The Great Big No

by dietplainlite

Summary

Kylo Ren is third generation rock royalty, a reigning brat prince starting to feel the burn of the fame he reached for with both hands. Rey is an aspiring singer on the verge of a big break, provided her A&R guy still has a job by the time she reaches LA. Their paths have crossed briefly, disappointingy, before. What happens when they collide?

Notes

If you're new to the Reylo ship or this story, welcome! You can find me on Tumblr at kylo-wouldnt-like-those-chips

Thank you cutebutpsycho for your invaluable assistance with the whole journalism thing. And for encouraging me to put this story in the 90s where it belongs.
FIRST KNIGHT

By Dax Shantau, staff writer

January 23, 1998

“Hey, I had my first threesome there!” This is the response from a senior editor (who shall remain nameless) when I tell him where I’m meeting Kylo Ren, dark lord of The Knights of Ren. We meet in the fabled West Village apartment of Ren’s parents, Millennium Falcon guitarist Han Solo and folk singer- turned-record-exec Leia Organa six weeks before the band’s sophomore album, Starkiller, is set to drop. He prefers this to meeting at a bar or restaurant, not for privacy, but because he’s a California kid who “loves this town but hates this fucking weather.”

He stalks about the apartment barefoot, in black jeans and a grey sweater with thumb holes cut in the sleeves. Tall and dark but not particularly handsome, Ren is the kind of guy you’d think picked up a guitar because it was the only way he could ever meet girls. Spend a few minutes in his presence, however, and you’ll see that he floats around in a cloud of dark charisma. Not the kind born from being charming or well-spoken--to be frank, he is neither of those things—but there is a draw, nonetheless, that has attracted scores of girls to his band’s music.

No, ladies, the apartment isn’t in the bell tower of a gothic cathedral, nor is it furnished in black leather and industrial lighting. Despite the theatricality of the typical Knights of Ren concert, which feature masks and 1980s hair band caliber pyro, Ren’s apartment is almost painfully typical, down to the exposed brick, warehouse windows, and built-in shelving stuffed with books and vinyl. I even spy a cappuccino machine that looks to have been used a few times.

What’s less typical about the apartment is its pedigree. His parents purchased the top floor of the former boot factory in 1965 and in the years before their son’s birth in 1973, the couple hosted the type of parties that have become legend in downtown lore. Mention this address to anyone who was any part of the 1960s New York rock scene, and they’ll have a story. I break the ice by telling him about my editor’s threesome, in the loft’s master bathroom.

“Yeah,” he says. “People tell me those stories all the time. That or how much they wanted to bang my mom. They forget I was a kid here. That I was her kid.”

I express some surprise that he still has access to the loft.

“It’s in my name. It was an eighteenth birthday present, way before all that went down.”

“All that” is his defection from his mother’s Resistance Records five years ago, halfway through recording The Dagobah System’s first full length album. Dagobah’s first EP, Bright Blue Glow,
had unexpectedly gone platinum on the strength of the jangly alt-country infused “City in the Sky,” and the LP was anticipated to catapult the band and the label to the next level.

After Ren’s abrupt departure, Resistance released the album as an eponymous EP in 1994. It performed phenomenally, but, unable to find a strong new lead singer, the band dissolved in early 1995. Ren relinquished all royalty rights as part of his settlement and legally changed his name from Ben Organa-Solo to Kylo Ren.

He has never talked about the split, or his current relationship with his parents or his uncle, legendary record producer Luke Skywalker, who retired soon after the EP’s release. Some speculate that Ren chafed under his uncle’s more structured process. The band had put Bright Blue Glow together in Ren’s parents’ home studio during their senior year of high school, only going to the label for help with distribution and promotion. Skywalker is known for his tight scheduling and strictly proscribed recording process.

Others will point out that this theory doesn’t make sense, as Ren signed on immediately with First Order Records, run by notorious Svengali Alistair Snoke. The former airline mogul launched the careers of three of bestselling boybands of the 1980s, his success attributed to his absolute control over all aspects of his groups’ personal and professional lives. As the boyband craze died, Snoke shifted his focus to rock bands and the occasional hip hop artist, eventually transitioning from manager to label runner in 1991. Ren has known Snoke since he was a boy.

When asked how much influence Snoke had on his quitting The Dagobah System, Ren sighs loudly and stares at a distant point past my head. I repeat my question.

“Is this really what this interview is supposed to be about?”

I move on, asking about the album. Any future questions about Snoke or his old band are met with silence. On my end it feels tense, but he is strangely patient, as though he could wait until doomsday for me to move on.

At press time, Starkiller’s first single, “Darkside Blues,” is certified platinum, and the video has reached number one on TRL ten times. Quite a feat when you consider that *NSync and the Backstreet Boys both have singles out. The album is projected to go gold in its first week.

Ren describes Starkiller as a classic one-producer concept album, dealing with the pitfalls of fame. He fully recognizes that it’s well-trod territory, and hand waves my concerns about how his fans will relate.

“Okay yeah so I grew up in Pacific Palisades, mostly. My first girlfriend was a super model and I’ve never had a real job. I had my first platinum album when I was nineteen. What else am I supposed to write about? But really, none of that matters because some things are universal. Loneliness, disappointment, your first fuck? It’s all universal whether you’re in Beverly Hills or Oklahoma.”

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Rey closes the magazine and rolls her eyes. The issue is a year old, but had come into the shop with a box of back issues from the 70s. She’d been drawn in by the cover photo, a close up black and white shot showcasing every flaw on Kylo Ren’s weird face, but she can’t stomach the “poor little rich boy” bullshit she can see coming around the bend.

The magazines need to catalogued before she can price them. She considers tossing this one into the trash, but figures one of his fans may pay a couple of dollars for it, so she enters it into the
spread sheet. The work is second nature, so her mind drifts. This is usually when snippets of lyrics or melody will come to her, but she keeps thinking about last July, when she spent two hours in Kylo Ren’s dressing room.

The tickets were a nineteenth birthday present from her boss. Soshanna had likely traded for the tickets, but Rey didn’t care. Bartering is a fact of life in her small town’s economy. As Soshanna had no use for them, only caring about music so far as how much its memorabilia will bring in, Rey knew that she likely gave up a more valuable trade in order to secure the gift, and that’s what mattered.

It didn’t even matter that Rey hates The Knights’ music. What she does love is The Dagobah System. They only ever recorded ten songs, and Rey was only twelve when *Bright Blue Glow* came out, but Rey is pretty sure she wouldn’t have made it through middle school, much less high school, if not for those songs. She saw the concert as an opportunity to see the man who’d written them, and maybe even thank him.

Rey has always been adept at talking her way into places, and being a reasonably attractive, thin young woman with a perfect fake ID is a huge advantage when talking your way back stage at shows. She doesn’t consider herself to be a groupie, even though several of her online music friends are. She has two main objectives when going back stage at shows: Get her demo in the hands of whoever is the most receptive, and get her hands on whatever is on the catering table.

Most of the time she achieves at least one of these before someone notices she’s there to network and eat rather than do what groupies do. Sometimes they let her stay because they just like having pretty girls around. Other times she’s been asked none too nicely to leave. A few times she’s learned that sometimes it’s harder to talk your way out than it is to talk your way in. But she’s always talked her way out.

Last summer, for the first time, she didn’t have to do any talking at all. While they were waiting for the band to come back for the encore, one of the security guys had come out to where she stood against the rail, handed her a badge, and told her to come with him. Kylo wanted to talk to her.

Rey knew what that usually meant but she went anyway, following the guard downstairs, through the green room and down a hallway lined with dressing rooms. He opened the door to the last one and told her to go inside but not touch anything. The room was larger than her trailer, and better furnished. There were vanilla scented candles on every surface and a huge spread of food on a corner table. She sat down in a big white chair and immediately regretted it, as she sank so deeply into it that it would be difficult to stand up again with any grace. She considered moving to the sofa but froze when voices started filtering down the hall. She examined her fingernails, trying to affect an air of nonchalance as Kylo Ren entered the room.

He stopped short when he saw her, as though he’d already forgotten he’d asked for her to be delivered to his dressing room. Exhausted and sweaty, dark hair plastered to his head, he looked younger than in photos.

“Oh, um. I need to shower,” he said and passed through into the adjoining bathroom.

Half an hour later he emerged in a cloud of steam, fully dressed, in a pair of worn Levis and a faded black t shirt.

“Sorry about that.” He gestured to the corner table. “Hungry?”

“Starving,” she said. Getting out of the chair was as much of a struggle as she’d expected, but the bounty on the table was worth it. She piled a plate high with fresh fruit and cheese, grabbed a
Corona from an ice bucket and perched on the chair arm. Ren leaned against the door jamb and watched her eat. This probably would have made other girls self-conscious, but Rey can’t afford to be shy when it comes to food, especially free food.

“When’s the last time you ate?” he asked.

“Last night. Had to save up for gas so I skimped on groceries.” She popped a cube of cheese in her mouth and instantly regretted it. It tasted like school paste.

“Something wrong?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she murmured. She never complained about free food, or any food for that matter.

“It’s vegan cheese. Takes some getting used to.”

“Oh, of course,” she said, finally swallowing it. She took a long pull on the beer bottle.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty three.”

“You look younger. Do you have your ID?”

“Why do you need my ID?”

“You’re in my dressing room. In some states that alone can bring a statutory rape charge. And even if you’re over eighteen, you’re drinking.”

“Oh, yeah.” She fished the ID out of her pocket and handed it over. He studied it for a long time, holding it up to the light and running his fingers over it.

“This is a good one,” he looked at it again. “Rey. An actual New Mexico driver’s license, with your picture, just a different birth year. Let me see your real one”

“That is my real one.”

“Somehow I doubt it.”

“Why?”

“Just a feeling.”

She sighed and handed him her real ID.

“Nineteen, only yesterday.”

“Yes.”

