen in other ways to figure out why they are sick and hurting. It’s like you and Ky with the blinking thing. You
It was a job that Rose talked a lot about. She remembered how upset Kylo had been when he found out his old dog was sick and had to die. Maybe he needed to go to a better vet, Kylo had said to Han one night when they were looking at old pictures of him. Kylo had been so much angrier when he was fourteen. Even if he was still punching walls, he was softer now. He’d cuddle more and he wasn’t crying as often. If she kept going to therapy and things got better with school, she’d feel better too.

But did she want to work with animals? She liked animals. She loved going to the fair every summer to see the horses. Leia said that she could take horseback riding lessons if she wanted to but she hadn’t talked to Kylo about it yet. It would be fun to try at least. But animals died. And their owners would be upset. She didn’t want to let them down if she couldn’t make their pets feel better. “I just think I’d make people sad. What if I can’t figure out the right medicine to give them?”

Poe was nodding again. “Yeah, that makes sense. But hey, hey! I have an idea. You could be an artist. You’re really good at drawing. I mean, I don’t get some of them because I’m stupid, but Ky says they make sense to him. I’m sure there are tons of other people out there who would like to see them. You could draw or paint or do those really weird sculptures that no one gets. Or like those people who do the really cool spray-painting art. I think artists are…they have a lot of emotions. They’ve seen a bunch of things or felt things no one else could. You could totally do that.”

She started to think about what Poe was telling her, trying to make that world real, when both of their heads turned to glance behind the garage at the sound of a car rolling down the alley. Kylo was finally home. Poe quickly got to his feet, hugging her again, before he sprinted towards the garage.

Putting her drawing aside, she went to sit on the top step to wait for them.

“…and I know I need to learn how to do it but the guy looked at me like I was stupid for asking what I needed. Dad has all of these tools and the fucking guy kept trying to sell me tools.” Kylo was carrying one bag and Poe the other. She smiled at them both, waving.

Kylo grinned at her, his face soft again. He really had calmed down. Leaving the house had been a good idea. I don’t think I bought the right stuff. But it’s Leia’s fault for trusting me.

“We’ll find some video online and figure it out, Ky.” Poe paused, glancing in the plastic bag. “They sell candy there. Why didn’t you buy any candy?”

Kylo rolled his eyes, looking from her to him. “We need to fix the wall. We can…” He started off sounding angry and she exhaled. He glanced at her quickly and licked his lips. “We can get candy when we’re done. Okay? Rey? Do you want to help us?”

They were standing on the porch, waiting outside the door.

“No,” she said, smiling. “I’m going to finish my homework.”

He looked at her with worried eyes for a moment but nodded and went inside. She heard them almost arguing about candy again when they were in the house, but shrugged it off.

Alone, Rey went back to her spot on the comfortable chair. Beside the man in the suit, she added a
figure in a dress, holding a paintbrush.

It had just been an ordinary day. She hadn’t really thought about it for so long. She had lost so many of her memories of Poe because of how she felt about Kylo. Poe never deserved all of the harsh feelings she had about him. He had done nothing but love her. Shaking her head, she wiped at her eyes again.

“We are in touch with his family again, looking to see if Kylo has been in contact with them without telling us. But what did he mean for your family?” Erso looked at her with narrowed eyes. “Kylo spoke about him often.”

“And it sounds like you haven’t gone over your thoughts about him,” Owen added. “Rey, we know that you have been dealing with a lot this summer. And from my conversations with Kylo about his past relationships, I have a good idea of what Poe meant to him. But if you haven’t dealt with that loss in your own way, much of what you felt related to Gregor might have brought it out. It might explain some of how you acted. That’s what we are trying to get an explanation for.”

She rubbed her eyes. “I’m really tired. I don’t know if I can talk about this right now.”

She wanted to go to her room. It felt like she’d been trapped with the two agents for hours. And the clock still wasn’t moving.

“I don’t think it’s a matter of whether you can or cannot. I think it’s up to you to try.” Kenobi shifted in his seat. “Rey, you were a child when he died and I think that many of the problems in your relationship with Kylo are connected to the fact that you weren’t working together. Part of being a couple is knowing that your partner has a past, even if it’s a difficult one. And some of the decisions you made regarding Gregor may be connected to things you haven’t really thought about in a long time.”

She could only stare at him, her mind drifting again.

“Rey, honey, where’s Kylo?”

Rey wanted to snap that she didn’t care where he was but shook her head at Leia’s question instead. “He went for a walk. He smelt…he smelt like alcohol again. I don’t think he showered.”

“He probably went to the park again. Was he wearing his running clothes?” Rey managed to nod. Some of the tension left Leia’s shoulders. Sighing, she sat across from her at the table, flipping the edge of the flowered placemat. “He needs to start answering his phone when he does something like this. He wants us to have that tracking app and I’d do it if he’d let us know where the hell he is too. But how are you doing today, sweetheart? Are you worried about him? Some days he just doesn’t feel like showering and that’s actually pretty normal.”
All of his behaviour wasn’t normal, she wanted to argue. It had been almost two months since the funeral. Even now, he was spending too much time in the basement, going through his old life while drinking by himself. She’d sit on the top step, trying to find a way to talk to him. They would lock eyes and he would tilt his head. Those evenings would stretch on until she was too close to tears to endure any more of it. But every time, before she left, she’d catch his eye and only managed to shake her head before going upstairs to her room.

“I don’t know what to do, mom.” She’d been drawing again. Drawing her thoughts felt better than writing them. She was tired of everything being black so she’d left her dark markers upstairs on purpose. “He doesn’t even want to spend time with me.”

“You can’t take that personally, Rey.” Leia sighed. “He doesn’t want to spend time with anyone. But we’re not going to give up on him. He’ll realize…I think he knows how hard he’s being on everyone and he’s going to apologize and really mean it soon. But we need to make sure you’re okay too. What are you going to do today?”

Standing from the table, Leia kept glancing at her as she reached for the coffee pot. Rey had heard Kylo get up at the same time that Han did. She’d sat at the top of the stairs, listening to them talk. Kylo hadn’t slept or showered. He didn’t touch his coffee and instead of taking the dog for a walk with Han, Kylo went out the front door, disappearing into the morning.

Adding another flower to her landscape, Rey shrugged. “I don’t know. I might go for a bike ride.”

Leia nodded, sipping at her cup. She made a face before moving to the fridge for some milk. “Christ, what did Han make? Tar?” Rey tried to smile before looking at her drawing again. “Sorry, honey. But that was just…disgusting. But I think a bike ride would be nice. It’s supposed to be a beautiful day. We can go to the pool in the afternoon. You can call your friends and maybe we can stop for burgers after.”

She swallowed at the thought. She didn’t think hamburgers were very healthy. They tasted good but there was so much fat and so many calories in them. She’d have to swim for a long time to be able to eat one. And if she ordered a chicken sandwich, it would be better. “I can ask them. I’d like to see them.”

Leia took the seat beside her. “Do you want to ask Kylo if he wants to come?”

She quickly shook her head. “He…he doesn’t like people seeing his arms.”

After a tight smile, Leia nodded. “Honey, are you still having nightmares about what he did?”

“I didn’t like seeing him at the hospital. And I know…” She swallowed. “I’m sorry I ran away, mom. I felt so alone and I didn’t want them to get married and nothing…it was like there was a hole in me and I just wanted it to go away.”

“And you thought California might be the answer?” Leia asked.

Biting her lip, Rey shrugged. “I thought…I wanted to see if things would be better there. I was tired of feeling alone and thinking about them. I’m…I’m sorry I stole from you too.”

Leia sipped her coffee. “I know you are, sweetheart. And even though I don’t understand why you wanted to leave, I understand that you were feeling hurt about their…” Leia stopped for a moment, putting her cup down. Rey was used to seeing people start to cry that she didn’t have to guess what Leia was thinking about. She watched her blink back tears before picking her mug up again. “I’m sorry about that.”
“I know.” Picking up a green marker, she started creating a small hill in the background with careful, overlapping lines. “Mom, do you think he was scared when he died? Do you think that my parents were scared when they were murdered too?”

“Well, I’m not an expert.” Leia licked her lips before nodding to herself. “You can call George and ask him, since he’s…since he deals with this stuff more than we do. But from what Ben said, when he told dad about it, he looked afraid. But it sounds like he was trying to stay alive. And I miss him a lot, just like Kylo and dad miss him. And maybe your parents weren’t scared of dying, but they were afraid of what was going to happen to you.”

“Why do you think that?” Rey asked, glancing over but not quite meeting her eyes. She focused on her earrings instead.

“Well,” Leia started before taking another drink of coffee. “It’s hard to be a parent and know that someone could hurt your child. I lived that fear for seven years, not knowing what was happening to Ben. I know that even if I died in a car accident or got sick, I would have died wondering what happened to my son. There’s a special bond between parents and children, just like the one between partners. We stop thinking only about ourselves because there’s someone else out there in the world that has a piece of our heart. And I know that when grandpa died, he knew that I would be safe with my family. I was sad for a long time and I think about him a lot, but with you, Ben, and Han, I have other pieces of my heart to focus on.”

Slowly, Rey started to spin a marker. “Were you scared when you couldn’t find me?”

“Rey, of course we were. We told you how petrified we were. We thought you were hurt and lost too. I’m so thankful that we could find you and bring you home. I don’t think there’s a minute of that night that I’ll ever forget. But…” Leia sighed. “But have you thought about what we talked about? About how maybe it’s a good idea to go to stay with Luke and go to a different school for a while? Ben needs a lot of time right now and, Rey, he’s not being selfish by taking some time to himself. He loves you and he cares about you. Even if I wish he would keep his phone on all of the time, I also need to try to give him space. But maybe we can’t help you both like you need right now. And this school might be able to help you find out why you feel like there’s a hole inside of you. It’s your choice, Rey. But I’d appreciate it if you thought about it.”

The marker still in her grip, Rey ran her fingers up and down the green plastic. “I don’t want to miss my friends. And I don’t want…even if Kylo is ignoring me, I don’t want him to feel alone.”

Leia’s hand covered hers. “We’re working hard to make sure he doesn’t feel that way. But maybe, sweetheart, it’s a good idea to try something new. This is a big change for our family. For almost five years, there were five of us. And we don’t want you to feel like you’re not special or that you’re not loved while all of us try to deal with him being gone. What we don’t want you to do is take on all of Kylo’s grief and ignore how you’re really feeling.”

For a moment, all Rey could think about was Poe in the casket. How Kylo looked at the hospital. How she had to see both Hux and Han crying at the hospital. How George had looked in the car. All of the faces started overlapping and she wanted to scream until they all went away.

Sucking in a long breath, she shook her head. “I need to think about it more. But I want Kylo to get better too.” If Kylo could just stop missing him then everything would be better. They could have their bubble back and they could deal with their hurt together.

“Rey, we’ll be looking out for him. And Uncle Luke will be taking care of you.” Leia squeezed her hand lightly. When she pulled away, she stood from the table to rinse out her mug. “But just think about it. If you do decide to go, we wouldn’t be sending you away. You’d come home for
Thanksgiving and Christmas and New Years'. You’d be home for your birthday and Easter. There would be other weekends too. And we’d be talking all of the time.” Leia turned, holding the damp mug. “Families are still families even if we’re separated to work on ourselves. And when we come together again, we’ll be stronger because we made that hard choice.”

Shrugging, Rey picked up her marker again. “I’m going to think about it.”

“Okay.” Leia’s hand brushed her shoulder. “Did Han actually take a look at your bike? I thought you were having a problem with the chain.”

She couldn’t remember if he did or not. “Can we go take a look at it? Then I can change and maybe Kylo will be home before I go for a ride?”

Leia smiled. “That sounds like a great idea.”

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She was still in the classroom. She wasn’t in the kitchen anymore.

Owen sighed. “We understand how difficult that time was for all of you. And that there was a time when you were living in Michigan with Luke, attending a different school.”

Looking at her hands, she flicked her eyes up to them again. “And then I got that letter. It just tore my heart up that Kylo could love someone more than me.”

It was a feeling that had never faded. Arguing over the pictures, having to hear about Poe again, fighting about Gregor…all of it had felt so important. Now, when she looked at her thoughts, Poe would have tried to help her through all of this. It had been building all summer and now that it finally settled into her heart, she wished she could pick up her phone to call Kylo. He missed him. And she missed him too.

Erso cleared his throat. “So, would you say that you turn to Leia more than Han? If we ask her questions about what you’re describing to us, will we hear the same story?”

“Yes. I try to talk to her about my problems. She’s always been there for me.” She closed her eyes, feeling regret roll over her again. “But I’ve pulled away again since school started. This summer has been…hard. Han…I thought he was picking sides. That he picked Kylo over me. They have been arguing about me and him and what to do with us.”

Really, it had all started the moment she stepped off the plane.

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Slumping into Leia’s arms, Rey’s cheeks remained dry. The relief should have been instant. Leia was the woman she’d called mom for so many years: the same greying hair, perfume, and soft sweater that she wore on warmer days. But something felt different in the hug.