“Well, you can stay, but I’ll take that,” he said, plucking the half-finished beer from her hand and replacing it with a bottle of sparkling apple juice.

“Sorry.”

“Did you come alone?”

“Yeah. I gave my other ticket to someone in the parking lot.”
“Gave?”

“Yeah. They were a gift so it didn’t feel right selling it.”

They fell into silence again as she finished the strawberries on her plate.

“How did you like the show?” he said at the same time she asked if he was vegan.

“Yes. Not for ethical reasons, though. I don’t give a fuck about cows. How did you like the show?”

“Um.”

“You didn’t like it.”

Rey’s pulse quickened and she looked around. At some point, the guard had closed the door. She could hear sounds of a party coming from the green room, down the hall.

“Well, I…you see—“

“You’re a Dagobah fan.”

“Yes,” she sighed.

“One of you pops up in the front row every once in a while. I’ve learned to recognize that determined, martyred look.”

“I just wanted to—“

“Thank me for helping you get through your parents’ divorce or your sister’s death or a bad breakup. I know.”

Rey threw down her plate, which by then only held a few cubes of the nasty fake cheese, and stalked over to him.

“You don’t know the first goddamned thing about me. How dare you anyway? Mocking the fact that people connected to something you wrote? I’d give anything for that, and you throw it away like it’s annoying, like you—you can’t be bothered? Why? Because it’s not as cool as what you think you’re doing now is? Fuck you. Fuck The Knights of Ren. Your music fucking blows.”

He stood there as though he was waiting for more, eyes locked on hers, a muscle working in his jaw. She turned to leave.

“Wait.”

“I’m not going to fuck you. I was never going to fuck you. I’m sure there’s someone down the hall who will.”

“That’s not why I asked you in here.”

“Oh so you just wanted to make fun of me. That’s great. Guess I should be grateful you didn’t want to fuck me and then make fun of me. Or make fun of me and then fuck me.”

“I wanted to talk.”

“Really?” Rey laughed.
“Yes. Please stay.”

In the end her growling stomach made the decision for her, and for the next hour, she sat eating fruit and cashews while he chain smoked clove cigarettes and talked, mostly about music and his grandfather, an obscure country singer from the 1950s who’d died in a car accident at a young age. About ten minutes in she realized that when he said “talk,” he meant that he would talk and she would listen. He was the first person she’d ever met who was more obsessed with music than she was, but she couldn’t get a word in. Finally, he went to use the bathroom and she slipped out, shoving the jar of nuts and a box of chocolates in her bag on the way.

She didn’t leave her demo. He was not someone she wanted to feel indebted to.

Soshanna peeks her head in and interrupts Rey’s reverie.

“Rey, sweetie, come help me lock up. You can finish those tomorrow.”

Her boss has teased her hair blonde hair to higher levels than normal and touched up her makeup. Another date night.

“Yes ma’am,” Rey says.

Driving home through the sunset, Rey has one of those rare moments where she’s grateful for where she lives. She’s never really been anywhere, but she’s seen plenty of movies and photos, and a few of the tourists that have come through the shop while in town to visit the hot springs have told her that New Mexico is one of the most beautiful places on earth. The pink and purple sunset works as a balm against the gritty feeling in her eyes and the tired hungry feeling in her bones. She knows she should move closer to town to save money on gas, but she can’t give these drives up.

In her driveway she turns off the ignition on her AMC Eagle and the engine rattles to a stop.

“Good girl,” she says, patting the dashboard. “I’ll do that oil change on Saturday, okay?”

The trailer is cold but Rey pulls on another sweater rather than turning on the heater, then digs around in her meager cupboard. The peanut butter jar has been scraped almost clean and there are some oats left. If she puts the cooked oatmeal in the jar and stirs it, it’ll just about get it all. That should do for breakfast in the morning. It’s quick work to grill a tortilla and melt a slice of cheese over it. She thinks about the grilled cheese sandwiches one of her foster mothers used to make with thick slices of commodity cheese and margarine on the bread. If she thinks hard enough about it she can almost fool herself into thinking her supper tastes like that, even if she doesn’t have any tomato soup.

She takes her plate and a glass of water into the living room and pulls out one of the mail sorting bins that holds her records. She hasn’t listened to the Anakin Skywalker album since she first bought it, right after her encounter with Kylo Ren. When she’d researched Skywalker, she’d been surprised to find out he was one of those artists who, while the general public didn’t necessarily know of him, country aficionados adored him, and pro musicians of all genres would cite him as an influence. His music had a haunting, raw quality that had only exacerbated Rey’s loneliness and she’d only listened to side A. With the sun gone over the mountains, she feels the need to poke at a bruise, so she slides the LP from its sleeve and sets it on the platter. She stares at the handsome, sad man on the album cover and pictures a straight line running from this plaintive voice to Leia Organa’s soul infused folk rock melodies, taking a quick detour to pick up Millennium Falcon’s
southern rock guitar on the way, then winding its way into the loose crunch of the Dagobah System, and she can’t understand how it terminates at The Knights of Ren, who feature both a scratch DJ and a bagpipe player.

As she licks her plate clean, she thinks about what it must be like to not just have a family, but to have a family whose purpose and legacy is so clear. And as much as she understands that you might want to strike out on your own a little, she thinks about Kylo Ren in his comfortable dressing room, with more food than he can eat, and the fact that he has so much choice in what he eats that he can cut out two entire food groups. She thinks about the fact that he has a family he chooses not to talk to. She thinks about all of this and she hates him, even though she hasn’t thought about him much in over six months. And she takes that hatred to bed with her, pretending it supplies a semblance of warmth.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from Hole's "Celebrity Skin"
Kylo Ren wakes up in Los Angeles and wants to punch someone, anyone, in the face. For one moment before fully waking he’d thought he was still in New York, with nothing to give a fuck about. But he’s in LA, where there are contract negotiations and fans that don’t know how to leave you alone, not to mention his mother, who he could run into at any moment because she somehow manages to be everywhere at once. But hey, at least it’s sunny.

It’s been like this forever. When he’s in New York he’s happy for a few days, but then he’ll end up on the subway at rush hour or step in puddle of slush and all he can think about is the open highway and eighty five degree weather. Then he’s back in LA and all it takes is a good traffic jam on a hundred and ten degree day for him to miss the relative freedom of hopping on and off the train at will and the rain against the loft’s windows.

He rolls over and reaches under the bed, thrashing around with his hand until it lands on his Powerbook. His head throbs vaguely as he sits up again, and when he can’t connect to the Internet he considers throwing the computer across the room and going back to sleep.

Before he can do anything rash, his assistant knocks on the door and comes in with his mail, a glass of orange juice, and two Advil.

“Good morning!” she says.

Kylo grunts.

“Okay looks like I should have brought up coffee.”

“You should always bring up coffee, Lorna.”

“Right. I’ll remember. Oh, hey your Ethernet cable came out.” She picks it up and hands it to him.

“Oh, yeah, thanks.”

“No problem!” Lorna pushes her glasses up on her nose and thumbs through her organizer. “Well, you’re in meetings most of the day at First Order, but the first one isn’t until noon. Hux has you all booked at the Ivy for a breakfast meeting beforehand.

“The Ivy.”

Lorna sighs. “Yes.”

“Hux wants us to meet at the goddamned Ivy to talk about our contract. They can’t even decide on what pizza to get when we’re in the studio, when each of us could realistically have five of whatever pizza we want, without nearly coming to blows over Hawaiian, but he wants us to have a friendly sit down at the fucking Ivy.”

“I can get you a private dining room at the Four Seasons but you’ll have to wear a jacket.”

“Fine.” He pops the Advil and downs the glass of juice. “Let the others know.”

“Do you want me to cancel altogether?”
“No. Because then they’ll meet without me.”

“All right. Car will be here in an hour,” she says. She leaves with his empty glass.

None of the fan mail is interesting enough for him to answer personally so he puts it aside for Lorna, who will give them to her assistant to send out the autographed glossies.

His email is even less interesting so he shuts off the laptop and shoves it under the bed again. His bones crack a bit as he gets out of bed and he seriously regrets the third rum and coke he’d had on the plane last night. He finds his wallet in his pants pocket and digs out a scrap of paper. It’s the address of a girl in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, memorized while studying her driver’s license to verify her age. He always does that, so he can write it down with the date in case anything weird comes up after. One time there was a paternity suit from a girl who’d been in his dressing room less than two minutes. Most of the addresses are written down in a Moleskine notebook he keeps in his tour bag, but this one never made it there. He’s not sure why. She wasn’t anything particularly special, really, except that she’d yelled at him, then snuck out without saying good bye.

When he’d spotted her, halfway through the set, she may as well have been under a spotlight. Small and wiry, her face dominated by dark tilted eyes and a wide slash of a mouth, she’d held onto the railing refusing to give up her spot no matter who pushed and pulled at her. Despite that determination to stay front and center, or maybe because of it, it didn’t take long to figure out she wasn’t a Knights fan. There were two types of audience members who looked like they were enduring the show rather than enjoying it: older relatives there to chaperone, and Dagobah System fans. This girl had obviously come alone.

He’s never more grateful for his mask than when there’s a Dagobah fan in the first row, and this one was more intense than any he’d seen. They all seemed to harbor some disappointed hostility under their awe, but this one looked like she were trying to scoop the answer (the question is always “Why did you quit?”) from his brain. Telling Raoul to take her backstage was almost an act of self-preservation.

Back on stage for the encore, Kylo had enjoyed a moment of relief at not being under her intense gaze anymore, before wondering what the hell he was going to do when he was in the same room with her, without his mask.

Turns out he’d bungled the whole thing as spectacularly as possible. He’d only wanted to find out why she’d come to the show if she didn’t like the music. Why she’d put herself through that, even for the chance to talk to him. He doesn’t have anything to say about The Dagobah System. It’s over and done. That was Ben Solo’s high school garage band and it meant nothing to Kylo Ren. But every once in a while one of them would come, and the stupid suffering looks on their faces made him want to smash his guitar against his own head. Sometimes he smashed it on the stage.

But instead of asking, he’d insulted her. Then he’d talked at her for over an hour about nothing but his grandpa, who died twenty years before he was even born, and every album that ever meant anything to him. Maybe it wouldn’t have been so bad if he’d let her talk, but he couldn’t shut up, and when he came back from the bathroom she was gone.

He looks at the piece of paper again.

“No, you fucking psycho,” he mutters, and puts the scrap back into his wallet.
“Four albums, $40 million advance and a 1% royalty increase over the previous album.”

“The last one is five times platinum in a year and you’re only going to ask for forty million on four?”

“Why the hell would we agree to any more than three? Our last one was three.”

“Because it gets us a bigger advance.”

“Oh boy more pressure and a bigger debt! Where do I sign up for that?”

“I think Hux’s deal is fine.”

“Yeah but if he starts with that we’re gonna end up with like, five albums for ten mil or something.”

“Come on he’s not that bad. The bigger the deal the bigger his cut.”

Kylo sits with his eyes closed. They’re seated at a round table, ill-fitting suit jackets thrown on over their t-shirts (except for Hux, who looks like a fucking Brooks Brothers ad.) They haven’t gotten their food yet and the table is already a mess of napkins, Bloody Mary glasses and spilled coffee. He focuses on his breathing because it’s the only thing keeping him from flipping the table over. He remembers that it’s still legal to smoke inside in New York and has to start his breathing exercise from scratch.

Finally, instead of flipping the table, Kylo decides to derail the whole train.

“I don’t think we should wear the masks anymore,” he says in the brief silence after their food arrives.

To a man they all turn to him. Hux speaks first. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t think we should wear the masks anymore.”

“Why the hell not?”

“They’re played out. They were fine for the first two, especially Starkiller, but we don’t need them. People know us. We didn’t sell twenty million records worldwide on masks alone.”

“But the masks are our thing?” Mikey, the bassist, chimes in. He would be the most worried, since he’s got the most unfortunate face of the group.

Kylo shrugs. “They were our thing for two albums and now they’re played out. We’ll become a parody of ourselves if we keep it up. Look at Gwar.”

“Leave Gwar out of this!” Mikey says. His sparse goatee quivers with indignation.

“I’m with Kylo on this,” Banks says. “Do y’all have any idea how crucial peripheral vision is to drumming?”

“Yeah? So what’ll your excuse be if we get rid of the masks and you still suck?”

“Shut the fuck up, Mikey. Go suck some Gwar dick.”

Derek puts his arm out to keep Mikey from launching himself across the table at Banks. “Chill out, man. You, too, Banks.” Mikey sits back down, arms folded, and glares at Banks.
“Now,” Derek continues. “You all know I can play a guitar one armed and blind folded so I don’t care one way or the other but maybe we can talk about this some other time?”

“Sure,” Kylo shrugs. “But if we end up doing Unplugged, there’s no question alright?”

“Hey one question about Unplugged?” It’s the first words Moff has said all morning.

“What do your turntables run off of, Moff?” Kylo asks, anticipating the DJ’s question.

“Electricity. Duh, Kylo. But so do the microphones.”

“Jesus Christ you’ll play the bagpipes and beatbox why do I have to figure out everything?”

“You’re the lead singer, man.” Banks says.

“And the writer,” Mikey adds.

“Fuck all of you. Are we done?”

Hux looks up from his PalmPilot. “Are we? Do I go in with four albums for forty million?”

The band answers with a chorus of shrugs and “Whatever.”

“Start with sixty million,” Kylo says.

The rest of the band downs their drinks and starts to leave, but Hux puts his hand up as Kylo stands.

“Kylo, stay here. We need to talk.”

“But Hux I wanna go get ice cream with the others.”

“Fuck you Ren we’re smokin’ a blunt,” Mikey says.

“Obviously, and after that, you’ll go get ice cream.”

“You’re fucking vegan anyway.”

“Oh, damn that’s right. I don’t know where I could find vegan ice cream in Los Angeles. Guess you can go on without me.”

Four idiots file out and he’s left with the one. They stare at each other across the table until Hux sighs and speaks.

“You need to find a girlfriend.”

“No,” he says, rising. “Anything else?”

“Kylo, I’m serious.”

“I’m not taking relationship advice from someone with a bowl cut. What is this about?”

Hux is silent for a moment while he spreads cream on a scone. “You’re not performing well in the 11-17 or the 18-29 male demo.”

“So?”
“We think that they might…relate to you better if you had a girlfriend.”

Something drops in Kylo’s gut at that. He sits down and leans forward. “I’m not gay, Hux.”

“Don’t be surprised, Kylo. You haven’t even been on a date since Katya, as far as I know. You don’t fuck groupies. What the hell are people supposed to think?”

“I don’t care what they think.”

“Then you shouldn’t care about going on a few dates.”

“I’m not interested.”

“Not interested? What about Katya? You were together for three years.”

“We had a connection.”

“So reestablish that connection.”

“Sure, I’ll call her up and tell her to drop her NFL boyfriend.”

“So find a connection with someone else!”

“Or what? I’m not one of your pop singers. I’m not contractually obligated to have a girlfriend. Besides, the girls will go ballistic if I have a girlfriend.”

“They’ll stick around. They always do. But men are afraid to say they like the band.”

“Because they think I’m gay.”

“That’s part of it.”

“Who fucking cares,” Kylo says, standing up. “You said when we were on tour that the girls are the ones that matter because they’re the ones that buy things.”

“But you’re never going to be taken seriously if all your fans are girls.”

“If I wanted to be taken seriously I’d have stayed on an indie label with my garage band.”

Hux throws pushes his plate away and stands up, coming around the table to Kylo. “So you’re happy with a trophy case full of People’s Choice and Billboard awards? You’ll be happy that the only Grammy in the cabinet is your grandfather’s?”

Kylo punches the table. A waitress runs in at the sound of breaking glassware, but stops and backs out when she sees the stand-off.

“This is the most batshit conversation I have ever had and it ends now.”

Hux puts his hand on Kylo’s shoulder and leans in. “Fine, but look, Kylo. The label is thrilled with the record sales. No one is saying they’re not. But awards, real awards, are important to them, too. To the Grammy voters you’re not much better than a boyband, and it’s got less to do with the music than your fan base. Getting rid of the masks is a good start, and we’ll definitely bring that up again, but I think it would help your image if you appeared more…”

“Normal?”
“Not normal. Rock stars are never normal, and that’s what you are.”

“I can walk anytime I want, you know. I’ve done it before.”

“I also know how far you’re willing to go for the illusion of credibility.”

Kylo inhales, straightening to his full height.

“I’ll see you at the meeting,” he throws over his shoulder on his way out.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Title from "Ziggy Stardust" by David Bowie
A gentle knock on the trailer’s storm door interrupts Rey’s sleep. It’s earlier than she would have liked, but her dreams were making her sad so she wraps her quilt around her shoulders and shuffles to the door.

“Buenos dias, Dolores” she says to the young girl standing on the concrete step, carrying a large insulated bag on one shoulder. A pickup truck idles in the drive, and Rey waves to Dolores’ aunt Irene.

“Buenos dias!” the girl responds and opens the bag. Rey’s mouth waters but she has to shake her head.

“Lo siento, no puedo hoy. Me pagan el Viernes.”

“Oh it’s okay!” Dolores says. “Tía said it’s for helping with the generator.” She pulls a Styrofoam container and a foil package out of her bag. Steam wafts off of the foil and Rey’s stomach growls. “You can freeze the tamales if you don’t eat them all right away, okay?”

“Thank you, Dolores. Tell Irene thank you, too, okay?”

“I will! Are you working on anything new?”

“I’ve had some ideas.”

“Paulo says you should forget writing your own stuff and try to be the next Britney Spears.” She wrinkles her nose and giggles.

“Tell Paulo that there is no one like Britney Spears. I’ll play the new song for you next time you come over, okay? But it looks like your Tía is ready to go.”

“Okay! Your accent is getting better by the way. Keep practicing! Bye!”

Dolores skips back to the waiting pickup, pigtails bobbing, and Rey waves them off. She shuts the door and turns around, leaning against it as she tries to tamp down the pressure in her chest and throat. When she’d helped Irene Munoz fix her generator last week, she hadn’t expected anything in return.

This time of year is slow at the shop, with more locals pawning things to pay their heating bills, and fewer tourists stopping in to look for antiques and collectibles. Even with food stamps, she’s struggling with the hours that Shoshanna can give her, and every day she’s getting closer to turning in the Sonic application that sits on the coffee table.

Rey takes a deep breath and sets the food down on the counter. There are a dozen tamales and they smell like heaven when she opens he package. She considers the food for a minute or two and makes a decision. She’ll eat until she’s full.

Taking her plate to the living room area, she sits down at the coffee table and starts flipping through her notebook.
It’s an ordinary composition book, nearly full now, pages thick with words, chord progressions and scraps of paper and napkins. It’s mostly snatches and segments of songs but there’s the occasional page where lyrics crawl across the page and down with no breaks or cross outs. These are from the moments when she hits on a chord progression just right and she hears the words and melody singing to her from the guitar strings.

Today, though, she wants to crack something open that’s been hiding from her. She’s got a bridge and a chorus. No verses yet but what she’s got is good, especially the melody. So good that she sang it for everyone she knew the day after she started it to make sure it wasn’t something she’d stolen. It hadn’t sounded familiar to anyone, so it’s well and truly hers, but now she’s got to find the verses.

She studies what she’s got while she eats, flipping to other pages in case other unfinished bits might fit. Stuck near the back, between some folded over pages, she finds a napkin, the writing blurred a bit by coffee stains.