“Sweetheart, what happened? We haven’t heard anything more. How are you doing?”
Rey hated herself for looking up and hoping to see Kylo standing behind his mother.

“I don’t…” she started, stepping back and dropping her eyes to look at her shoes. They were the same blue ones she’d worn almost a year ago, seeing Kylo outside of her arrival gate. She had loved them then but hated them now. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Leia stepped back, exhaling and shaking her head before she looked at her husband. Rey felt like she wasn’t really there; maybe the plane had crashed and she was dead. The ghost ache in her chest was there because her heart had stopped beating.

“Well, that’s okay. That’s more than okay if you don’t want to talk about it. But we need to ask some small things here to understand what’s going on. You’re here now and you’re okay. But we’re worried about Ben.” Han put his hand on her shoulder and her frown deepened. “Honey, what did he say when you left? He hasn’t answered his phones since yesterday.”

Of course he wouldn’t. He’s feeling sorry for himself. Or hurting himself. Or drunk. Or all of those things. The thoughts spun into confusion and she didn’t want to say any of them. If she did, then they would be real.

She weakly lifted her shoulders, trying to ignore Kylo’s tears in her mind. “He told me to go. That’s what he kept saying.” She looked up and saw the hurt and puzzled looks on the faces of the only parents she’d ever known. She tried not to focus on how they were there for her, but only asking about Kylo. “Can we go home now?”

She walked with her arms folded around waist as they made their way to the car. She’d seen the halls of that airport so many times now. Inside, she quietly wished that Han didn’t always park in a nearly identical spot every time. Everything was the same but different now.

“Rey, you can talk about what happened to you. You can talk about anything. Things don’t get better when you keep them inside,” Leia said softly when they were in the truck, her bags loaded in the back. “We’re here to listen. You know that. We’re worried because we can’t get in touch with Ben, but we’re also thinking about you. I know that it’s all so heartbreaking and hard to think about, but you’re safe now. No one can hurt you here. Everything that’s happened is very serious so we’d really like to know what you’re thinking. You look so upset, sweetheart. It will help to talk to us.”

Running her hand on her seatbelt, she stared at the inside of the truck. “Everything happened. He told me to leave. What else was I supposed to do?”

She didn’t even want to say his name anymore. Just thinking about it made her throat tighten. How could she have ever thought that he’d ever be Ben again? That day when he’d tried to show her all of his soul had been the closest but then he ripped it all away, chasing leads across the country until they had started to grow apart. And then her frustration with Grey almost brought them closer when Kylo had listened for once. That was only six months ago: six months and the world had turned upside down again.

“It must have been hard for him too. We only want to know how upset he was. We’re trying to guess and we’re only thinking the worst.” Leia reached back to rub her knee. “We wanted you to come home too. What happened to you is horrible and we’ll deal with it together. This is where things start getting better, Rey.”

Better. Better. How many times in her life did she have to hear that word? Why couldn’t things just be normal instead?
“You don’t know everything that happened,” Rey answered, wanting to pull away from the gentle touch. “He’s been lying to me for so long. I don’t know…I don’t know what to believe anymore. He said some things he can’t take back this time. So maybe he should know how I feel for once.”

She heard Han and Leia shifting in their seats as she spoke, her voice dull in her ears. The drive already felt impossible, the buildings and scenery rushing by. She was trapped there, their thoughts and questions crushing what was left of her. She just wanted to get back to her room and call her friends. They’d be able to understand.

“Has he called you since last night?” Han asked after clearing his throat. “Honey, we’re trying to figure this out too…”

“No.” She turned her head to stare out the window. “And I don’t want him to. I don’t want to see him ever again.”

She could see Han clenching the steering wheel in her mind. “Honey, his friend just died and…”

“Stop!” she snapped, cutting him off. “I don’t want to think about him either. I thought when we escaped that people would stop dying. You always wanted them to be together. And now he’s gone too. And everything is about him and Kylo. No one even cares that he came after me too and he had a knife. We broke up, dad. We broke up and Kylo won’t be able to fix it this time because he’s busy crying over someone else who’s died. I just want to go home.”

Home had always been where Kylo was. When they were small, that was all it was. They were safe in their bubble, before he started pushing her beyond its limits. Maybe home really had been California. Even if her family there didn’t want her, it would be a place where she only had scattered memories of Kylo: the time she had with him in hell and then the trips of returning to try to patch up the pain that those years had caused.

She heard Han grind his teeth together before he nodded. “Then we’ll get you there. We have everything set up for you and you can relax and start getting your head together, sweetheart. And we’ll give you some time. We didn’t know about that. But you need to talk to us, Rey. We’ve been saying that for years to the both of you.”

Talking. Sure. When the pain in her chest went away, she’d be able to talk.

The house looked the same. It never changed even if everything else was different.

She wanted to take a shower but stopped short outside the upstairs washroom, her socked feet keeping her from going inside. There were almost more ghosts in that small room than at Snoke’s. She’d had to read about the awkward shower between Kylo and Poe, another cherished memory for Kylo that he’d kept secret from her for years. Reading about her assault through Kylo’s eyes had been another hard path to walk again. He had an easier time writing about it than talking about it and seeing her pain.

And then she had to turn and stare at the open door of Kylo’s room. The comforter was disturbed; someone had been sitting on his bed, thinking about him.

Gripping the knob tightly, she thrust it shut. She turned and went to her room, closing her door behind her with another firm slam. She could already hear Han and Leia downstairs on the phone. She didn’t want to deal with them and clicked the lock with a harsh twist. Kylo had been everywhere, leaving a mark that wouldn’t wash off. Curling up beside her bed, she rested her chin on her knees. The sun was shining through the window and she didn’t want to look at it.
Her lip started trembling but still, no tears came.

She’d had his hands on her body so many times. At first, to take care of her and clean her, taking the hurt that Snoke had left on her body away. Then, it was to help her when she fell as a child, safe in the outside world where pain should have only been temporary. But now she felt disgust rising within her about all of the times he’d touched her intimately. He’d had to force himself to be with her. She had always thought Snoke had ruined her body but now Kylo had almost done the same, nearly hurting her more than Finn had.

She thought she’d never like sex but being with him had been everything. He had been deep inside of her, his kisses and hands caressing her like he really loved her. But the condom and then the collapse into Grey showed what he really thought about her. He probably hadn’t even bothered to write about having sex with her. He acted like she’d trapped him in the relationship that he said he wanted and then did everything to push her away.

“Rey?” Leia’s voice and the knock on her door made her glare at the intrusion. “Would you like to have some lunch? It would be good to eat and I can make you something. Or we can order something you like. You need to eat and we are hungry too.”

She should be starving but her stomach ached for a different reason.

“I’m not hungry,” she answered instantly. “I’d like to be alone for a while.”

She heard a deep exhale from the other side of the door and the light sound of a touch of nails.

“Just let us know if you need anything. Okay? We’re here for you. And we love you. Don’t forget that.”

She rolled her eyes. They were just making phone calls about Kylo. They weren’t there for her. Glancing at her window, she wished that Han had never fixed the siding. She could just leave and never look back. It was to keep her safe while trapping her at the same time.

Grabbing her phone, she called Rose. Even if she had to walk out of the front door, she needed to get out of that house. Maybe her heart would stop beating so hard if she did.

“Hi, Rey. How are…are you okay?” Rose’s voice and concern was almost a balm on the burn.

“Are you home now?”

“Yeah, I’m home,” she answered. The air was starting to air feel heavier, slowly crushing her.

“Rose, it just hurts so much. I don’t want to be here. I wish you had picked me up.”

The grief. The pain. The ghosts. Kids coming into the house and never really leaving. Love coming into her heart but never staying. Everything hammered in her chest and she couldn’t breathe again.

“Okay, well, let me get Kay and we’ll come over. We can just take a drive or something, or do whatever you want. I’m so, so worried about you. Your texts were just bizarre. You had a fight? Someone died? You broke up? I can’t believe all of this stuff happened to you,” Rose spoke quickly before taking a deep breath. “Do you want us to come over? So you can, I don’t know, make it make sense?”

“Yes,” she said, not thinking twice. “I can’t be in this stupid house. Everything just reminds me of him and I need…I need something of my own right now.” She needed her friends, the ones who had seen how shaken she’d been when she nearly drowned. Maybe if Kylo hadn’t shown up, they would have been able to handle it all themselves.

“Okay. I get it. I really do. We’ll be there in fifteen minutes. I’ll see you soon. Rey, I love you so
much. We’ll get through this, okay?” Rose’s voice strengthened at the end. “I just want you to be okay.”

“I want…I just need to stop feeling miserable.” Rey wanted to say that it felt like her friends were the only ones that were looking out for her but pushed it down. “I love you too. I’ll see you out front.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

Hanging up, she forced herself to her feet. Grabbing shorts and a tank top, she fixed her hair into a ponytail and stared at herself in her vanity mirror: the shape of her shoulders, the freckles on her nose. She shouldn’t be standing there; she should have been in Virginia. Maybe that’s why she looked wrong to herself.

And, of course, she’d end up looking at a picture of her and Kylo tucked into the corner, making her purse her lips. It was an innocent snapshot that she’d printed out from Benji’s birthday, not even a month ago. It used to make her happy to see their life together. Now it felt like she couldn’t touch those memories without it hurting.

Turning, she snatched up a sweater and unlocked her door. Stomping downstairs, she saw Leia on the phone at the kitchen table. She was drying her eyes when she looked up.

For a moment, Rey let a rush of panic for Kylo snake up her spine. The new world around her was still settling into shape and she hadn’t decided if Kylo should exist in it or not, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t be a shadow in the distance.

“Hold on, George, she’s here,” Leia said before turning the phone to her shoulder. “George is wondering how you’re doing. I told him that you’ve made it here safely and you’ve been resting. Do you want to talk to him? He’d love to talk to you right now.”

Her heart fell at the words, rolling into a new pattern of rapid thudding.

Taking a step back, she shook her head. “Just tell him I’m fine.”

She didn’t know if she’d ever be able to talk to George again either. All of these people who claimed to care about her were always doing things behind her back. Kylo had always wanted to control what other people said and did. Now, she was starting to understand why.

Leia was staring at her, keeping the phone down. “Are you going out?”

“Rose and Kaydel are coming over,” she said, crossing through the kitchen for the backdoor as quickly as she could. “I’ll call if anything happens.”

She left without waiting for a reply, slipping on her flats by the door and ignoring the other shoes that haunted the backdoor.

Breathing in the fresh air, she heard Han on the phone on the porch. She only glanced at him for a second before she left, crossing around the corner of the house for the front yard. She ignored how he called out for her, crossing the lawn with steps that felt shakier as she kept moving.

Sitting on the curb in front of the house, she folded her arms.

Maybe she shouldn’t have quit dance but those girls had turned awful. She had been okay at track
and field and still liked running, but so had Kylo. Even with dance, Paige had been there. And Paige was Kylo’s friend first. She had her art and her studies, but she was at Kylo and Poe’s old university. If she had died, Kylo probably wouldn’t have bothered to think about starting a scholarship for her. Even the cat had been another piece of Poe that Kylo was determined to keep around. Her parents were his parents. Her old high school principal was his best friend. The little boy she loved to spend time with was his godson.

It was all his and not hers.

Kaydel’s car finally pulled up and she pushed herself to her feet, climbing into the passenger seat.

Looking at her friends, she nodded before she set her eyes on the dashboard and let out a long scream in the safety of the car.

Rose was rubbing her back by the time she’d finished, letting the sound remain ringing in her ears as she gasped for breath.

“Okay, so we’re going screaming,” Kaydel said, turning towards the road. “Let’s go somewhere good for screaming.”

Kaydel drove to the other side of town, to a park filled with trees, water, and enough open space to get lost in. She couldn’t remember ever being there with him so at least this place didn’t hold memories behind every tree. And Rey was more than thankful that wasn’t at the escarpment. Or the dog park. Or all of the hundreds of other places that she’d been with Kylo.

“I want to stop thinking about him,” she said as they walked down the trail. “I want to leave and not be here anymore. Nothing here is really mine. It’s just his and he let me borrow it.”

Rose glanced at Kaydel and then took a deep breath. “What happened when you were there, Rey? You said everything was good when you left and then it’s like things…exploded or something.”

That part was right. And Kylo had been the one to set it off. “The same man that tried to hurt me in Mexico was there. He killed…him. And I was there.” Her voice was wooden as she rattled off the story. But then she scoffed. “He tricked me into walking into that house to try to kill me too and all Kylo cared about was his dead friend and his boss.”

Kaydel reached for her hand, a soft touch reminding her that she wasn’t alone. “Rey, you had to see a dead body. You had to find it all by yourself and I wish that we could have been there for you. And someone tried to hurt you—tried to kill you. If no one was listening then they really…they really suck. I’m so, so sorry.” Kaydel pulled her into her arms, tightly wrapping them around her. “I’m so sorry you had to go through that alone, but you’re not anymore.”

She almost felt herself crumble in the embrace. “But he was just so angry when he got home. He told me to leave. That I couldn’t love him anymore. That he was a monster. I didn’t know what to do so I just left. And I don’t know if I ever want to go back.”

Finally, the tears came, something inside of her breaking at last. She sobbed and felt Rose hug her from behind, encircling her in love and safety.

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She sobbed out of the memory. “I don’t want to keep talking about this. I don’t understand how this will help Kylo.”

“We need to know who you spoke to and when. Kylo’s movements are easy to follow because he was around us at the time.” Owen clicked his pen. “What about Rose Tico’s older sister? She’s married to Armitage Hux. How often does Kylo confide in them?”

“You’ve met them,” she said, shrugging. “They know…sometimes they know more than I do.”

Owen nodded. “Believe me, when we compare your stories, we will have a greater idea about who knows what and when they knew it.”

She rubbed her neck. “Kylo lived with Hux after Poe…after Poe died. He’s been with Paige since they were sixteen. They were all friends in high school.” Blinking, she gasped. “You can’t tell Benji that he’s gone missing. He won’t understand. He’ll be scared. Kylo is his hero and…”

There was another flash of softness from Owen as he bit his lip. “We’ll…we’ll handle him, Rey. They’ve been under constant surveillance.”

But Kylo wasn’t there to protect him. If Kylo was gone, everyone was in danger. Putting her head in her hands again, she sobbed again.

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“Do you know where Kylo is today?”

Rey thought for a moment about Paige’s question. “I think he’s in Ohio. He called yesterday and said that the hotel where he and Owen are staying doesn’t have a gym. He gets up at 5 a.m. and needs to do something to distract him from being frustrated all of the time.”

Paige touched her shoulder as she walked by, flipping her hair as she moved, leaving a flowery scent in the air. She was working hard to get her pre-pregnancy body back. That extended to her beauty routine.

Smirking, Paige sat down beside her on the playmat and pushed a toy car in Benji’s direction. In the living room of their house, Rey thought about the conversation with Kylo. He was getting settled into the routine of being out of town, but always looked for things that made him feel more at home. Picking at the edge of the mat, Rey smiled lightly. It was almost easier when he was on the road. It made it feel like he was travelling and, in the end, he’d come home to her.

“But he asked how you were doing too, right?” Paige lifted her eyebrows, letting her son start rolling the toy. “Sometimes when he calls me or Armie, he only wants to talk to Benji and he’s…he can’t really answer him yet. And then he’ll ask about you, but he sometimes forgets to ask how we’re doing. So I’m just making sure he’s…being more normal.”

“Yeah, he always gets stuck on that.” Rey nodded. “And yes, he does. He asks about school. He makes sure that my friends are still helping me. He doesn’t ask about Finn but finds a way to…to make me tell him how I’m feeling. It still hurts when we’re in the same room but I think it’s getting better at school.”

“Oh, Rey. I’m so sorry. But it will get better with time and talking.” Sighing, Paige picked up
some blocks, helping Benji stack them when he decided that the car was boring. “He still feels horrible that he couldn’t be here longer, you know? A lot of things came back for him, but that doesn’t mean he should only focus on his feelings. Well, when he’s not talking about murder statistics and all of that scary stuff.”

Inside, Rey knew that she felt better when she talked to Kylo about anything. Sometimes, his rants or ideas about criminology helped distract her. Thinking about school, her friends, Finn, and the future all felt like a weight pressing on her chest. She had her therapists. She had Han and Leia and Hux and Paige. But sometimes, she just wanted Kylo and only him. It bothered her that Grey was at the house when she wasn’t there. He was nice, she tried to tell herself. They were just friends. But there were some nights when she’d roll over and reach for Kylo and wonder if his bed really was as empty as hers.

“Rey? Anything you want to talk about? I think it’s nap time so we can put our little man down to sleep and then we can talk about what you’re thinking about.” Paige scooped her son up off the floor and smiled at her. “I can see he’s about to have a meltdown so that means it’s a good time to take a little rest.”

It was true. By the time they got Benji to his room and changed his diaper, he was whining with tears starting to form at the edges of his dark eyes. He was a quiet toddler but nap times still weren’t perfect. When Rey watched him alone some evenings, he was only fussy when it came to sleeping. He would eat anything she put in front of him so that part was easy. Both Paige and Hux tried to tell her that she wasn’t doing anything wrong when he cried, but it always felt that way.

She listened to Paige sing to her son and drifted into the sound of her voice. It reminded her of when she was very small, one of the few memories she had of not hurting. Kylo would tell her stories or sing small songs to her and any of the other children nearby. Only years later did she realize that he was doing it while being in immense pain. A broken arm, a cracked rib, a concussion, burns, and bruises…and he kept trying to smile and make her feel safe.

Now that he was working to make sure no one else had to feel that pain or to help the families of victims, she felt torn about it. She wanted to keep all of that kindness for herself. He was just too far away. And Christmas wasn’t for a while. Summer was even further away.

Smiling, Paige finally turned. She picked up the baby monitor and left the door ajar.

Sitting down at the kitchen table, Paige rubbed her eyes. “Hux is missing all of these moments. I wish he didn’t work so hard.”

“She’s a good principal,” Rey answered. “But he shouldn’t have to work weekends all the time. Kylo sometimes works weekends and I get worried that he’s going to burn himself out.”

She’d also heard Leia and Han talking about the same thought.

“They both are. You should have seen them in college. It was like a competition to see who would take a break first.” Paige poured her a glass of juice before sitting back to sip on the one she’d poured for herself. “It was easier when Poe was there. He’d make Kylo stop. And when I was there, Armie would at least only work half as hard. I felt so lazy all of the time trying to keep up with them. Poe did too. We’d go for these walks and…” She trailed off, finally noticing that Rey was just staring at her orange juice. “Rey, I’m sorry. He was my friend too. It’s nice to have some good memories of him.”

She wasn’t wrong. But it still didn’t sit right with her.
“Yeah, but that happened a long time ago now. Kylo should…try harder not to be sad.” She looked at her glass. “But I miss him too. I think I would feel better if Kylo wasn’t alone in Virginia.”

Paige licked her lips. “He has friends there. And we talk a lot of the time when he’s not pushing himself too hard. But, Rey, they were together for five years. I know that Kylo is important to you, but have you thought about why you feel this way?”

She shrugged. “I talk to my therapists about grief and healing. I mean, I never knew my parents and I miss them too. I miss Leia’s father and mother. But sometimes I don’t feel like being sad all of the time. Memories aren’t supposed to hurt forever and it’s like Kylo makes himself sad.”

“And that makes you sad?” Paige tilted her head as Rey looked up. “Rey, I worry about him too. And so does Armie. But you don’t always have to worry about him. He’ll find a way to work through his feelings. He’ll always be in your life, but your life is your own. Sitting around and only thinking about him isn’t…it isn’t good for any of us.”

She shrugged. “I know that. I mean, I don’t always think about Kylo all of the time.”

She had school. She had her friends. She had afternoons with Benji. The world felt smaller without Kylo, sure, and a lot of things felt boring. But that didn’t mean she sat around only waiting for Kylo to call or text.

“That’s good to hear.” Paige picked up the baby monitor. “Do you want to go upstairs and do yoga? I want to tell you about the book I’ve been reading and he won’t sleep forever.”

Rey nodded. “I have my stuff in my bag.”

If anything, it would be a good way to get her mind off of worrying where Kylo was and what he was doing.

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She finally sat up, shaking her head. “She was just trying to help me.”

Paige and Hux had always tried to help her and she hadn’t spoken to them in so long. They knew she’d been in the hospital but she hadn’t wanted to see them. She hadn’t talked to Benji in so long. She wasn’t the type of person to avoid her friends but things had been easier without having to look at them and remember Kylo’s broken promises.

The silence of the classroom was broken when Owen sighed and stood. He glared at his phone before stepping closer to her. Even if she wanted comfort, needing to desperately get out of that room and out of her memories, she turned away from him.

“Rey, we’re not…we’re not trying to be mean to you. There is nothing personal here. This is complicated and we’re really only looking for the truth here. We have a number of facts and we need to look at them with your added perspective.” He reached out to her and she dropped her head. “Please remember that we’re only doing this to find him and uncover the connections to the investigation.” She kept her head down, not wanting to look at him. “I need to leave. Galen, I will call you when I am in Nevada. Please keep her talking. You know what to focus on.”

The clock at least started ticking again, matching his footsteps as he left the room. The tears were
trapped in her chest again and she fought to breathe. She heard the agent’s chair being pulled closer and she couldn’t move.

“I need you to look at me, Rey.” She could smell the vague hints of Erso’s cologne. “Are you having another panic attack?”

Blinking, she finally lifted her eyes. “I haven’t had one in so long. I’m on new medication and as long as I don’t think about Grey or Kylo, I feel better. But being here…” She shook her head. “I don’t know how much longer I can be here.”

He shifted out of his chair, taking a knee across from her. He lifted her water bottle to her hand, folding her grip around it. The touch forced her to meet his eyes, trying to keep the room from slipping away. He leaned closer, not speaking. Slowly, she nodded and started matching the rhythm of inhales and exhales.

“There,” he said when calm finally settled in her chest. “Isn’t that better?”

He squeezed her shoulder before stepping back to his chair. Sipping her water, she weakly lifted her head. “I keep forgetting to do that.”

Crossing his legs, he closed his notebook. “Rey, I think you need to understand the pressure and stress on Agent Kenobi’s shoulders. He cares about you. We all care about you. Unfortunately, we have a task that makes it hard for us to treat others with some of the compassion they may deserve. We are simply going down the list of the last people Agent Solo spoke to before he…” He paused and briefly winced to himself. “See? I want to risk having my suspension reinstated by telling you more about what we know and I can’t do that.”

Closing the lid on her water bottle, Rey shook her head. “Kylo never liked you. Why did you…why did you help him?”

He cleared his throat. “Now that Agent Kenobi has departed, we can really be honest with one another. I helped him and then, despite what you did, I also helped you. Part of it was to protect myself and my reputation, but more of it was to help Kylo. I’m doing these things because I share the same belief as both Agents Jinn and Kenobi. Kylo has a great deal of potential and he’s never allowed himself to see the world as anything other than filled with pain. The few times he’s known love, he’s cherished them, but then it’s only a return to the darkness. I have a daughter who’s led…well, she’s led a very similar life. I can’t help but see some of her in both you and Agent Solo. Life isn’t supposed to only be fighting and constant problems.”

The bottle crinkled in her hand. “I still…I still feel bad that I almost got you in trouble.”

“Yes, well,” he sat back again, crossing his legs. “Why don’t you tell me why you placed those phone calls?”

Keeping her eyes low, she focused on her breathing as she started speaking. “It’s when I had my first panic attack, before I ended up in the hospital. It’s like…everything is stuck in my mind and I can’t get it out.”

“Well, start wherever you wish. I’m here to listen.”

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There was a cop car waiting outside of the house when she pulled up with her friends.

It was almost dinnertime but they’d spent the rest of the afternoon sitting quietly in the grass, trying to make plans for the future. Starting with a blank slate was a good thing, Kaydel had said. Rose agreed and Rey was too tired to argue. They cared about Kylo but maybe he’d gone too far this time. Even Kaydel had lost the dreamy look in her eyes.

But she still felt lost knowing that they didn’t share the same past. Kylo was the only one who knew what it was like to be in Snoke’s hell. He knew what it was like to find a dead body and have a broken heart. All of those things should be bringing them together, but he’d pushed her away. It wasn’t only hurt connecting them; so many good memories were rooted in him too. There was comfort in remembering Christmases and birthdays and moments of softness. She didn’t want to take down the picture of her and Kylo at the lake. The photo that grandma had taken at the fair when she was four, Kylo holding her hand while she sat on the back of a pony, shouldn’t have to be erased because he’d turned them into this.

Still, the second she was back in the house again, so many of those plans and memories were sucked back into the void. Her heart instantly started thundering again.

She vaguely recognized the cop sitting at the kitchen table before she rolled her eyes. It was Poe’s old friend. Glaring at him, she walked by them for her room.

“Rey, can you stop and talk to us? We still haven’t been able to get a hold of Ben. Has he tried to call or text you?” Han’s voice was firm as he stood from the table, trying to reach for her.

She stopped at the base of the stairs, weakly pulling out of his grip. “No. No, he hasn’t. He told me to leave, Han. He told me not to be in love with him anymore. Can’t I have a day to deal with how I feel without having to worry about him?”

Stomping up to her room, she shut the door before the cat could run inside.

Everything just had to stop.

She skipped dinner, ignoring the knocks on her door. She also had to block out the arguing that came from downstairs. Instead, she spent the night texting her friends, trying to figure out where she wanted to go and what she wanted to do. Every time Kylo crossed her mind, she forced the thought away. He was an adult and, apparently, she wasn’t one because everyone had to take care of her. Kylo could deal with his problems on his own for once.