Knight in shineless armor flying too close to the sun

Tilting at those dragons at those deeds your father done

Not her best, really, but it evokes a clear memory of sitting under tube lights nursing a one dollar bottomless cup of coffee at a truck stop on the way back from Las Cruces. She’d pulled over because, despite the short drive, she couldn’t keep her eyes open. By that time, she was more confused than angry about the encounter with Kylo Ren, though she was definitely annoyed with how late she’d gotten on the road. Mostly she’d worked on a different song, but had jotted this down in a moment of contemplation. It doesn’t fit what she’s working on at the moment but she moves the napkin to the front of the notebook to look at later.

By the time she has to leave for work, Rey’s got most of two verses down. She shoves her notebook into her backpack and scarfs down one more tamale from the package, feeling a little guilty as she puts the remaining ones in the fridge. She has just enough time to stop at the library before she has to be at the shop.

Luckily, she doesn’t have to wait for a computer when she gets there. She starts out with her email. It’s been a few days since she’s been able to check it. It’s mostly spam, but there are a few emails from people she’s met at shows and on message boards. She marks them as unread so she can answer them when she has more time, then pulls up the Groupie Central board.

Even though Rey’s interests lie elsewhere, the board has been invaluable to her in terms of learning how to gain access to bands. She knows her method is a long shot, but it’s less of a longshot than sending out unsolicited demos. There aren’t any shows in Las Cruces or Albuquerque coming up, she’s just curious about one particular thread. She has to scroll down a while before she finds Kylo’s thread.

Last year she hadn’t shared her story on the board. She rarely does, because her experiences are usually boring. The only exception was the time that she decided she might have sex with the bassist for Forest Moon, until he asked if he could eat gummy worms out of her vagina. When she’d told that story, at least four other girls had said he’d asked the same thing. One said she’d let him.

The Kylo encounter had been so weird, though, and for some reason she felt like maybe it wasn’t right to lay all of that out there, which was funny considering it’s a board where penis length is
regularly discussed. But now, because it’s on her mind again, she’s curious about whether other people have had similar experiences with him.

His thread is fairly quiet and mostly full of girls saying he brought them to his dressing room and talked to them. A few say they’d tried to make a move and he’d turned them down, telling them he just wanted to talk. The consensus on his demeanor ranges from awkward to outright rude, and a lot of them speculate that he might be gay. Rey doesn’t feel comfortable with that sort of speculation so she logs off.

With five minutes left, Rey decides to check her email one more time. There’s one new email, and her mouth goes dry when she reads the subject line.

**Listened to Your Demo, Let’s Talk!**

Her hand shakes as she clicks to open it.

Dear Rey,

Oola Ryloth passed your demo CD on to me. She said you gave it to her after a show a couple of months ago. She just got back from tour and was so excited, I went against my better judgment and listened to it. (I never listen to unsolicited demos, and I’ve been telling Oola to stop taking them, but of course she doesn’t listen.)

Anyway, I’m stoked she didn’t listen, because I am absolutely blown away by your lyrics and your vocals. Oola said you have a good look, too. I’d love to chat with you in the near future about the possibility of finding you a slot on our roster here at First Order. Give me a call at your convenience. Leave a message with my assistant if I’m unavailable.

Sincerely,

Finn Storm

A&R

First Order Records

Rey sits back in her chair, not daring to breathe. She’s afraid to blink, afraid it’s a joke or a dream. Then the two minute warning window pops up on the computer and galvanizes her. There’s a little boy waiting patiently for his turn so she can’t extend her time. She frantically clicks the printer icon and sends it to the circulation desk printer. Her legs are wobbly when she stands up, as though she’s just run five miles, so she has to steady herself on the desk for a moment. Smiling at the little boy, she maintains a leisurely pace until she’s out of the computer lab, then walks as fast as she can to the front desk to pick up her printout.

“I printed something from computer 3,” she says to the Linda, the circulation clerk.

“How many pages?” Linda asks, not looking up from the books she’s stamping.

“Just one.”
“Okay that’s ten cents.”

“Oh, yeah hold on.” Rey digs out her change purse and hands the Linda a dime. The clerk akes her sweet time entering in the transaction.

“Do you need a receipt?”

“What? No? Um, I mean no thank you.”

“All right. One moment.” She shuffles to the back and returns with a sheet of paper.

“You know, the whole point of email is that you don’t use paper.”

“Yes, I know, but this one’s important. Thank you!”

“No running, young lady!” Linda calls behind Rey as she bolts out the door.

Rey leans on her ragged car under a bright blue late winter sky and reads the email over and over again. She looks around and everything else is so normal. It’s the same Main Street she’s walked down her whole life. Same mountains in the distance. Same monument to fallen war heroes. But her life has changed irrevocably. This is it. Even if nothing comes out of it, nothing will ever be the same after this. Someone likes her music. Someone who matters.

She’s so hyped that she’s afraid she’ll wreck her car if she tries to drive, so she leaves it in the library parking lot and jogs the remaining five blocks.

“You’re late, Rey,” Soshanna says when she comes in, but her annoyance quickly turns to worry when she gets a good look at her. “What happened? Are you okay? You look like you ran here.”

“Sorry!” Rey says as she unwinds her scarf. Then she runs over to Soshanna with the email. “Look at this!”

Soshanna reads through it twice before looking up at Rey with gleaming eyes. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“What do I do?”

“Well obviously you need to call him, sweetie.”

“Oh. Yeah. It’s an LA number is that okay?”

“Of course, Rey. Of course. Use the one in the office.”

“Okay. Okay. Thank you, Sosh.”

“Anytime, sweetie. And one thing.”

Rey stops at the door to the office. “What?”

“I’m gonna miss you.”

Rey smiles at her boss. “I’m not going anywhere yet.”

“Oh, sweetie, you will.”
Chapter title from "Superstar" by the Carpenters (originally by Delaney and Bonnie.)
Painted in desert hues and sitting on a dusty corner at the far end of Main Street, the Sacred Song is indistinguishable from many of the other buildings downtown. Opened in the early 70s as a spiritual book store, it had evolved over the years into a café, music venue, and, most importantly, a safe space for those who felt rootless or outcast. When Rey slips through the beaded curtains into the shop, Ahsoka is behind the counter measuring tea into sample containers. Her white hair falls down her back in two thick braids and she wears a loose sundress despite the outside chill. It helps that her shop is always toasty, for the sake of the dozens of plants scattered throughout the shop. Rey has spent many a long evening here, nursing a tea or hot cocoa on days when her trailer is too cold.

“Rey!” she says, warm smile cracking her face. “It’s been far too long.”

“I know,” Rey says, taking a seat on a stool at the counter. “And I feel bad coming now, because I need a favor.”

“Honey,” Ahsoka says as she screws the lid on the jar of tea. “Favors aren’t like a house or a new guitar. You don’t have to save up for them, and you’re always welcome here. What do you need?”

“I need to play a show here on Saturday, and I need as many people to show up as possible.”

“People always come out when you play, but it might not be as many on two days’ notice. What’s the rush?” She takes a jar of dried lavender from the shelf and gets out two scoops, handing one to Rey.

Rey has to concentrate to keep her hands steady as she scoops the dried buds into the sample cups. “Yesterday I talked to an A&R guy from First Order Records.”

“Oh, that’s marvelous!” Ahsoka says. She reaches out and stroke’s Rey’s cheek. “I suppose he wants to see a live performance before he makes any offers?”

“Exactly!”

“It’s a good sign if he’s willing to come out here.”

“I know. Do you think we can get a good crowd?”

“I’ll try my best, Rey. First Order, hmm?”

“I’m trying so hard not to freak out.”

“Well, I’m glad I’ll be able to get a good look at your A&R man. I’ve known a few in my day. Some are absolute gems but others aren’t worth the paper they write the contracts on.”

“I’m sort of glad you’ll get to check him out, too.”

“I know how easy it is to lose yourself in the things they promise you.”
“Did you ever think about going back, after you got here?”

Ahsoka’s laugh rings out, rich and pure. “The first few months here I wanted to tear my hair out. I missed the beach, and the parties. Hell, I even missed the traffic. But then I actually started reading the books I was selling and talking to the people who bought them, and I found a beautiful balance. Learned to love that silence. You know the one, right before sunrise? As for the music, it’s always going to be a part of my life, but here it doesn’t own my life.”

“But you think I should go out there? If they ask?”

“Of course. Because your life is yours, and you’ve already experienced this part of it. You’ve learned to be responsible and you know who you are. That’ll make a big difference.”

Ahsoka puts the lid on the last of the sample cups and stacks them on a tray by the register. “Now, I’m going to start making some phone calls. You’d better go to the back and fire up that computer, see if you can get a flier made up.”

As Rey boots up Ahsoka’s office computer and waits for the Internet to connect, her stomach dips again as she remembers her conversation with Finn Storm.

It had taken her several tries before she’d dialed the number completely, and she’d hung up the first time someone had answered. After putting her head down on the desk and spending a few minutes picking at the tape holding the edging onto the desk, she’d sat up, squared her shoulders, and picked up the phone again. The same quick, efficient voice answered on the second ring.

“Finn Storm’s office.”

“Oh. Hi. May I speak to Mr. Storm, please?”

“Who’s calling?”

“Rey Kenobi. I had an email? From Mr. Storm?”

“Just a moment.”

She sat on hold for most of one song, a Muzak version of “Smells Like Teen Spirit.” The song had cut off and she thought the connection was lost, but then a voice came through.

“Rey Kenobi! I was hoping I’d hear from you today.” Finn sounded quite a bit younger than she’d expected, but he was confident and cheerful, which helped ease her nerves.

“I just got your email about half an hour ago.”

“Listen, Rey, I don’t have much time to talk but I want to come see you play ASAP. Do you have a gig this weekend?”

“Oh. Um. I can if you need me to?”

“Sweet. I can come in on Saturday. I’ll hook you back up with Robyn and you can give her the details.”

He’d transferred her before she could respond and she’d found herself telling his assistant that she would be playing at the Sacred Song at seven on Saturday night. After she’d put the phone down, she’d gone into the bathroom, taken a few deep breaths and thrown up.
“Fuck.”