When the house got quiet, she finally dared to step out from behind her locked door.

Leaving her room, she needed to use the toilet and finally take a shower. Standing in the hallway, she forced herself not to look at Kylo’s room. The lights were on downstairs so she closed and locked the door to the washroom. Han and Leia were giving her space and she was going to take it. The last time she’d been clean was after Silla made her shower at Kylo’s. The woman had been so kind, making her tea and letting her try to talk about what had happened: the therapy session and leaving Kylo; getting the text and feeling hunted; and then how alone she felt.

She’d tried to breathe. She’d tried to listen to Silla: if she wanted to be with Kylo, things like this would happen. It wouldn’t always be someone they’d know, but they were investigating murderers and predators. Sometimes, people they worked with got killed. Sometimes, they’d be in a situation so dangerous she wouldn’t be able to comprehend it. She made no promises to Silla, but had hopes. Then, Kylo came home and ripped the wound open, reaching a point she never thought they’d reach.
Stripping off her clothes, she shivered, remembering Kylo holding her down on the bed. His hands had gripped her with his full strength as he forced his mouth against hers. He’d been so brutal and hurtful.

His hands had killed.

Killed for her.

And she’d let him touch her with them.

Slumping down under the warm water, she wrapped her arms around knees.

Gripping her head, she sobbed. Grey would still be alive if Kylo had just left him alone. She wouldn’t have had to walk into that house. They would still be together if Kylo had just said something about how he felt inside.

Sitting up, she stared blankly at the tile.

Since March, Kylo hadn’t even looked at her with any desire. He’d kept his distance or stayed home, keeping away from her. Even in the playhouse, when his eyes were only focused on her, she hadn’t felt wanted. There were touches. There were kisses. Maybe he was lying about what Luke said too; maybe he did want to break up.

Slamming the shower off, she sat in the tub and quietly wept, not knowing where the pain was coming from.

A quiet knock on the door made her tense. “Go away!”

“Rey, I can…I can hear you’re having a hard time in there.” Leia’s voice was soft. She could hardly hear it over the drip from the faucet. “If you want to talk, I’ll be in the bedroom. You know that I’ll always listen to you. Okay, sweetheart? There’s dinner for you in the fridge. Does that sound okay?”

Swallowing, Rey scratched her nails down her leg. “I know. I’m fine. Good night.”

She waited until she was shivering, the water droplets evaporating off of her skin. Weakly, she pulled herself up and out of the bathtub. She needed to feel something other than empty again. It was a dark spiral and she couldn’t pull herself out of it.

She dried off. She put on her robe and snuck back to her room.

She dressed in her soft pyjamas and crawled into bed, remembering instantly how lonely it was to sleep by herself.

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Erso had his hands folded in his lap, but he looked like he was listening to her. “I’m beginning to understand. Sleeping in a familiar place, but being pressed on by your feelings, can be very disorienting. You were also still dealing with the sight you walked into only a few short days before.”

Inhaling, she emptied the last of her water. “Can I have…can I have something more to drink?”
He nodded, reaching for the bottle. “Just water? Or would you like coffee? Maybe something to eat?”

Rey shook her head. “There’s…there’s a coffee stand not far from here. If you go down, towards the library…”

“I believe I saw it when we arrived.” He studied her for a moment before nodding. “Please wait here. I’ll be back shortly.”

Left alone in the room, she shook her head.

If she was going to tell him everything, she’d have to talk about Grey.

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“Hey, here’s a stupid question,” Grey started, getting her attention by running his nails on the deck. “Is Ky here? I need something from the garage.”

She wasn’t working that day. She hadn’t expected him to just drop by, but she should have anticipated it. Sometimes it really was like he was there more often than he was at home. She was doing a charcoal sketch, practicing her shading again, outside in the sunlight when Grey had just come up the back steps to stare at her.

“You know you can call him, right?” she asked before glancing down again. “And he’s in D.C. He wants to buy some shirt and wanted to try it on before he did. They didn’t have a location here so he went into the city. He doesn’t want to pay that much for alterations so he went to look at it.”

Even though she was trying to like Grey and everything he’d done for her and Kylo, when he sat down at the patio table and put his feet on it, she was aggravated in an instant. She had just wiped it down that morning and now he was getting dirt on it again. “Christ, he fucking hates D.C. traffic. And it always smells like a fucking swamp. He must really want that fucking shirt. What are you up to?”

She lifted her shoulders. “I’m just drawing. I watched a video about a new technique and I wanted to try it.”

He craned his head to glance at her sketch paper. “No shit? That looks fucking awesome. I told you that you could do more crafts with the kids, right? Kids love learning art stuff. Better than hearing my voice for the billionth time.”

Grey turned away, popping his sunglasses over his eyes as he leaned back in the warmth shining down on them. With his head craned back and his hands resting on his chest, he looked so relaxed. She hated how it made her feel tense. Grey never cared about anything. He just looked at a problem and shrugged at it before making up some solution off the top of his head.

“They like hearing your voice,” Rey said, breaking her thoughts.

“Right?” Smirking, Grey shifted his weight. “Thank Christ I still like hearing the sound of it too.”

Of course he did. “You know that you can just go to the garage and take what you want, right? Kylo hasn’t changed anything. And you were just here yesterday.”
Grey flicked his sunglasses up and grinned. “Yeah, I know that. I was just checking in with you. Ky gets in his head and you and I only talk at work. So I thought I’d see if there was something on your mind.” He moved to stand, pulling down his t-shirt as he moved. He stretched for a moment, rolling his shoulders. Again, Rey could understand why Kylo had been attracted to him: the length of his body, the shape of his nose, and the focus in his eyes. She could remember the feel of his lips and wondered if Kylo still thought about it. He slapped his thighs lightly, breaking her stare. He smiled at her again. “But if you have nothing to say, I need some fucking hedge clippers. The loser across the street is going to give me fifty bucks to trim his tree.” Grey stopped for a moment to meet her eyes. “If you want to help me, we can split it.”

But she only looked back at her sketchbook. “No, I’m fine. I’m waiting for Kylo.

“Kay. Cool. Have fun with that.” He smiled at her, his crooked grin forcing her to return it with a light smile of her own.

He walked away, stomping down the deck to the grass and disappearing around the corner of the house, humming to himself. She swallowed down her annoyance before reaching out and wiping off the dirt from the table with one hand.

Kylo really did need to find someone else to take care of the yard and house.

And his life.

She’d heard the garage door open and, even a half an hour later, hadn’t heard it close. Rolling her eyes, she left her spot on the deck to make sure that Grey remembered to close and lock it. He was so careless and Kylo shouldn’t trust him with so much.

She stopped when she spotted Kylo’s car in the driveway and heard two voices.

“…no, those are the ones I already found. I want the longer ones. I know you have them.”

An annoyed huff from Kylo made her smirk. “So why were you fooling around with the dartboard? If you need something, you can just take it, Grey. You always bring it back so I don’t really care.”

“Well, you’re his favourite topic too, she thought.

“I want the two of you to be friends. And you do talk about work. So that’s another thing. You’re overreacting. Again.” Kylo’s voice made her smile. Of course Grey would be wrong about her. “If you’re borrowing a ladder, you’ll need someone to help you or you’re just going to break your neck. Let me go inside to tell her that we’re going to go take care of your dumb project. Why aren’t you letting some teenager do this?”

“I’m bored. Maybe I can be an arborist when I grow up and this is a great way to get experience. Plus, I want fifty bucks. But, Ky, honestly, let me talk to her about this. When we’re at the library, I can tell by the look on her face when she’s texting you and…”

“Grey. Leave it alone. We only have the summer together and she’s happier here than she is at home. She misses her friends but, sometimes, she just wants me.”

“Yeah, but where does that leave you? You shouldn’t have to double-check with her if you’re going out even when she’s back in Connecticut.” She heard Grey drop his voice and she had to
crane her head to hear him. “When are you going to tell her?”

There was a moment of silence before Kylo spoke again. “You’re being an asshole right now. It’s not like that. I’ll figure out some way to tell her. She…Grey, I mean a lot to her. And she means so much to me. We need…we need to talk about this.” Kylo sighed heavily and Rey nodded to herself. “Go over there and I’ll come help you in ten minutes. And I want half of that money.”

“Fuck you. It’s my money.”

“Fuck you right back. They’re my tools, you fucking moocher.”

“Fuck you again! You’re a cheapskate!”

She watched Grey leaving the garage and he paused to turn back to say one more thing to Kylo and caught her eyes. Tilting his head, a strange smirk crossed his face before he took off.

Breathing in and out, she waited five minutes before coming around the front of the open garage. “I didn’t know you were home. I didn’t hear him close the garage. Why can’t he ever listen?”

Turning, Kylo shrugged. He picked up the clippers, turning them in his hand. “It’s just how he is. But I got home and he was still here, finding something to distract himself. Again.”

Folding her arms, she tried to ignore what she’d just overheard. “Did you get the shirt?”

He nodded. “Yes. It’s $400 and I will still have to send it to Leia to get it fixed. It was too tight around the neck. But I can show you once I’m done helping him find a solution to his boredom.”

He hugged her before he left.

And Rey had to sigh before she closed the garage herself because no one could do anything right around there.

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“Here you are.” Erso handed her a tea and a cookie. He placed a filled bottle of water beside her as he moved his chair closer. “Rey, were you crying again?”

She sipped on the cup. “I’m still working on what happened with Grey. I was just remembering another time, before Kylo and I got together, that makes me rethink everything. Again.”

Erso drank from his paper mug, toying with the string of the teabag. “We’ve had conversations about him. There was a minor incident at the funeral. Gregor’s mother was quite angry with Kylo and blames him for her son’s death. And I believe that he carries quite a bit of guilt there as well. But I understand that the argument started with Dr. Kanata, when Kylo discussed being friends with him again.”

“Everything started to go wrong when I got there and, like, Kylo was quiet. But he’s always quiet so I didn’t really think anything was wrong.” She started. “We had dinner and sort of talked, but he was really distant. He kept looking at his phone and then said nothing was wrong right after. But now I know he was probably thinking about Grey or something.” She gripped her cup tighter.

Every moment with Kylo needed to be churned over and she didn’t think that she had the strength
to do it. He had told her that every word in those journals was the truth: they were his heart and soul. She had seen herself in so many of those moments, how often he thought about her. Whether or not he was keeping things out was weighing on her again. Shaking her head, she tried to keep going.

“We went to therapy on the second day and it’s been so long since we had a session together. I knew he’s been having a hard time, but I thought it was mostly the case. He’s been stressed about this...” She trailed off, glancing at Agent Erso. “He was stressed about you. And I thought we’d be talking about that. He always needs to work on himself and I want, wanted, to help him. And I also thought we could talk about more of the stuff to make us better as a couple. Like, why he hadn’t been to see me on campus like he promised. But then...” She took a deep breath, feeling the words tingle on the tip of her tongue.

She needed to push past it all. She needed to get the image of Grey dead on the floor out of her head and focus on herself.

Biting her cheek, she shook her head. “It all turned into how he can’t tell me everything. That he’s been holding back because it would make me mad and I’d shut him out. Like, yeah, it’s easy to shut him out when he’s not here. And then he said that he wasn’t ready to have sex with me, like I’m some kid in his eyes, and he needed Grey to make him tell me about it. Kylo always hides things from me and I finally got sick of it.”

She dropped her head, rocked back to being in Maz’s office. That was where Kylo worked. He had all of the power there. Now, there was another FBI agent there, tearing up her memories and her healing. Making her voice heard was all she could do.

“It’s been so long since he really cared about what’s going on in my life. He asks questions but he’s always so focused on himself. Why did he want that stupid job if all it causes him is so much stress? Hux told him he could work at the school. He told me he wants to be perfect for me but needs to, like, hide parts of himself and save them for someone like Grey because he needed someone to talk to. Why can’t I just be enough? I didn’t force him to have sex with me. I didn’t force him to hide things from me. I just felt like I was going to explode. And then,” she paused to take a breath, “and then he tried to apologize, to take it all back, and I just walked away.”

Erso exhaled, breaking the quiet that had descended around them. “And you are aware of what happened next? After you departed?”

Slowly, she sipped at her tea. It was still warm. She hadn’t been speaking for that long. “I found out the next morning. And it’s why...I guess that's why I called you.”

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All she wanted was to get some plain toast for breakfast but Leia was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee, looking like she hadn’t slept. Her hair was down, long and grey, reminding her that she wouldn’t be there forever. “Rey, can you sit down?”

“What happened?” She swallowed before she spoke. She slowly made her way to the table, taking her usual spot, the one that should always be beside Kylo.

“Han left for Virginia last night. He got there early this morning.” Leia sat back to rub her eyes.
“He brought the cat for company. He took the good kennel so he’s okay.”

She shrugged, trying to focus on how tired she felt. Kylo might as well keep him if he ached for Poe so much. Poe and Grey. Grey and Poe. He would never miss her as much as he missed them.