“Sweetie, you okay in there?”

“Yeah Sosh. Just nerves.” Nerves and an overfull stomach and dread that Ahsoka may not have an opening for her on Saturday. She rinsed out her mouth and stared in the mirror until a smidgen of her former giddiness came back.

When she came out of the bathroom, Soshanna had sent her home.

“You won’t be any good for me today. Your head’s a million miles away. Go get some rest and practice or whatever it is you need to do.”

She’d gone straight to the Sacred Song, but the shop had been closed. The note on the door said she was away on a buying trip. Rey had swallowed her panic and gone home, where she took two shots from the bottle of Old Grandad she kept in the back of her closet, gotten her guitar out and practiced until her throat was raw and there were angry red grooves in her callouses. She poked at them with her thumbnail as she tried to go to sleep, the dull ache somehow soothing. Finally, she’d taken another shot to knock herself out.

This morning, she’d barely taken the time to run a comb through her hair before rushing over, and she’d nearly cried when she saw the “Open” sign on the shop’s door. Ahsoka hadn’t given her time to cry after she’d agreed to help her.

A few of her past fliers are saved on the computer so it doesn’t take long to create a new one. She prints a dozen out, kisses Ahsoka on the cheek and flies out the door to go hang them at the usual places. She saves the last one for the community board at the pawn shop. After hanging it, and before she unlocks the door, Rey stands in the middle of the sales floor and looks around.

The rows of guitars hanging on the wall gleam in a multitude of colors. She used to think of them as broken dreams, but now she thinks of them as dreams in limbo. Five years ago, she’d carefully chosen her Taylor from this very wall, hands trembling as she handed over the cash she’d saved from her babysitting jobs. Her foster father at the time had thought it a silly waste, but her foster mother, the one who made the grilled cheese sandwiches, told him to hush. That everyone needs something a little silly. In the almost two years that Rey has been out on her own, she’s gone hungry many times, but she’s never been able to bring herself to hock that guitar.

She turns on the lights, unlocks the door, and flips the sign. As she takes her place behind the counter, she lets herself wonder how many more times she’ll do this. She lets a tiny part of her imagine what it might feel like to put her feet in the ocean, and what a full cupboard is like. Something stirs inside, and the place she’s worked for so long seems slightly strange, as though she’s already given notice.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Ladies of the Canyon" by Joni Mitchell
It’s been a long time since Finn has travelled this far afield to scout an act. It used to be his thing. While everyone else stayed in New York and LA, he was the one out discovering rappers at house parties in Little Rock, Arkansas, or garage bands in dive bars in Springfield, Wherever. They’d started calling him The Miner, for his skill at unearthing diamonds in the rough.

He’s only been in the business five years, but early success finally gave way to complacency. After those first few years of hustling and building a name, it became too easy to stay at home, where he could throw a dart and hit five different acts, all hungry, some of them talented. He’d even started going to showcases.

When he’d met with Oola to catch up after her tour, he’d accepted the demo CD she’d given him without planning to listen to it. In fact, he’d planned on throwing it in the trash as soon as she left, with all the other demos he finds in his bag or jacket pocket after a night out.

“Don’t take it if you’re going to throw it away,” Oola had said. “I’ll just take it to someone else. This girl has something, and I want you to sign her.”

Oola had been one of Finn’s first artists to hit big. He’d found her in a cabaret in Bakersfield, making a pittance working for a slug of a club owner who stiffed her on tips when he wasn’t groping her. She’d gone on to become Finn’s first platinum artist.

“You’ve got to stop taking these, Oola. For your sake.”

Oola had sighed and waved her hand. “I know. Someone will sue because one of my lyrics or a hook sounds like theirs if you play it backwards.”

“I’m serious, though. It happens.”

“I’m serious, too. Listen to it. That last track especially is fire.”

Finn leaned back in his chair. “Well, tell me about this girl.”

“Kind of skinny but that’s only a plus around here. Has that sort of effortless music festival vibe to her look but a mad intense personality.”

“Hot?”

“Would she have gotten backstage at my show, otherwise?”

“Point taken. What kind of hot?”

Oola considers for a moment. “Like, the love child of Fiona Apple and that slutty girl from My So Called Life.”

“Okay, I’ll listen to it. No promises.”

“I don’t need any. But I’ll say you’re welcome in advance.”

“You know you don’t owe me anything, Oola.”
“Oh I know that. We came up together. I’m just paying my good fortune forward.” She’d kissed his cheek and left with one more admonishment not to throw the disc away.

Finn had put the CD in his backpack and forgotten about it until a couple of days later. He came across it when he got his wallet out at a gas station on his way up the coast. He slid it in the car player before he got on the road again, then ended up pulling off the road at an overlook before the end of the first song.

“Holy shit.” He’d parked the car and hit the back button so he could listen to the full song with no distractions. This girl’s voice was clear as a bell, sad and pure, but she knew just when to break it, before it became so sweet as to be grating. And her words were so honest, and so specific that they were instantly relatable.

He hadn’t had chills like this listening to a new artist in more than a year.

There were three tracks on the demo, and he listened to them all four times before pulling back onto the highway. He listened to them the whole way to his meeting and on the way back. He’d sent Rey an email as soon as he’d gotten back to the office the next morning.

As Finn pulls into Rey’s tiny desert town, he gets a rush of nostalgia. He’s never been to this particular town, but he’s been to a few like it. He locates the Sacred Song easily, passing it on his way to the purple adobe hotel where he’s staying.

Surprisingly, Truth or Consequences boasts a few better quality hotels and spas, and he’d had his choice with it being the off season. Still, his junior suite cost less than a single at a Motel 6 would have in Los Angeles. The boy who checks him in can’t be more than seventeen. He looks Finn over, noting the quality and cut of his suit, and asks if he’s in town on business.

“Yes,” Finn says as he hands over his company card.

“First Order Records! You hear to see Rey?”

“Yes, actually. Do you know her?”

“Yeah. She was a senior when I was a freshman. Does she know you’re coming?”

“Yes.”

“That’s tight. She’s pretty good, for that kind of music. Not my thing. I’m more into like, rap and metal.”

“Oh yeah, what’s your favorite record right now?”

“Slim Shady for sure, man. Got it the day it came out. It hasn’t left my car.”

“Yeah that one’s pretty dope. What else you listening to?”

“Okay I know it’s stupid, but between you and me?” The kid, Josh his nametag says, looks around before leaning in. “My sister has been playing that new Backstreet Boys song like, nonstop for the past week and I caught myself singing it in the shower this morning. Those dudes fucking suck but that shit is tight, you know?”

Finn smiles. “Everyone’s been that way about it. The day it dropped everyone lost their minds. I swear I heard one of the Knights of Ren whistling it when I passed him in the hallway.”
“Oh shit, they’re on your label, right?” Josh’s eyes are bright but then his smile fades a little as he shrugs and completes Finn’s paperwork. “I mean, yeah my sister likes them a lot, too. They’re okay. Not my thing though.” He hands a key to Finn. “We don’t have those key cards yet but these work better anyway. It’s upstairs, first door on the left. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thanks,” Finn says, shaking the boy’s hand.

He only spends enough time in his room to shower and change. The flight was short but his appearance is important. He always wears a suit to these things, having no desire to blend in. He wants to see how the artist will perform under pressure. It also serves as a uniform and gives him an air of authority. He’s young enough and looks younger. He doesn’t want to be mistaken for a teenager.

There’s a decent crowd when he arrives at the shop, a combination bookstore, coffee shop and herb shop. He garners a few odd looks from people, but the vibe is friendly, as he’d expect from a place like this. You never know, though. He goes up to the bar to greet the proprietor, and it takes a moment to recognize her.

“Ahsoka Tano?” he says to her as she clasps his outstretched hand in both of hers.

“You recognize me? I suppose you would. I knew A&R boys who’d have drinking contests based on the most obscure music trivia.”

“I wouldn’t call you obscure, Ms. Tano. I can’t tell you how many of my artists have said you’re an influence.”

“It’s come to that, has it?” She smiles and gestures to her right, where there’s seating area and a small stage. “There’s the girl you’re looking for.”

Finn had looked Rey up online before catching his flight, mostly finding reviews of her shows from the local paper. Only one article, about a songwriting competition she’d won in Santa Fe last year, had an accompanying black and white photo. She’d been looking down at her guitar so he’d only gotten a glimpse of long hair and a bit of her profile.

The girl hauling an Orange amp out onto the stage is taller than he’d expected. She’s slender, but toned. Her dark hair falls almost to her waist, though most of the front part is piled on top of her head in an elaborate, careful mess of coils and braids. She’s dressed simply, in long blue floral skirt and a striped tank top. There’s an oversized cable knit sweater draped over a stool in the corner.

When she looks up, Finn is pleased to see a remarkably pretty, yet interesting face. Her forehead is wide and her jaw is square but she’s also got killer cheekbones are and cat like eyes. He’d never really doubted Oola, though.

The girl sets up with expert efficiency, does a quick sound check, then leaves the stage to come talk to Ahsoka Tano.

“I should be ready in about five minutes,” she tells the woman.

“Great! And your guest is here,” Ahsoka says, pointing the girl toward Finn.

The girl’s eyes widen slightly and her smile transforms her face. “Of course! I looked you up online but I just get focused and get tunnel vision. Thank you so much for coming, Mr. Storm.”

“Call me Finn,” he says, shaking her hand.
“Okay, Finn. I’m Rey. Though you probably guessed.”

“Seemed like a good assumption. So, Rey, just do things the way you normally would. I’m not going to tell you to forget I’m here, but you know, try to fake like I’m not.”

“Okay. So that means I go freak out in the bathroom for a minute or two, then grab my tea from Ahsoka and go on stage.”

“Sure, if that’s your usual thing.”

She waves awkwardly and slides past him toward the bathrooms.

More people have filtered in during their conversation. It’s a good assortment of people. All ages, not all of them what he’d assume to be the shop’s regular clientele.

“So, what’s Rey’s story?” he asks Ahsoka when she brings his Italian soda. “How long has she been playing here?”

“Well, she first started coming in when she was about thirteen. That was when she was placed with the Plutts. Terrible people, just in it for the money from the state. I don’t think she ever got to eat except at school, so I fed her when I could. She was only with them for a year, thankfully, and the next folks were more kind. I gave her her first guitar. I got it in trade and didn’t really have a need for it. It was a piece of junk but okay to learn on. She saved up and bought that Taylor when she was fifteen or so, from the pawn shop where she works now. I think everything she makes her music on comes from that pawn shop.”

“So, she was in the foster system?”

“Yes, but that’s not really my story to tell,” Ahsoka says, and moves down the bar to another customer.

After a minute or two, Rey emerges from the bathroom, grabs a mug of tea from Ahsoka and shoots Finn a nervous smile before stepping on stage. She sets the mug down on a small table, picks up her guitar and slings it over her head.

“Hello, everyone! Um, so I want to thank everyone for showing up tonight on such short notice. This first song is pretty new. I actually finished it today while I was changing the oil in my car. It has nothing to do with mechanics, it’s just that inspiration strikes in odd places. Anyway, it’s called ‘Crestfallen.’”

She strums a few chords and launches into the song. As she does so, the people in the back who’d continued speaking during her intro went quiet. There’s still a bit of a murmur from the people sitting at the bar, and those browsing books, but for the most part, her audience is captive.

Rey sings with her eyes closed most of the time. Not something he encourages in artists, but she opens them at just the right places, for exactly the right amount of time, sometimes punctuated by a small, sad smile.

Her voice rings as clear and true as it did on her demo, and the lyrics to this new song, while rough, are stunning. She finishes, letting the final note die with her last strum, and opens her eyes to wild applause. Finn finds himself clapping as well.

Her between-song rapport isn’t strong, but it’s not the worst Finn has seen. That would have been the guy in Overland Park, Kansas, who had resorted to telling knock kno k jokes between songs.
During her break, she hovers uncertainly at the edge of the stage, so he waves her over.

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted to talk to me before the end of the set, but I didn’t want to come over because I didn’t want you to feel pressured to talk to me.”

“It’s all good, Rey. I could leave now and know exactly what our next steps should be.”

She sits down on the stool next to him and accepts another mug of tea from Ahsoka. “Really? You liked it.”

“You’re a strong lyricist with a clear voice. Your look is great, and you connect well with your audience. We’d need to sit you down with a pro songwriter, just to tighten some things up, but things look really good.”

Rey’s smile falters. “A pro songwriter? Is there something wrong with my songs?”

“Rey, they’re fantastic. But we want to make sure they’re perfect.”

“But doesn’t that mean they get credit, and royalties? And I still want them to sound like me.”

“Yeah of course, but with their help you’ll also sell more albums. You’d still be the main songwriter. And a good songwriter will understand your voice. The songs would still be yours. What’s your favorite album right now?”

“Fanmail.”

“Hell yeah! Between you and me, I’d give trade my first born for a shot at working at Arista. Okay. So do you know how many writers worked on that record? Twelve, including the girls. But I guarantee TLC are making bank on that record. What’s another favorite?”

“Um… Jagged Little Pill?”

“Perfect. Alanis co-wrote that entire album with her producer. Do you think she’s crying about that? Do you have and doubt that’s her message and voice? Look, Rey, you’re a damned good songwriter. You’ve got a voice. But there’s a formula to hit songs and even the most pretentious indie musician you can think of is trying to hit that formula, if not for sales, just so their listeners will hum it while they’re making coffee in the morning. We just want to make sure that you’ve got everything you need to be successful. If we sign you, the label is going to put a lot of money into this, and the faster they make their money back, the faster you make money. Your songs are good enough to put on the air as is, but we want to make sure they’re more than just good enough. We want a smash first single. You’re competing with a lot of teen pop, after all. Hey, how old are you, anyway?”

“Nineteen.”

“When do you turn twenty?”

“July.”

“Okay so you wouldn’t be a teenager anymore by the time we get a single out but that’s cool. Pink will be almost twenty-one when her album drops.”

“Who?”

“You’ll see.”
“Is my age really a problem?”

“Not if we stick with the folk rock thing. But they’re signing fourteen year olds for pop these days.”

“Jesus. I mean but of course we’re gonna stick with folk rock. That’s my sound.”

“Sure, totally,” Finn nods.

“And you do not want to see me dance. Okay, you said that you know the next step, so what is that?”

“You can come to LA next week and meet with some people. You need to get set up with a manager. They’ll help handle your contract negotiations. I have someone in mind, if she’ll take you.”

“So, are you offering me a contract?”

“I have to get a couple more things straight but yes, Rey, I am pretty confident we’ll be able to offer you a contract.”

This is always the best moment. It’s part of why he loves his job so much. Rey smiles so wide that he thinks she might hurt herself, and she looks like she wants to hurl herself into his arms. Finn has missed this. He’s signed a dozen acts in the past three years but he’s so tired of jaded, polished southern California bands who are so caught up in being cool that they pretend getting signed is no big deal.

Rey finally decides on shaking his hand rather than hugging him.

“Hey don’t like, go and announce it during the second half of your set or anything though, okay?”

“Oh, no, of course not. I am not a before they’re hatched chicken counter.”

“Sweet. Now go kill the rest of your set and find me after so we can hammer out details for next week.”

At that, she gives into her impulse and hugs him before running back to the stage. Ahsoka, who has overheard their conversation, looks him in the eye.

“That girls is special. I wouldn’t have encouraged her this long if she wasn’t. Take care of her. I may have burned a lot of bridges when I quit, but I’m pretty sure I could still fuck up your life if she gets hurt. Got it?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Finn says.

“Great! Next drink’s on the house.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "32 Flavors" by Ani DiFranco
Other than a lone surfer struggling in the choppy water, and an old woman determined to take her daily walk, the beach behind Kylo’s house is empty. He stares out the sliding glass doors in his kitchen as Hux drones on. He hates this house. It looks like a stack of sugar cubes, in a long row of similar houses. The beach is mediocre and all his neighbors are old.

He wonders if he’ll get fined if he paints his house black.

“Kylo are you listening?”

“No,” he says.

“Alright, then just sign the bloody contract. We all know you’re just holding out to be an arse.”

Kylo shrugs and watches the surfer wipe out a fourth time. “Maybe I’m having an artistic crisis.”

“Oh, thinking of switching bands again, or is it a solo career this time? Taking up painting? Photography?”

“Chill the fuck out, Hux. I understand that you’re going to clear more from this than I will, but your desperation is sad.”

Hux slams his tea cup on to his saucer and stalks over to Kylo. “This little, strop or whatever the hell it is doesn’t just affect me. It affects your band mates, and everyone they employ, and everyone that works for me. I couldn’t get your goddamned creative control because you’re a child whom they don’t trust. Maybe if you get your act together and present yourself like an actual artist, people will treat you like one.”

“Have you been talking to my father?”

“What? No!”

“That’s weird because you sound exactly like him right now.” Kylo turns from the window and goes to the kitchen counter. The contract is spread across the granite surface, yellow sticky flags on the places he’s to initial and sign. He holds his hand out and Hux passes over his Monblanc.

“You’ve read it?”

“Twice. Mitaka looked over it, too.” He initials rapidly, feeling oddly suffocated as he does so, then signs and dates the bottom of the last page with an obnoxious flourish before tossing the pen back to Hux.

“There. Now get the fuck out.”

“You’re a bastard.”

“And I just made you nine million dollars richer. Goodbye.”

Hux gathers his things and leaves, muttering something to Lorna as he passes her in the doorway.
“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘Good luck, he’s in rare bloody form today.’”

Kylo smiles. “I hope you came in to tell me I have no responsibilities today.”

“Um, no. This may not be the biggest record deal of the year but it is the biggest in the last couple of months so First Order is going to push for a press conference. Probably today.”

“Great, get me the next flight out of here.”

“Kylo, if you go to New York they’ll just set it up there and then the other guys’ expenses will go on the band’s tab.”

“Fine. Whatever. What else?”

She pulls a Manila envelope out of her bag. “Hux said to give you this.”

“Why couldn’t he give it to me himself?”

“He gave it to me when he got here and said to give it to you after he left. I didn’t open it.”

Kylo undoes the clasp and peeks inside. It contains several head shots of young women. He slaps the envelope on the counter. “Don’t let him do that again. Don’t let him give you mysterious packages to hand to me. You should fucking know better.”

“He’s your manager, and it’s none of my business.”

“You’re right. Go away. And tell Lindsey or whoever that we’re out of orange juice.”

“You really are being such a prick today.”

“Do you call me a prick at the bank when you cash your paychecks?”

“Yes, actually,” she says.

“You’re fired.”

“No I’m not.”

“Excuse me?”

“You went through ten assistants before you found me and I’ve been with you for two years now. Do you remember what it was like before I came along?”

“Fuck!” He turns away from her and goes to the glass door again. He leans his forehead on the glass and wonders how much force he’d need to put his head through it.

“I’ll be downstairs on the patio, working. I’ll let you know as soon as the press conference is set.”

After she leaves, Kylo picks up the envelope and dumps the head shots on the counter. There are five of them, men’s magazine types with long middle-parted hair. Two blondes, a brunette, and two red heads. He picks up the phone, slides the door open and steps out onto the balcony, dialing Hux’s car phone. It rings once.

“Brendan Hux speaking.”
“I would punch you in the fucking face the next time I saw you if I didn’t think you’d sue me.”

“Kylo! What a surprise. Now, you know I wouldn’t sue you. I’d just have you arrested. Which might be almost as good for your image as having a girlfriend.”

“So I’m supposed to choose one of these girls, from a photo?”