“Honey, this might be hard to hear.” Leia sighed as Rey curled her arms up around herself. “Ben is not doing very well. He told Han not to tell us anything, but he had a giant cut on his arm. It looks like he fixed it himself but apparently that agent he hates was there. I don’t know what Owen is doing right now and I’m—we’re frustrated. He needs his career and we don’t want to keep him from it but really…” Leia shook her head and sipped at her coffee. “It’s going to get him killed one way or another. That’s a hard truth to live with.”

At least someone was agreeing with her about that.

She listened to the refrigerator hum until Leia cleared her throat.

“He, we’re not blaming you for leaving or taking time to yourself.” Her voice was kind but Rey didn’t know if she could believe it. “It wasn’t safe there but you could have told us how upset he was. That was all we were asking. We wanted you to come home and we’re going to help you but we’re a family. The four of us need to stick together and take care of one another. That’s what families do and we always tried to teach you that. We need to think about Ben too. He lost his friend and he has so much to deal with at work. And he is also hurting about the breakup, Rey. I don’t know if you believe that or not, but he is. We could have done something sooner to help him if you had told us how upset he was. When he finally called, he didn’t sound like himself. That’s why dad left. He had to get to him and I…couldn’t stop him.”

Rey crossed her arms, trying to hide how much it hurt to hear that Kylo had done something like that again. But someone always helped him up, she kept repeating in her head. She shouldn’t have to do everything for him. She had to let herself heal for a while as he worked through his problems without her. After all, he didn’t want to talk about his darker sides to her.

“He wanted me to go,” she finally said, dipping her head. “He told me to leave and he broke my heart. I didn’t know what to do to help him.”

Breathing. She needed to try to breathe.

Leia reached out, offering her hand. Rey looked at it before lowering her eyes again, studying a pattern in the wood of the table instead. “Then that’s okay. It’s more than okay, Rey. A broken heart…it’s hard to think straight when that happens. We only—we’re glad you’re safe. But you could have said something. Rey, he does so many things that we don’t understand so even if we thought the worst, we’d hoped something like this wouldn’t happen. He’s okay, or is at least going to get there, but we could have done something sooner. He’s going to George’s soon and the kids will be there. I can call dad again if you…”

She shook her head. “I don’t want to think about them right now. It hurts too much, Leia. I hated Grey and Kylo was talking to him again. He…” The thought returned, the accusation that Kylo had so sharply denied. “He was probably sleeping with him. He cheated on me and couldn’t even tell me.”

Hugging her arms around her body, the heavy feeling pulled her down into the throbbing in her heart, spreading it directly to her stomach. He went back to Grey so he could have sex with someone he was actually attracted to and it had been going on the entire time.

Putting her hand over her mouth, she quietly sobbed. Leia left her chair, moving to hug her
shoulders and kiss her forehead.

“Honey, Gregor is dead. You’re still dealing with finding him, on top of everything else. We need to talk about that too so you can start getting through all of that pain. George said you still tried to help him. I’m so proud of you for that. You put yourself into real danger by going inside and you didn’t have to do that. But Rey?” Leia rubbed her back. “Ben would never cheat on you. He’s not like that. He was wrong in hiding the friendship but…”

Rey bit her lip and snapped her eyes to the older woman. “Why would he hide it if there was nothing going on? He loved having sex with him, Leia. I read about it. I had to read about all of these things. He could hardly stand to have sex with me but Grey gave him what he needed. He wanted to get back together with him and this was his chance because Grey would do anything for him. And Kylo knew that.”

Slowly, Leia’s hand stilled. “He loves you, Rey. He might be hard to love, but we love him through it all. We don’t always understand his choices but we can work together to figure out why he didn’t tell you. And now, Ben is trying to deal with losing him and helping George. And the person that did that awful thing tried to hurt you too. There is a lot to think about and I don’t want you to walk around with all of this on your shoulders. You’re a strong, young woman but you can talk to your therapists and us. I know you’re very, very hurt right now but I don’t want you to think that Ben was cheating on you.”

But Leia hadn’t been there. She hadn’t heard what Kylo had said or how they acted around each other. Remembering those images was more comforting than thinking about him as a hardly warm touch against her fingers as she knelt in blood.

She took a shaky breath. “How can you still love him after everything he’s done? He blamed you for his abduction. I read his first journal and he was just…so angry. He hated you when we got home. Maybe he never got better. He just does things because people expect him too. He decided to live there with George rather than here. He could have taken a placement here and he still decided to move there. Do you think he’ll be here to take care of you when you need him? He’s not here but I am. How do you know he won’t just abandon you like he’s always done to me?”

Leia took a deep breath, stepping back to take her seat across the table again. She settled into the chair and Rey looked at her hands. “Rey. I know you’re saying these things because of the pain in your heart, but it hurts to hear you talk like this. We’ve always tried to help you both think about how other people are feeling. Ben has gotten better at that. He calls. He’s promised us that he’ll take care of us when we’re old and he keeps his word about…things like that.”

Well, he’d promised to take care of her too. He’d promised her that he wanted this relationship and that he would work on that too. There were just too many sides to Kylo to keep track of. Who he was to his parents was different too.

Heartbeat. Her heart was pounding again.

“I think I’m just tired of everything,” she finally said, shaking her head. “I don’t know if I can miss him right now. Or care about him.”

“Well, it’s okay to feel that way. But bringing up how he resented us…” Leia took a long breath and nodded. “Rey, you have to understand how hard things were when he was gone. We blamed ourselves too. We didn’t look hard enough. We didn’t try hard enough. We had seven years to think about that and every day we felt heartbroken. We were fighting all of the time and it…it wasn’t easy. When he got home and things felt impossible, we tried hard to understand why he was acting that way and why George was so much more important to him than we were.”
Rey almost scoffed. Maybe that’s why he wanted to be with his son.

“Just remember that he’s still figuring out who he is,” Leia’s voice made her look up again. “That began when he started coming back to us, leaning on us and working hard on himself. It wasn’t just school. He thought about getting better so he could help you in the future. When…when Poe died, I thought we lost him too. And you were gone and…that was another night from hell. It was terrifying to think he might have done something like that this time. But if we had known how upset he was, and that no one was there, that would have helped us a lot. You have to let us know if he calls or texts you. You don’t have to answer them if you don’t want to, but please tell me or dad.”

Putting her hands on the table, Rey tried to swallow the words. Of course she knew how much Han and Leia missed Kylo when he had been in hell, but he wasn’t a boy anymore. And she had to walk away and that ripped her up inside just as much. Dark thoughts oozed in the wounds and she wanted to find a way that would keep her from ever forgiving Kylo.

“Why do you think he wouldn’t cheat on me?” she asked, staring at her fingertips. Why were they shaking?

Leia sighed again. “He just wouldn’t. They might have…they had that weekend, but if he said they are just friends, then I believe him.”

She pursed her lips, keeping her eyes on her hands. “He didn’t tell you when he started being more than friends with Poe.”

“Rey, I think you’re changing the subject.” Leia sat back, gripping her coffee cup. “I think we need to start talking about something that will help the other things you’re thinking about. Since you and Ben have broken up, that might seem like the biggest problem right now. But you had to find someone you knew murdered and then the man who did it came after you again. That’s really hard to deal with alone.” Leia had briefly narrowed her eyes before her face turned kind but Rey still caught it. There was a brief hint of Kylo there and she didn’t need that reminder at the moment.

“I already talked to the FBI about this.” She shook her head. “I told them everything that I knew and that’s their problem now. That’s Kylo’s problem now.”

“Rey…”

The pressure in her chest was telling her to run. So she followed it.

“Ugh!” Rey threw up her hands from the table. “I don’t want to talk about this! I’m going to Hux’s. He’ll know if Kylo was cheating on me or not and then I can really start hating him.”

Leia let her go and she slipped on her shoes. After grabbing a hoodie, she stormed out of the house and into the late morning. She didn’t even bother calling ahead of time.

During the walk over, all she could feel was her heart pounding in her ears.

If she could hate him, she could finally be rid of him. He could finally just exist like some other stranger. He could still be alive but she would finally be able to pull herself out of everything that was him. Her future needed to be her own even though her past wasn’t.

But she was starting to struggle with what Leia said. Kylo had always been drawn to blades and knives, even after the scar. The memory of Kylo and Grey staring at the knife block, making a joke that wasn’t meant for her, danced across her mind. When she re-examined the memory, she swore she saw Kylo’s hand on Grey’s back.
Benji was playing outside when she got to Hux’s house, her hands hurting from being clenched so hard. She hadn’t even realized how fast she had been walking.

“Rey!” Benji was grinning already, hopping out of his swing. “Do you want to hear a story I made?”

She stopped to breathe, to hug him lightly when he ran up to her. “Can we…can we do it later? I need to talk to your mom and dad.”

Benji tilted his head, squinting at her. “Mom’s out shopping with Anna. Dad’s trying to set up the new t.v. Can I play outside? I have my phone.”

He held up a baby monitor and Rey almost smiled. She nodded, trying not to get drawn into his happy face. Kylo was lying to him too, making promises he was never going to keep. He was going to buy him things but he was never going to be there. Kylo had the same fear but he should never have made those guarantees to begin with.

She managed to squeeze the boy’s shoulder and turned to walk into the house, hearing him start to chatter to himself as he hopped back on the swing.

Shaking her head, she kept going.

Hux was in the living room, staring at a remote control in one hand and an instruction manual in the other. After glancing over his shoulder, he sighed and kept looking at the screen. “I’m…I’m only doing this so I don’t freak out about Kylo. He still hasn’t texted me back and I’m losing my mind.”

Gripping her hoodie, she frowned again. “Hux, was he sleeping with Grey?”

Hux’s head snapped from the flat screen to her. “What the hell are you talking about, Rey? How is…have you been able to get in touch with him? What’s…what are you talking about?”

Her shoulders fell, tears coming to her eyes instantly. “I thought you would know something.”

Putting the remote and booklet down, Hux shrugged before he sat down on the couch. He pushed his red hair back as he sighed. “Why are you here, Rey? What’s happened? Is he okay? Are you okay? We’re going crazy here and we’re trying hard to keep it from Benji.”

She shook her head before she sat next to him. “Doesn’t he tell you everything?”

He planted an elbow on his knee before he rested his chin on his palm. “Rey, I’m…can you tell me what you’re getting at here? We’ve had the cops here three times and Kylo’s messages make no sense.” The baby monitor on the table was lowly relaying Benji’s happy chatter. “What happened when you were there? I keep…Paige has already talked me out of driving down there too many times.”

“Han’s there,” Rey answered, staring at the blinking message on the screen. “So he’s…I guess he’s okay.”

Hux leaned his head back against the couch. He looked like he did back in his office, when he was trying to talk her through a problem she’d been having. He’d always listened then, worrying about her in those moments. Unless Kylo was in crisis, she was his focus.

She sighed as he smacked his lips.
“Thank Christ. And you’re home. I…Rey, you know you can stay with us if it’s…if Han and Leia are busy with him or are fighting or whatever. He tends to take up a lot of space and hates it at the same time.” He sat up, looking at her clearly. “We won’t. I mean, we could use a break from the kids but if you’re staying here, you don’t have to do anything. We can hang out and talk. I don’t know what you went through but it sounded horrible.”

“We broke up. He couldn’t treat me with respect and acted like I was a kid and he was a monster.” She met his eyes, taking slow breaths before she nodded. “But I don’t know if I can be at home right now.”

Blinking, Hux sat up and frowned at her. “Then you shouldn’t be. But can you just explain to me about the cheating thing?” He leaned forward, running his hand over his face. “Rey, all I’ve tried to do since…since you two got together was to get him focused on you. I know things were fucked up with Poe but when he’s focused, Kylo is actually a good boyfriend. I’ve seen it and…”

“He’s only a good boyfriend with guys, Hux. He just screwed over Liza and never really wanted me.” Rey looked away, watching the Wi-Fi symbol keep flashing on the screen. “And even with guys, he sucks at it.”

He snorted. “Rey, I don’t know what to tell you. He’s my best friend. We talk all of the time. I’d… I started to put the pieces together that he was talking to Grey again because they’d show up online at different times but I don’t think…Rey. It’s him. When he found out I had cheated on Paige, he looked like he was going to kill me. I think he wanted to punch me in the face and I deserved it. But if they had their weird friendship again, that’s…” Hux trailed off and then shook his head, his eyes narrowing. “You do remember that he’s dead, right? The man we’re talking about? Who…” Hux pushed himself up to glare down at her. “Rey, if you’re hurting because you two had an argument, or that he made you leave, or that you’ve broken up, all of that we can deal with. But this is a loss and a big change for him and you found him. You saw him like that. I can be pissed at Kylo but he’s been trying and he’s got a lot of shit to deal with…”

“He never treated Poe like this,” she started, thinking instantly about how many quiet moments she had witnessed and overheard. Hux had seen them; he’d been in the car that night too. “He’d always apologize and talk to him and…”

But Hux cut her off. “Yes, I know. I know that they worked through things in their own way but he treated him like shit in a different way that you don’t want, Rey. Yeah, they were in love but Kylo wouldn’t let him…I…” He trailed off, looking distantly at the bookcase beside the television.

Her eyes spotted the picture that must have been taken from college. A similar one used to hang on the wall on Kylo’s house. Only this one included Paige, not just Kylo, Hux, and Poe.

She stared at it before Hux cleared his throat.

“Look, I don’t know what to tell you. I don’t know anything other than what he tells me. Grey has avoided me since January.” He tapped the couch, trying to get her to look at him. After a few more dull thumps against the cushion, she finally turned to meet his cobalt eyes. “If things are tough at your house, you can stay here. But give him a break. This asshole has killed another person he cares about and your life is in danger. My kids like looking at the police cars, but they will figure it out one day. And I will have to tell them that it isn’t just some story that Kylo was kidnapped and killed to get out, only to have some other monster hunt him down and threaten everyone he loves. I kept trying to help him, to point out all of the weird shit that Grey did, but he gets…”

Grey getting too close to Kylo, whispering in his ear. Grey always showing up, rapping on the deck. Grey turning in a chair at the library with a pencil in his mouth to answer her question in a
calm yet sincere tone, explaining where the envelopes were and how to address the send-outs for the mailing list for the reading group.

Hux took a deep breath, breaking her focus. “You know what’s wrong with him. You know he gets fixated on people. Rey, you’ve lived with him for so long and you’ve seen all this. He couldn’t live with anyone but me for years because he didn’t trust anyone else. I’m not defending him but I honestly don’t think he was sleeping with him.”

Wrinkling her nose, Rey shook her head, remembering what she’d read from Kylo’s journals. Or maybe it was what either of them had told her. She couldn’t tell the difference anymore. “Didn’t he try to kiss you too?”

“Yeah but…Rey, that was just him trying to figure his shit out. He was mourning and you were at Luke’s. And, look, I have my own problems with Grey, but he could be a nice enough guy when he wasn’t around Kylo. You saw that too in the beginning.” Slowly, Hux swallowed. “And then him and Ky started fucking with each other’s heads because they didn’t have enough problems in their lives.”

She licked her lips, sighing. “So why did Kylo want to be around him so much?”

Hux quirked an eyebrow. “You mean instead of spending time with you?”

The words made her clench her jaw, tears springing to her eyes. “How could you say that to me?”

The living room was starting to spin as she tried to blink it away.

“Look, Rey, I’m trying to treat you like an adult, even though this conversation feels like something I’d overhear in the hallways at school.” Hux sat up, running his hands on his jeans. She saw every fibre as he moved. “I thought you two could keep each other balanced. I thought that his love for you would make him realize that Grey was just… I don’t know. I don’t know anything anymore. I just want my best friend to call me and say he’s okay.” Hux stopped suddenly, dropping his eyes as his voice trembled. He took a deep breath as he wiped at his eyes. “And that they’ve found this fucking madman so I can sleep at night. And I want to fix my fucking television so my son can watch unboxing videos to distract him from asking about his godfather.”

The slamming down of the remote made her jolt and the room spun in a different way as Hux put his head in his hands.

“If he was cheating on you, then yeah, I will have a problem with him but I don’t think this should be what you’re worried about right now if you’ve broken up over something else. You found a dead person, Rey. All of this feels bigger because of that.” His voice was low and his head was still down. For once, she didn’t want to help him.

Her blood kept rushing harder. She could see it pulse in her eyes.

Shaking her head, she turned and left. Of course Hux would be lying for Kylo. There must be someone who knew more. Maybe she could call Paige and she would know. Kylo leaned on her just as much as he did Hux.

She didn’t even say goodbye to Benji before she started walking home.

There was too much to think about.

And every time she closed her eyes, she saw Grey on the floor.
Her feet kept moving and she couldn’t outrun her thoughts.

She saw houses but kept thinking that someone was hiding behind each one.

She kept remembering walking into that house. His house. Him on the floor. All of the blood and the look in his eyes.

Being tossed in the pool in Mexico. Being chased under the car.

Why was there water under the car? Why was she drowning there?

Being on the side of the highway in California and hearing Kylo screaming.

Water filled up her lungs even there.

Coming up the stairs in the basement, the burning in her underwear and pain in her heart about to overwhelm her.

Everything burned to a point in her mind: Kylo loved someone more than her. Kylo was lying. Hux was lying.

She bit her lip to keep from screaming and to keep the water from spilling out of her mouth. Somehow, her hand found its way into the pocket of her sweater.

Somehow, she dialled Owen, her lungs still being weighed down.

Dropping to the ground, she listened to the phone ring as she stared at her other hand. It was still shaking.

He finally answered and she sucked in a breath. “Rey, how are you doing? I’m a little busy right now but if you’ve remembered something…”

She cut him off, slipping into the haze. “Did you know what was going on between Grey and Kylo? Were they sleeping together again?”

A deep, long sigh of irritation rattled the other end of the phone. “Rey. I tried to warn him again that the friendship was a bad idea and he just…I guess he needed him. And it’s none of my business as long as it doesn’t affect his work. And as far as I could tell, he had a bigger distraction.”

He’d never spoken to her like this. Gripping her chest, she felt her heart racing harder.

“She just feels ridiculous to solving…someone is dead. I’m investigating his murder and you found the body.” His voice started soft but dropped back into frustration. She almost didn’t register the change in tone. “What happened before is something we are going to find out because it’s part of our jobs. But since it’s between two adults, and unless it goes directly to why he was killed, it was their business. I know that it hurts. I know that you are hurting for so many reasons right now. And I want to help you but I have more important things to deal with. If it has nothing to do with the case, it was his business, their business. This is…this is a ridiculous question right now. I rarely…” Owen took a deep breath and her heart shuddered again. “I rarely speak this way to people, especially someone I care about, but I have an actual job to do. This is real and it is happening. If you have questions for Kylo, ask him.”

She tried to get the words out that she didn’t want to talk to him but it came out as a pair of breaths instead.
Owen sighed again. “Look, I want to help you, Rey. I want to see you get better because I do care about you. But you really need to think about your priorities here. We can get you proper services to talk about finding Grey. There’s a great deal of stress connected to your attacks as well. But being angry with Kylo because of something like what you just asked me is…”

Didn’t he know? He had to know. Why didn’t everyone know this? The thought kept screaming in her head.

“Kylo hurt himself,” she blurted out, but they weren’t her words. “He tried to kill himself and the other agent covered it up.”

“What.” She had to take a deep breath at the ice in his voice.

She had to fight through how she couldn’t breathe again.

“You should never let him come back.” The thought pounded at the back of her head and she couldn’t fight it. He was a liar and a heartbreaker. He didn’t deserve his happiness if she couldn’t have it either. It’s what she had to do, right?

Owen took a deep breath. “Rey, this is very serious. And I need to treat it that way. Are you absolutely sure? It is very serious to lie to a federal officer, Rey. Even if you are my friend, I have to do something about this and I would really rather not deal with an accusation like this at this moment.”

She had to roll her eyes. “I’m not Kylo. I wouldn’t lie.”

“Fine. Goodbye. Please don’t use this line unless you have something serious like this to discuss with me.” His voice was sharp, settling harshly against her ears.

But the second she hung up the phone, there was no satisfaction.

The feeling in her chest didn’t go away and it didn’t get better.

Only pure dread rolled through her.

The sky tilted and her entire body was shaking.

Blinking, she realized she was wearing Kylo’s hoodie.

It was the only thing that was real at that moment.

Staring at the sleeve, she thought about the last time he’d worn it. He’d been happy that day, reading on the porch. He’d stopped and looked up, telling her about some case he was working on. His eyes were soft and caring as he reached to pull her onto his lap. He’d breathed her in, telling her how much he loved her and how good it was to be home. Even if his mind was elsewhere, his heart was with her.

Kylo had pushed her out of his life, but that job was all Kylo had left. He’d lost her through his selfishness and his reaction had been again borne out of pain. He only hurt himself when she wasn’t there.

Sweat beaded down the back of her neck. She stared at the black screen, seeing her reflection and not recognizing herself.

She still cared about him and she hated herself for it.
This was all Kylo had wanted since he was fourteen: he wanted her to be safe and he wanted to make a difference in the world, searching out the darkness and trying to lift it. He was slowly destroying himself in the process, torn between the life he wanted and the life that he had, but it meant so much to him. All of those years of having to cover up his checklist with her drawings but he’d still managed to accomplish something.

Distantly, she remembered him and Maz discussing his performance evaluations. He was stressed at work because of something and, from what he’d said, it was her.

All of the times when they would sit and plan the future, about always being together, were supposed to lead to a reality in which they both could be happy. He’d helped her plan for her future without judging what she wanted to do. Going to college had meant they’d be apart but it was only supposed to be for a few short years. And then they’d have the life that would just be one another.

And now she was the one who was going to take the last piece of his life from him. Poe was dead. Grey was dead. She was gone.

Kylo had nothing.

His tired and fearful eyes, covered in blood after he came up the basement from murdering Snoke, flashed in her mind. Clinging to him as he screamed for help outside of the house rocked her again.

Panicking, she shook her head as regret washed over her.

She couldn’t call Owen again. She couldn’t take it all back.

With quivering hands, she scrolled through her contacts, looking for the number that had only just been put there, by the agent in the back of the ambulance. He’d told her to call not only if she remembered something, but if there was anything he could do to help.

He could fix this.

“Agent Erso? It’s Rey. I just made a big mistake,” she was whispering, afraid that if she raised her voice she’d start sobbing. She needed to do something. “I told Owen that Kylo hurt himself.”

The man on the other end of the phone exhaled and she heard him turn in his chair. “That’s…this is very serious, Rey. You’ve put me in a very difficult position right now because,” he paused to sigh. “Now both of our careers are at stake. I made a decision to protect him and now I will be in a great deal of trouble. We both will.”

Listening, she recognized that he was moving, walking somewhere. Gripping her sweater, she shook her head and stared at the grass. “I’m sorry. I just couldn’t think and I…”

“Rey, I understand that you’re regretting what you did. You have had a great number of things to deal with the last few days, just as we all have. Kylo was already…he’s already improving. He has a strength within him that makes it hard not to help him. But I need to ask you, Rey, before I do anything, do you trust me?” He was speaking as she heard the dull thunk of elevator doors closing. “Agent Kenobi is already seeking me out, so I will need an answer promptly if I’m going to do something to help you and Agent Solo.”

Sitting up, she nodded to no one but the phone. “Can you go with him? Can you make sure that Kylo…that Kylo doesn’t lose his job? It’s so important to him and I was…”

“You wanted to hurt him because he hurt you. I understand that.” The elevator plinged in the background and he was walking again. “But do you trust me?”
“I do. I trust you.” She breathed out and shut her eyes. “I never wanted Kylo to hurt himself. I really didn’t. But he told me to leave and I couldn’t look at him anymore without…without hating myself for loving him even after everything he’s done to me.”

She tried to picture where he was in the building, if it was a hall she’d walked down. Maybe she didn’t belong in Kylo’s world, but he needed to have that. Thinking about him with Grey was a knife to her heart, but it was still beating. Kylo had always tried to teach her kindness, to think about others and how they were feeling. She’d been with him as he held the hand of so many girls after Snoke had tortured and raped them, telling her that it was okay to hug them so they would feel better. Kylo had gone into the basement willing to die for her so she would be able to keep living. He might have destroyed everything between them, torching the past like it was meaningless and ruining their bond almost to the point where it could never be mended, but he had worked so hard to get to where he was. If he lost it, he’d have nothing.

She had to be better than him.

She had to push back the hurt and be better than how she’d been acting. The pounding in her chest had to stop taking hold of her thoughts.

“Please help him, Agent Erso,” she said, letting her head fall back. “Please do something.”

The pause stretched on so long she had to look at her phone to make sure it was still connected. “I will do everything I can to help him, Rey. I must go now. Thank you for telling me. Please know he’s in good hands.”

The phone clicked off and she let it fall from her hand.

Rubbing her face, she fought off more tears.

Lying down on the grass, she ran her hand through the blades. They swished through her fingers, slightly damp until it faded beneath her touch. Her eyes blurred and she tried to grip harder to hold onto the lawn. Her heartbeat got heavier in her chest and she couldn’t catch her breath. It started to crash harder on her and she thrust out her hand again. The grass didn’t seem real, like her hands weren’t moving across it. Sound rushed through her ears and she fought to inhale. She battled to exhale in the next moment.

Her body was fighting against her, sending the swirl behind her eyes rolling harder. The world felt like it was falling from beneath her, reminding her of what it was like to be drunk. Everything was slipping away into a whirl of white.

Breathe, she told herself.

Breathe.

She reached for any strength within her, fighting to hold on to where she was. Maybe she was still in Virginia. Maybe the man in black had dragged her out from underneath the car. Her throat had been slit and she was bleeding out on a driveway.

And Kylo would be the one to find her, to pick her up and cradle her, his heart finally dying with her.