“Of course not, you’ll want to speak to them first. I’ve merely narrowed the pool.”

“By going to Central Casting?”

“Of course not. I went to a modeling agency. Do you have a better idea? This way, it’s all business. They sign a nondisclosure agreement and no one’s feelings get hurt.”

“This is bullshit. I’m not auditioning a girlfriend.”

“Oh no, Kylo, I’m about to go into the Valley. I’m losing you. We’ll speak later.” The connection goes dead. Kylo growls and hurls the phone off the balcony, toward the ocean. It barely misses a seagull as it lands in the sand.

“I’m not getting that,” Lorna’s voice floats up from downstairs.

He gathers up the photos and tosses them in the garbage before heading down the stairs and trudging out onto the wet sand to retrieve the phone. He waits for two ladies to pass him before making his way back.

“Hello, dear,” the one who lives next door says.

“Hi,” he mumbles.

“That one’s in a band,” the lady says to her friend. “My granddaughter loves them.”

Lorna sits at the driftwood table on the patio. He hands the phone off to her as he goes back inside. He considers going to his third floor bedroom, but goes into his studio instead. It’s not as elaborate as his parents’, but it works for laying down demos and for general isolation.

He picks up an acoustic guitar from its stand. The one that came in a crate of Anakin Skywalker’s things, that had been unearthed his junior year of high school. Kylo’s mother had passed the whole crate along to him, unopened. This guitar is the one he’d played on the Dagobah System tracks. It’s been a few months since he’s picked it up, but the housekeeper has kept it dust free. The star shaped pearl inlays gleam in the low light and the strings give off a soft zing as he runs his fingers down them. He tunes it and starts strumming, using any chord that occurs to him. The first time he’d played this guitar he’d been tripping mushrooms, and he’d seen colored sparks jump from the strings as he’d strummed. Sometimes, when he plays it now, if he really lets go, it retains some of that magic. But right now, it feels like it’s mocking him. His hands are too big for it, his touch not light enough to coax out the sounds his grandfather had. He puts it back and picks up the 1965 Stratocaster he’d bought with the his first advance. After he plugs it in, he turns the volume up and lets it hum, reveling in the energy for a few minutes before attacking the strings.

Kylo runs through scales, through every guitar solo he ever learned as a kid, and through all the bullshit he’s written with The Knights of Ren. He plays even after the E string pops, only stopping when his left index finger starts to bleed. He puts the guitar away and goes up to his room, sucking the blood off his finger as he walks.

Lorna has laid out clothes for him on the bed, along with a note and a Xanax.

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Kylo glances at his watch. It’s only eleven. He pushes the clothes onto the floor, hesitates, then picks them up and drapes them over a chair before crawling into his bed. He falls asleep with Anakin Skywalker’s final song thrumming in his head.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Title from "Supersonic" by Oasis
First Order’s A&R team are scattered around the main conference room. Most are still availing themselves of the breakfast spread on the credenza. A few are already in their seats, but when the head of A&R walks in, precisely at nine, all chatter ceases and everyone scurries to the table.

At six foot three inches, Phasma stands taller than everyone in the room, even without heels. She always wears heels.

She’s been in the office since seven this morning, but there isn’t a hair out of place on her sleek platinum bob, or a wrinkle in her grey pantsuit.

“Let’s make this quick today, shall we? We’ll start with company news. You’ve probably all heard by now but we finally have all five signatures on The Knights of Ren’s new contract. It’s a sixty-million-dollar advance, which the company can well afford, but it may mean a bit of belt tightening so don’t be surprised if you’re have to soothe some new artist egos after negotiations over the next few weeks. Any questions?” Her blue eyes scan the room. “No? Good. Speaking of contracts, the company will not be releasing Aayla from her contract.”

Finn looks around at his coworkers. Most are unfazed. A few look uncomfortable. Aayla is a pop artist, signed to one of the company’s subsidiaries. She’d asked to be released from her contract after stating that the subsidiary’s head, who also acted as her producer, had sexually harassed her. She’d already delivered on one of her two albums, which had gone gold and recouped her advance plus expenses. Finn had been certain they would quietly let her go, to avoid any negative press, or at least sign her to First Order or one of the other subs. He’s stunned that Snoke has decided to push the issue, considering it will likely go to court.

One of his coworkers, Trent, raises his hand. Phasma nods at him. “Okay but I’ve got this girl group I’m looking at and they’ve got this whole girl power shtick like the Spice Girls. You know Aayla’s gonna go to court on this. What do I tell these girls when they ask about it?”

“Tell them that Aayla had a fantastic relationship with her producer, of which we have proof via the emails they sent back and forth, and that she only started the sexual harassment nonsense when they started recording this album and he brought in new songwriters.”

“Is that what happened?” Trent asks.

“It’s what we’ll go to court with. Remember, your loyalty is to the company, not your unsigned artists. Any other questions? Good.”

Phasma reviews the rest of the company news and begins going around the table to check in with everyone. Finn feels queasy. He’d known Aayla for a few years, having met her at a company party right after she was signed. She’s an incredibly talented and prolific songwriter, with the ability to write for almost any genre. He’d actually considered having her mentor Rey. He thinks about Rey and how happy she was when he’d told her he was interested in signing her, how she’d looked ready to burst during the last half of her set. Rey radiated goodness, in a way few people he knows out here do.

“Finn?” Phasma says. “What do you have cooking?”
He jumps. He hopes this is the first time she’s called on him. “Me? Oh, yeah. I’ve got a couple of
things going but we’re not close to an offer yet,” he says.

“I’m excited to hear what you’ve got. Have Robyn drop the demos off with me today.”

After Phasma adjourns the meeting, most of his coworkers stay in the conference room, finishing
the last of the buffet and gossiping, but Finn bolts to his office. Robyn is away from her desk, and
for once Finn is pleased with that.

Rey is flying in tomorrow and her deal memo is sitting on his desk. He had her sign it before he
left to officially establish their business relationship. He shuts the door and stands for a moment,
taking deep breaths. He cannot believe he’s about to do what he’s about to do.

First things first. He turns on his shredder and feeds Rey’s deal memo into it. No one had seen it,
and he hadn’t updated Robyn on his trip to New Mexico. It’s like it never existed.

Once the paper is destroyed, he sits at his desk and takes several deep breaths, picks up the phone
and dials.

“Resistance Records, Poe Dameron’s office.”

“Bebe! Finn Storm here. Is Poe in?”

“He just got here. Hold on a moment, Finn, and I’ll transfer you.”

When Poe picks up the call, Finn is in the middle of another round of cleansing breaths.

“Finn! It’s been a minute since I’ve seen you. How are things over on the dark side?”

His anxiety only slightly relieved by Poe’s pleasure at hearing from him, Finn gets to the point.

“That’s actually what I’m calling about. You know how you’ve always said you owe me a huge
favor, after I saved your ass that time?”

“Of course. What’s up?”

“Are you hiring?”

“Finn did you get fired? What the hell did you do?”

“No, but I’m going to quit. Today.” He looks out his office window, then closes the blinds. “And
I’m going to poach an artist while I’m at it.”

“You’re serious? What’s going on over there.”

“You know about the situation with Aayla?”

“A little here and there.”

“They’re not releasing Aayla from her contract. It’s probably going to go to court and it’ll get ugly.
Snoke is making an example out of her. But Poe, this new artist I found, well, Oola found her but
that’s whatever, anyway, she’s special. Really special. And I just imagined what it could be like
for this girl if we sign her. That she could be another Aayla. Or they could decide they want to
package her. Make her a pop act. I don’t want that for her, and I don’t want to work at a company
that operates like this.”

“Wow, Finn. That’s intense. And yeah, I think we can find a spot for you here. I just don’t have
the power to make it official and the General is off on a retreat in Bali. No Internet, phones only for emergencies. She’ll be back next week.”

“Okay, I can wait about the job. But if by some crazy chance Ms. Organa says no about hiring me, you’ll take care of Rey, right?”

“If she’s good I can sign her. I trust your judgment, but I do need to hear her and meet her, as a formality of course.”

“Good. Good. Okay. We need to get through the weekend. Her flight is in tomorrow at noon and there’s an ASCAP party that night. So I can bring her by tomorrow afternoon? I’ll send a courier with a demo.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Yeah, I’ll act like everything’s normal tomorrow, stay out of the office all weekend, then send someone for my things on Monday with my letter of resignation. Oh, shit.”

“What?”

“I’m going to have to get Robyn to come with me, for one. She’s talked to Rey and handled all of her travel arrangements. First Order will make this messy if they can figure out a way to claim we already had any kind of agreement. But shit, Robyn doesn’t matter anyway because they’ll just pull my emails.”

“Well, then I think Bebe should be the one that goes to clean out your office on Monday.”

“Why Bebe?”

Poe laughs. “Let’s just say they know their way around a network. If Bebe goes in, there’ll be no sign you sent or received anything from that account.”

“And they’d do that?”

“Of course I will!” Bebe breaks in.

“Have you been on the line this whole time?” Poe asks.

“You never told me to hang up.”

“Shit. Sorry, Bebe. You can hang up now.”

“Okay, later!”

“Poe, thank you, man. I’m serious. Even if you do owe me, this is huge.”

“No worries. I’ve been trying to figure out a way to poach you for years. You made it easy.”

“All right. We’re really doing this.”

“Yes we are.”

“All right. See you tomorrow then. Oh, one last thing?”

“Yeah?”
“Rey’s hotel is booked on my company card.”

Poe laughs. “Cancel it and I’ll have Bebe make new arrangements. Welcome to Resistance, Finn.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Another World" by Poe
How Are You So Burnt When You're Barely On Fire

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The blue hard shell suitcase is the same one Rey’s mother had packed before dropping her off with Aunt Ginny, who wasn’t Rey’s aunt at all, or mama’s aunt. She was a cousin of some kind, and the only living family that Lila Kenobi knew of.