Gasping, she sat up, gripping at her chest.

Her body ached and her mind still sent her visions of him.
Slowly, standing up, she couldn’t even remember where she was. All of the words she’d just said vanished as she stumbled to the sidewalk. The ground wasn’t steady, shifting as she moved. Her heart wouldn’t stop pounding in her ears as she felt tears sting her eyes.

None of this could be happening. Her body couldn’t be shaking like this.

Whimpering, she reached her porch, somehow.

She pulled the hoodie closer and breathed in the last scent of Kylo.

A gentle hand touched her back, making her jolt.

Blinking, she took in the sharp-coloured lips and worried eyes. “Rey, where have you been? We’ve been trying to call and were looking for you.”

She shook her head and dropped into Ahsoka’s arms. “I don’t know.”

Leia sat down on the other side of her and she sobbed hard into her therapist’s blouse. “Rey, you were gone for over three hours. We couldn’t find you. I’m…I’m going to go call the cops and tell them that she’s home.”

After a light touch on her back, Leia left them alone. And Rey kept trying to catch her breath.

“I was just across the street from Hux’s,” she whimpered.

Gently, Ahsoka lifted her chin. With one eloquent hand, she dried her eyes. “Rey, he called after you left. And then when you weren’t home after an hour, Leia called me. We all looked for you and you weren’t there. We couldn’t find you.”

Hadn’t she just sat down on the curb? Ahsoka’s hand threaded through her hair, pulling out a twig. Dried grass clung to her sleeves. Reaching down, she saw that her knees were skinned. She didn’t feel the pain until then.

“I must have…” Her breath caught and she pulled out her phone. There were dozens of missed calls, but she ignored them. Scrolling down, she saw that she had actually called the two FBI agents. Her heart started pounding again when Leia came outside. “Is Kylo okay?”

Leia sighed before she nodded. Sitting down beside her, Rey accepted her hand. “Han said that everything is fine. Or, well, as close to fine as it will be for a while. He spoke with the other agent and he told him that Ben will get through this. I think that…I think that we need to sit down and talk about what happened, but maybe not right now.”

“Absolutely,” Ahsoka said, clearing her throat. “When things like this happen, no one acts rationally. Even trained FBI agents have breakdowns. But I think we should leave Kylo’s problems where they are right now and that’s with them. If he has his friends and his father, then he can start healing. What we need to focus on is Rey. I think for a while, Rey, let’s put Kylo aside. Whatever you did, maybe it will help his superiors to see some of his greater problems. But what we need to focus on is you.”

As she explained what was happening in her head as the afternoon stretched on, Ahsoka leaned back and finally sighed. “Rey, this is only for us to talk about. It’s not a diagnosis until you talk to a real psychologist, but what you’re describing, with the mixed memories and how you connect them to something you saw or heard or smelled, even something small…you’re experiencing a form of post-traumatic stress disorder. That could also explain why you don’t remember where you went this afternoon. You had a panic attack.”
She was cleaned up now, bandages on her knee. Even in the washroom, being helped by Leia, her mind wanted to be drawn into another memory of Kylo helping her. The same pain from being cleaned up. The same washroom. But she Leia kept holding her hand, keeping her from slipping into her head.

Now, she had a cup of tea in her hand when the words finally started to soak in. “Is that why I don’t remember where I went? And why nothing has been making sense since I got back?”

“It sounds like it, from how you described it. I know the source is what you’ve been through so let’s start with…with Kylo and how you’ve felt the last few months.” The woman took a deep breath and shook her head. “I know we haven’t talked for a while, Rey, but I hope that you have been talking about some of these other problems with your therapist on campus. You weren’t in a normal relationship, even if it felt that way at times. It’s really okay to ask for help when things start not feeling okay. Everything that’s happened this year, and maybe earlier…you haven’t been yourself.”

It made her feel weak to hear that. It made her feel empty to know that there was something wrong with her head. Most of all, it made her feel useless for ever trying to love Kylo.

“Because I tried to follow my heart?” she asked, setting her teacup down on the coffee table. At least her hands were shaking less now. “I think I did everything wrong. I never should have kissed him. He would have been happier with Grey and…”

“Rey,” Ahsoka’s calm voice cut in. “Wrong or right, it happened. And now we’ll start thinking about why you thought only Kylo could fix your problems, and why you thought you had to solve all of his. That’s what led us to this point. We used to talk about this when you were younger. And there’s nothing wrong if you’ve started to feel this way again because you were a couple. But, really, if you saw one of your friends with someone like Kylo, what would you say to her?”

Blinking, Rey stopped to sip her tea again. She wanted to put off saying the words again. “He’s probably not good for her. He…he’s trying but he might not be right for her.”

A gentle arm on her back kept her in the moment when she was about to fall out of it. Swallowing, she shook her head.

“But…” Rey started in the gap left for her to keep talking. “Kylo was able to date other people. What was wrong with me?”

Ahsoka sighed. “I can tell you that things like this just happen. Even if two people are close, trying to be together romantically changes the relationship. Think about this. When you were younger, could you talk about your parents to Kylo or Han and Leia?”

After thinking for a moment, Rey nodded. “With him, we used to be afraid if they were alive, I’d have to leave him. But then I talked to other people and started to work on missing them.” George had paid for her parents’ graves. And she couldn’t even talk to him about his son. Her lip quivered and she quietly shook her head. “Kylo was the one to take me to see my grandparents. Anything could have happened, and he still took me there.”

The sound of the ocean. The feeling of Kylo beside her, watching the sunset. The memory ghosted across her mind and she could almost feel the mist on her face…

“Yes, and that was a good thing.” Ahsoka smiled lightly, knocking her back to where she was. “But now, now that your relationship has changed, part of those feelings could have started coming out. Think about how you feel or felt when Kylo was away.”
Rey didn’t need to think too much about it. It was how she was feeling at that moment. “I’m worried about him, but I’m also wondering if he’s missing me. I want to know what he’s doing but right now, I’m worried if I did know, then it will make me angry or sad. I miss him and want him to be with me and I…” She bit her lip. “Sometimes, it hurts that he has his own life.”

“And that’s very hard for you, a young woman starting her life, that he’s had so many more years to build his than you’ve had. Even if you’ve been in his life and been around him, and he wanted you there, you might have been looking for something more than he could offer. Think about your past. Think about knowing that your parents never got to meet you, to love you, or take care of you. Think about all of the children who were around you. You know they were killed in a horrible way.” Ahsoka paused for a moment and sat back. “Think about how eight years ago, someone you loved was also tragically taken from you. That’s a lot of loss for a young person. Why do you think that I’m bringing this up right now?”

Staring at her hands, Rey tried to think. “Because someone else has died? And I’m sick because of it?”

“Maybe. Maybe a little bit that. But maybe some of it comes from the fact that a lot of the losses in your past affect your relationship with Kylo.” Ahsoka kept her tone even before she tilted her head. “Can you tell me how you feel about that?”

Rey looked at her, trying to figure out what she should say. “I don’t…I don’t really know. Maybe because he’s always been there?”

She nodded. “The start of your life is always going to mean you’ll have some struggles along the way, and that you need to talk about how you’re feeling. Kylo connects you to the past, but that also brings back a lot of the hurt. You wanted him to get better too, yes, but from what you’ve told me, he was struggling too. It seems like he never wanted to hurt you. Still, in a way, you both had a hard time communicating your emotions because of the two sides of your fear for one another. You reached a breaking point because you were both hurting and couldn’t share it.”

Dropping her head, Rey picked at the quilt on the couch. She still wanted to blame Kylo for everything. But maybe a lot of her pain made it hard to accept some of the things he needed from her. Maybe giving her heart to Kylo hadn’t been the right thing. But she couldn’t think of it as a mistake. She couldn’t let it ruin her for love in the future.

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“But then Leia dropped something in the kitchen.” Pulling at her sleeves again, she tried to keep her voice steady. “And it was like I wasn’t there anymore. I felt so afraid and small. I could smell Snoke. I could feel him…molesting me. My body just shook. I couldn’t get out of my own head.” Putting her hand over her mouth, she tried to keep talking. “Because then I remembered how Kylo kept me safe. How he held me afterwards. How he kept me safe. That’s…that’s what I was thinking about before I ended up in the hospital.” She stared at the water bottle on the floor as the sharp memory rolled through her head again. “I was sitting on the couch, trying to breathe, and I just couldn’t. I’ve never had that memory before. Maybe I used to have it as a nightmare but it was gone for so long. I was at Snoke’s. All I felt was fear and pain. It made me have a panic attack and I…”

“Rey,” he softly said, reaching for her hand. “It’s very hard to deal with flashbacks like that. You
were in a dissociative state. You didn’t do anything wrong. Many things can trigger episodes like that. Before that afternoon, had you experienced things like that before?”

Weakly, she lifted her head. “Sometimes. Sometimes I’ll just be back in Grey’s house. I’ll see him there and I won’t know where I am. But it got…after I started talking to Ahsoka again, and told Leia how I was feeling…it got a little better.”

“A little better is good. A lot better would be more reassuring.” Erso squeezed her hand lightly before sitting back. "Have you been recovering since then?”

Weakly, she gripped the offered palm. “It’s been…hard. Leia has been…she’s been there for me and I wish she was here now.”

He sat back and nodded. “Then I will make a phone call and see where the other investigators are in their questioning. Try to eat a little, Rey. Hopefully, we won’t be here for much longer.”

Alone again, she nibbled on the cookie.

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Leia wiped her eyes with her free hand. Rey didn’t want to let go of the other. Her head was foggy but the heavy beating of her heart had finally stopped. She could almost breathe again, even if she was in a hospital gown that itched slightly. Her mouth was dry again and her eyes hurt.

“I’m thirsty,” she mumbled. She was also hungry, craving something sweet.

“Here, there’s water.” Leia reached for a glass from the side table. “Honey, you had a panic attack. They’ve given you some things that will help for now, just like the pills you used to take when you were small. If…Rey, you should have told us that these things were happening to you. I could have called Ahsoka earlier. You’ve never…these last few months wouldn’t have been so hard if you’d have told us more about what was happening between you and Ben.”

Still lingering in the nightmare from childhood, coming back to haunt her because of what she was thinking about it now, she tried to focus on Ben and not Kylo. She was always terrified of Kylo leaving her because it felt like everyone had always been leaving her. But her parents hadn’t left her because they wanted to. The children in Snoke’s basement weren’t gone because of something bad they did or because they wanted her to be left alone. Poe didn’t die to punish her; someone killed him. The same person who killed Grey.

Did the emptiness come from Kylo’s choices?

“She asked about my parents.” Putting her head against her pillow, Rey sobbed as Leia rubbed her back. “I never thought about why I was always so worried about Kylo leaving me.”

“Rey,” Leia said, continuing to soothe her with gentle touches. “Your parents never wanted to leave you. They died because someone hurt them and that man was pure evil. He just wanted to hurt people. I also wish that you could have known your family but I am thankful every day that I got a chance to know and love you and that you could be a part of our family.”

“Even when I’m saying horrible things about your son?” She wanted to undo everything she’d said that morning, even if she was unsure whether or not it was the same day anymore.
Leia’s smile started small and then grew slowly until Rey felt it in her heart. Despite the tears at the corner of the older woman’s eyes, the sight was soothing. “Even then. Through everything, Rey, we’re behind you. We want you to have a life of your own and be the person you want to be. I know that it hurts that things didn’t work with Ben. He has a complicated heart and so do you. Together or apart, we are always going to love you both. And, just so you know, we don’t expect either of you to give up your lives to take care of us. We have a plan. It would just be nice when we get too old to live here and that you’d come visit us.”

Sitting up and brushing her hair aside, Rey nodded. Taking in every word would take time but she wanted to believe Leia. They’d had so many unexpected things happen in their lives that it made sense that they had planned for everything. “Mom, did you really think it was okay that Kylo and I were together?”

Taking a deep breath, Leia’s smile faltered for a second as she took Rey’s hand. “We were honest with you at the time, Rey. I tried to talk you through being with someone older who was…complicated. And I’m freely admitting that my son hardly comes close to the definition of complicated but I…” She stopped and smirked to herself. “Okay, he can be fucked up at times when he forgets his good sides. But we never expected that all of this would happen. We thought…we honestly thought you two could heal each other’s hearts. And I’m so sorry that we didn’t step in more to help you both. Maybe he wasn’t ready. And maybe you weren’t ready either.”

She nodded, trying to let the thought take hold. “I’m going to have to talk to more people, aren’t I?”

Licking her lips, Leia gripped her hand with both of hers. “And I’ll be with you the entire time. Because, Rey, this started with Kylo, but you also found someone who was dead. You may have hard feelings about Gregor, but he was in yours and Ben’s lives for a while now. It will take time, but part of getting better will be talking about how you feel about that. Or, at least, that’s what the doctors tell me.”

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“She will be here soon.”

The door closed and she sat up, pulling herself from the hospital room. “Is Han coming too?”

Erso paused, standing in the doorway for a moment. “He’s made…he’s made the decision to go to the house in Virginia. We’re going through Kylo’s life and he’s obviously quite upset at the moment. But Leia will be here for you soon. She also had to deal with some hard questions this afternoon.”

She felt like she’d been there for hours, but the sun was only just starting to set.

“Agent Erso, are you going to have to go through his journals?” She rubbed her arms, gradually coming back to herself. “I know you read the missing one. Can you…what did he say there? I only want to know if…if I was in there somewhere too.”

“I can’t really tell you that, Rey. But, yes. You were there. That’s the truth.” He slowly moved to the front of the classroom, standing behind the desk. “And now I will be reading the other journals to try to uncover more about how he was feeling.”
She smirked, despite the weight in her chest. “He’s not going to like that.”

“No, well, that’s exactly why his father will likely be breathing down my neck the entire time I’m trying to do my job.” He picked up a marker, turning it in his hand. “Did Agent Solo tell you that I’m also an instructor at a university? I’m on sabbatical right now, but I also prefer classrooms to be filled with students there to learn rather than asking you these questions.”

She turned, watching him sweep the room. “I don’t think he told me. He just said you were from California. And you had read that journal and looked at him weird.”

“Well,” he answered, setting the pen down before returning to his chair. “That’s probably true. But after I helped him, we were able to find some common ground. I wouldn’t say that we’re friends, but if he hadn’t…” He took a deep breath and turned his head, focusing out the window. “The case we were working on was a complicated one and we wouldn’t have found the suspect without him. But he’s still a young agent. It was clear to me that he froze up because of inexperience, not because of anything else. And part of why Agent Kenobi is so…angry with me is because I was involved in that incident. I don’t think that Kylo went to Nevada because of what happened with the shooting. I think that we’ll find more answers by talking to you and his other friends and family.”

Wiping some crumbs from her leggings, she nodded. “I think I’m beginning to get it. But it’s been…these months have been hard. I haven’t felt like myself in so long. I only tried to love him. And wanted him to be in love with me. Having everything happen with Grey, I couldn’t do it anymore. Kylo had seen what I had and it was like he could block it out. I don’t think he realized I was so hurt.”

“Still,” Erso said. “The Bureau could have helped you long ago. When you told us about what George said, I’m sure he was sincere. You trusted us to help you when you were younger and you perhaps should have considered it again. It seems like you let Kylo stand in your way again.”

“I just wanted my own life.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Everyone has always acted like Kylo is my responsibility. I tried to take care of him. I wanted to stay there but he was the one who started arguing with me. I don’t remember ever being as angry at him in my life. Those few days were…I just wanted to forget them.”

“And in of your anger, you chose to leave him. And you let it drive you to a point where you required hospitalization.” His voice made her look up. “Rey, I understand why you left. Frankly, it was dangerous for you there. But a phone call would have helped us all a great deal. You know him well and what he’s capable of. It would have also removed some of your burdens.”

“I thought being away from him would fix things. I thought he would…find his own life and I could finally start mine.” Swallowing, she held his eyes. “He hates being shut out. But I had to do it. It’s what I needed. I couldn’t breathe around him anymore.”

“And he was only reminding you of Grey, rather than giving you the comfort he used to bring.” He nodded but raised his eyebrows. “You said ‘hates’. This isn’t the first time?”

“No,” she answered. “And it’s probably also why Han is going there and not…here.”

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“Kylo is where he is, sweetie. And I also think it’s a good idea for you to stay at home for a while.”

Huffing, Rey slumped down further in her seat, driving her hands under her thighs. Storming out of Poe and Kylo’s apartment and into the safety of dad’s truck should take away the ache in her stomach. But the distant sounds from the bedroom next door the previous night still haunted her.

“I hate them,” she said, her frown deepening. “I hate Poe the most.”

Han glanced from the road at her before sighing and turning back. “Now, why are you feeling that way? Rey, it’s just…this is just a part of life. We’ve…look, we’ll talk to the boys about what happened. Maybe they wanted to tell you in their own way that they want this type of forever deal.”

She wanted to kick at the dashboard. She wanted to kick at anything. Why couldn’t she be the one to keep Kylo forever? It just wasn’t fair.

“Maybe I want to keep Kylo forever? That’s what he promised and now he wants another forever. And I don’t want it to be with Poe. He’s ruined everything. Why did he have to come live with us? Why did Kylo choose him? Everything used to be just us and now…”

The truck slammed on its brakes, forcing Rey to shoot out her hands and gasp. Taking deep breaths, her head snapped towards Han. They stood still in the middle of the lane, cars already starting to honk angrily at them.

“So?” Han looked at her with sharp eyes. “Do you want to keep going? All those cars can just go around us and we can sit here all night if you want.”

Blinking back tears, she couldn’t find her breath. “I don’t…dad, why can’t we just go home?”

Someone screamed at them to get moving from the next car. Even through the glass, she could hear the harsh voice telling them to stop blocking traffic.

“All right.” Han tapped on the steering wheel. “Until you want to say what you mean…” He reclined his chair and quirked his eyebrow at her. “I might as well take a nap.”

Licking her lips, she dropped her head. “I just want him to be mine. That’s all.”

After a deep breath, Han fixed his seat and they finally started driving again. “Rey, I know that you think I was being mean right now, but sometimes I have to do things like that when I don’t agree with what you’re saying. I know you’re upset, and we’ll be home soon enough, but your Kylo is trying to have his own life. You have your own life, right baby girl?”

“All I do is go to school,” she mumbled. “And I hate school.”

Glaring out the window, she thought about how often she had to sit in the principal’s office for cutting class. How many times the school counsellor had to speak to her. It was embarrassing. The easiest answer was right there: she needed to spend more time with Kylo. She wouldn’t have as many nightmares. The constant feeling of needing to move and do anything would fade away whenever they were near one another.

“Yeah, well, that’s another problem we need to talk about. But, can you think about what we talked about before? About how maybe if you don’t spend so much time at the boys’ then you’ll be able to focus? You have your friends. Don’t you miss them when you’re here with them?” Han kept driving, but Rey still expected him to brake at any minute.
“I guess,” she said with a shrug.

Han sighed. “What if one of your friends always wanted to spend time with you? What if they didn’t want you to have any other friends? How would that make you feel?”

She lifted her shoulders again. “Finn does that sometimes. And I don’t like it. He’ll only want us to spend time together and it bugs me.”

They were on the highway now and Han slowly pulled onto the shoulder so he could turn to her. She didn’t want to look at him. Keeping her arms folded, she pulled away when he tried to rub her shoulder.

“Well, maybe think about how Kylo feels when you only want to spend time with him. And how hurt he feels right now after you said something like that to a person he loved.” Han kept his voice low and she dropped lower in her seat, tightening her arms around herself. “Honey, that’s called being possessive. And don’t think I haven’t had this same talk with Kylo about how he treats Poe the same way. It makes people afraid and it’s hard to be around someone who only wants to keep us the same way and that’s around us all of the time, only doing what we want. Do you understand what I’m saying, Rey?”

She kept her eyes locked out of the window.

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“I see. Even as a child, you had these types of emotions.” Erso quickly wrote something down before flicking his eyes up. “So you’ve been discussing these things with your therapists as well? And Han and Leia?”

She nodded, still lost in recalling that drive back to their house. It rolled into the week of Kylo constantly checking on her, and her deciding to shut him out. Only then could she turn her mind to a different focus. If he wanted a life like that, with someone who wasn't her, then he was breaking a promise.

"I felt so lost when they got engaged." Slowly, she looked out the window again. "And then he died and everyone only cared about Kylo's feelings."

He shifted in his chair before he sighed. "Rey, it seems to me like you haven’t had many chances in your life to have things that extend beyond him. Some of them are, unfortunately, from outside circumstances. Your upbringing, for example. Coming out of a traumatic experience creates a bond that many psychologists have studied and there is no real consensus. On the other hand, we have the choices that you’ve made as you've grown into adulthood."

“He made them too.” Her answer was quick. “He wanted me around. Sometimes, it's like he can't stay away from me. It’s why I thought the text wasn’t strange. Whenever I’ve stepped away from him, he gets so hurt and tries to convince me that he wants me in his life.”

“Yes but, Rey,” he paused, starting to flip through his notebook. “Maybe he wants you in his life in a way that is comfortable for him but does not match with the image you have of him in your head. As you have described today, he continuously made choices that show his independence, while you wanted to keep him in a specific way. Yes, he was there. Yes, he has a…dramatic presence. But in the memories and the moments you have told me about today, you have a hard time
separating your feelings from his. He was an individual while you kept holding yourself back from having a life of your own because you couldn't break away from your, how did you put it, bubble. This is why your relationship is so curious to me. There are ties here and a close bond, but it's very unique. And why we need to understand how he was feeling before he…left for Nevada. Our conversation has taken this road because there are many decisions and feelings involved. We have evidence on one hand, and what you were feeling on the other. There is more to this than that phone call.”

She had never been more thankful for the rapid knock on the classroom door. “I’m sorry it took so long. I left right after the questioning and…” Leia burst into the room, ignoring the agent and going right to her. “I hope you weren’t treating her like a suspect too.”

Wrapped up in Leia’s arms, Rey tried to shake her head. “It’s been…it’s been a lot of questions.”

Leia’s head snapped to Erso. “So then you know how hard she’s been working? You shouldn’t be here tearing up the past like your fellow agents were with me. There’s someone out there hunting my son and he has him now. And you’re questioning us like we have something to do with it? How can you live with yourself?”

Leia kept rubbing her back until Rey finally pulled away. “Agent Erso, I think…I think I get it now.”

The man stood, fixing his suit jacket. “Then I thank you for your time. And remember to take care of yourself. And to breathe. We will be in touch.”

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Alone with Leia in her dorm room, Rey couldn’t get her head out of the long and endless conversation. Even if she’d just explained it to Leia, it wasn’t vanishing like she had hoped it would.

Closing her eyes, she pushed back the old memories again. “I really don’t know where he is.”

“I know, Rey. They kept asking me the same thing.” Leia stroked her hair. “It all…it feels so different from when he was a boy. They were asking the same questions but his world is so much bigger now and I don’t know every corner of it anymore.”

“What do I do now that he’s gone?” Blinking, she felt a new pain finally hit her chest. She couldn’t pretend that he was at home and was safe. There was no more time to wait to talk to him. Learning who she really was inside had been so important. And she hadn’t realized how much of that was linked to Kylo.

The room suddenly felt smaller, sucking in around her.

She wasn’t four years old in the security of the hospital. She wasn’t six years old and sitting on her porch. She wasn’t eleven and in the truck. She wasn’t at the hotel or sitting in Hux’s house. She wasn’t in Virginia, waiting for Kylo to come home.

Those places existed because Kylo had the strength to escape. And she’d been the one who had never been able to free herself from those feelings that had bound them together, letting them twist and turn into something else in her chest.
“We have to take care of one another as a family.” Leia pulled her into another hug. “And Han will...when we can talk to him again, he won’t be that angry with you. But you really have to listen to Owen and Agent Erso right now. If you hear anything or know anything else, you might be able to help us find Ben right now. We are a family, Rey. We have to stay a family. That’s how we got through this before. It’s hard and it’s lonely but...but he’s still out there. And we still love him and we’re going to get him back.”

She could keep loving Kylo, but the only way to do that was to rethink everything he meant to her again. Step by step, she saw all of the pauses and strange looks from him in her mind. Kylo’s choices, she had realized as Agent Erso had been speaking, weren’t meant to push her away. She had been the one who hadn’t seen how often she stopped her own life for him when he never did the same in return. He did things to keep her safe, but what she wanted was so much more than that now. For her, it meant feeling alone because she had never dealt with so many of her feelings from the past. For him, it meant continuing to move forward until he got to a place that she couldn’t reach. Maybe his heart would always love her, just not in the way that she needed.

She only wished that she could have realized it without him disappearing.

Turning her head, she looked at the pictures on her wall. She’d taken down all of the images that reminded her of their time as a couple months ago.

The ones that remained were just like Leia had said: he was her family.

“I’m sorry,” she said, a tear slipping down her cheek. “I’m sorry he’s gone.”

The gentle hand returned to stroking her hair. “I know, Rey. I know. But you know...you know that everyone is looking for him. And we can’t lose hope. Things are...they aren’t the same...” The hand stilled as Leia’s voice broke, a sob shaking her body. Quickly lifting herself up, Rey wrapped her arms around her, holding on as tightly as she could. “We’re...we have to find him again, Rey. He has to still be alive.”

“I know,” Rey managed to say, her own tears catching in her throat.

He had to come back.

Even if he wasn’t coming back for her, for what they had shared during their painful romance, he would come back for his family.

And she had to be her own person when that happened. The shaking, quivering girl filled with panic and loneliness for him wasn’t the type of person Kylo wanted her to be when he helped her escape Snoke’s terror. She wasn’t the angry, demanding person she’d been as she fought to love him.

She had to be just Rey.