Lila had knelt in front of five-year-old Rey and told her that she would be back. For a long time, Rey believed it. And for a long time after she stopped believing, she pretended she did. Aunt Ginny had died when Rey was eight, and CPS was never able to locate her mother. The last known trace had been an arrest in Reno the year before. There was no father listed on Rey’s birth certificate, and Lila had never called him anything but “that bastard.”

All attempts at locating any family met with dead ends. Rey had fallen into the foster care system, and this suitcase had transported her possessions through five different homes before settling in the cramped closet of this trailer two days after Rey’s eighteenth birthday. She hasn’t been out of town long enough to need it since.

She sips at a glass of whiskey and Coke while she contemplates her clothes. Every stitch she owns is piled on her bed. There’s more here than she thought she had, but then again, she hardly ever gets rid of things and she’s been the same size since she was thirteen, just growing taller instead of wider.

Finally, she decides to bring what she loves, not what other people might like. It’s all going to scream “country bumpkin” anyway.

The sun is barely up, but it’s warm enough to have the windows open in the trailer and drive out the lingering winter stuffiness. It’ll be warmer still in LA, so in addition to her jeans she packs light dresses and flowy skirts. As much as she fantasizes about getting a massive Pretty Woman style makeover when she arrives, she understands nothing like that will happen until she’s signed, and it would all end up going on her tab anyway.

The excitement of flying for the first time burns away the nervousness she has over it, but the rest of this trip is so completely unknown, and intimidating. The furthest she’s ever been from home was a sixth grade trip to El Paso. Having Ahsoka drive her to the airport will be a huge comfort, but things have changed so much since she recorded her last album that she may not be able to adequately prepare her.

Rey looks at her watch and her stomach drops. Ahsoka will be here in fifteen minutes. Why had she put this off until the last minute?

She finishes with her clothes, goes into the bathroom, throws some makeup and toiletries into a plastic bag, then puts it in the suitcase with her clothes. Checks her backpack for her ID, plane ticket, money, and the gum that Ahsoka had suggested in case the pressure changes bother her ears. She puts the suitcase, backpack and her guitar by the door and closes all the windows. She’s just started to get antsy sitting on the sofa when she hears Ahsoka’s old Mercedes pull into the driveway. Rey bounds out, somehow carrying everything in one load, and Ahsoka helps her load the car.

“Don’t let them convince you to check your guitar,” she tells Rey. “That pretty little neck will snap
from the pressure changes. They can check it at the gate for you.”

“Thank you so much, again,” Rey says as she locks up the trailer. “I know things have been crazy at the shop with the Equinox and all.”

Ahsoka closes the trunk. “My customers have been patient with my erratic schedule for twenty years. This is once in a lifetime.”

Albuquerque is only two hours away but it has never felt longer to Rey. Even the anticipation of going to concerts has never made the drive seem this interminable, and she’s usually in the driver’s seat.

“Do you want to drive?” Ahsoka asks after half an hour of Rey fidgeting. She’s tried losing herself in the music, in the scenery, but all she’s doing is counting mile markers.

“Please?”

Ahsoka pulls over and they switch. “I’ve always wanted to drive this car,” Rey says as she adjusts the mirrors. It’s a diesel Mercedes from the 70s, built like a tank but tricked out with more features than most new cars. Once they’re back on the highway, Rey relaxes a bit, finally in control. Ahsoka has never changed out the eight track player in the car so they listen to all of Hotel California and Rumours, before Albuquerque’s modest skyline comes into view.

At the airport, Ahsoka helps Rey through check in and baggage screening and walks with her to the gate. They’d given her a little trouble about the guitar but Ahsoka had firmly but sweetly told them that checking it at the gate would work out perfectly.

They settle into hard plastic seats facing the windows.

“I have a weird gut feeling, like I’m making a mistake? But I think it may just be fear.”

“I’ll pick you up and put you on that plane if you try to back out.”

“That won’t happen. I can’t back out now.” After a few minutes of silence, Rey asks what she’s always wanted to know.

“Why did you leave it all behind?”

Ahsoka takes Rey’s hand. “It’s a long story and we can talk about it more eventually, but it all came down to the fact that it wasn’t what I needed or wanted anymore. All I wanted to do was express myself, and I got to do that for a long time. And then it felt like I wasn’t expressing myself so much as this person we’d all created. There’s a lot that went into my coming to this realization, and none of it is pretty. I don’t want to discourage you, Rey, but I want you to be careful. I’m not the worst cautionary tale out there.”

“Like you said the other day, I know who I am. I’ll be fine.”

“Well, you’d better be. Now let’s talk about something silly until they start boarding.”

Rey sobs as the plane takes off. She’d managed to hold back when she’d hugged Ahsoka goodbye, but had barely been able to speak through the lump in her throat. Now she watches the desert scroll out below her behind the plane’s wing, and as they rise above the clouds she says goodbye, because even if she comes back, somehow it won’t be coming home anymore.

She spends the entire flight looking out the window. It’s only ninety minutes and now time is
speeding by. She’s not even finished with the Coke the flight attendant brought her when they begin the descent. Chewing furiously on her gum, she presses her face to the window, enraptured by the sheer scope of everything. A never ending grid of buildings and roads, distant sky scrapers, and swimming pools. And as they begin their final descent, they swoop over a massive freeway with more lanes than she can count. Her stomach dips as the wheels touch the earth again and her ears give a satisfying pop.

When the plane slows and begins taxiing to the gate, the lady next to her puts away her rosary and pats Rey on the arm. “We made it!” she says.

“We did,” Rey answers.

A man holding a sign with Rey’s last name stands among other men and women holding signs with other names and Rey sighs. Finn’s assistant Robyn had said they’d send a car but hadn’t said exactly where they were supposed to meet.

“Hi! I’m Rey,” she says to the stony faced man and holds out her hand. He looks at it for a moment, then shakes it.

“Alexei,” he says. “Did you check a bag?”

“Yes.”

He takes her guitar. “Follow me, we’ll collect it.”

She follows him, letting him cut a path through the crowd as they walk down the concourse. Rey’s primary impression is of light and steel, and more types of people than she’s ever seen.

The bags are already circling the belt when they reach baggage claim. She spots her suitcase and moves to get it, but Alexei gets to it before her, giving her a stern look as he hefts it from the belt.

“Just one?”

“That’s it.”

He nods and starts off toward the sliding doors. It’s just as hectic outside, with cars and people everywhere. Alexei leads her to a black town car and opens the door for her. She slides into the back seat and waits for him to load her guitar and suitcase.

The car is spotless on the inside and smells new. Rey looks out the window as they pull out, but avoids putting her forehead on the glass like she had on the plane.

“How long have you lived here, Alexei?”

“Twelve years.”

“And before that?”

“Ukraine.”

“Did you come here to be an actor?”

“I came for freedom, Miss Kenobi.”

“Oh.” Rey says. She wants to ask him how old he’d been, how he’d gotten out and who he’d left behind, but he’s put on his sunglasses and entered the freeway. His face becomes a closed door.
Rey looks out the window again. Her lack of sleep the night before catches up to her and she dozes, using her backpack as a pillow. She wakes up when the car stops.

Alexei opens her door and she gets out. A bell boy has already jogged over to the car. He takes her suitcase and guitar from Alexei and puts them on a bell cart.

“Thank you, Alexei.”

“Have a lovely trip, Miss Kenobi,” he says. He nods and returns to the car.

Rey follows the bell boy, looking for any sign of Finn as they cross the lobby. She can’t recall if he’d said he would meet her to check her in or if she should check in on her own. She’d missed getting a look at the hotel when they’d pulled in under the canopy, but judging from the lobby it’s massive.

And fancy. As they get closer to the desk her heart rate quickens. Surely they’ll figure out any second she doesn’t actually belong here.

“Rey!”

Rey turns at the sound of her name to see a tiny red headed woman in a suit coming her way.

“Hi, I’m Robyn, Finn’s assistant. We’ll get you checked in and let you change clothes but then we’ve got to scoot over to a meeting with the label. You’ll probably want lunch, too? I can have them send something up while you’re getting ready. They have an amazing Caesar salad here. Come along.”

In no time Robyn has secured a room key for Rey. The bell hop follows them to the elevator and they get out on the fifth floor. A short walk down a hall and they open the door to a room about the size of Rey’s trailer.

Robyn takes care of tipping the bellboy and sending him away. Rey stands in the middle of the room. What if she moves too suddenly and it all dissolves, and she wakes up in New Mexico? Then her stomach growls, and she’s pretty sure that’s not something that happens to her in dreams, so she sets her backpack on the desk and goes to the window.

“Is there anything in particular you’d like for lunch, dear?”

“Can I just get a hamburger and fries?”

“Of course. Milkshake, too?”

“Um. Yes? Chocolate?”

“Done. I’ll order that then get out of your way. You can take a shower or whatever you need to do. I’ll be in the lounge. We need to leave in an hour.”

“Oh okay.”

Robyn closes the door and her ears ring in the silence. She relishes it for a moment, then begins a thorough investigation of the room. Dark wood furniture, rich green carpet, and a bed the size of her entire bedroom at home.

“I will not climb into that bed and take a nap,” she tells herself. She doesn’t have that long to get ready.
The bathroom is predictably huge, with an enormous bathtub as well as a shower. The toilet is in a separate little room. There’s a phone in that room as well as in the main bathroom.

Forty-five minutes later, Rey steps off the elevator and locates the lounge. Between devouring her enormous lunch and trying to figure out what to wear, she’d run short on time. In all of her research on the recording industry she’d never come across advice for what to wear to meetings with record executives. She’d brought the black suit she’d worn to her high school graduation, but once she got it out, it seemed way too formal. Finally, she’d put on a baby blue A-line dress and topped it with the suit jacket. Paired with her cowboy boots, it wasn’t not bad. She put her hair up in two coils on the side of her head, leaving a few whispies.

“Fuck it,” she’d said, after putting on some lip gloss and mascara.

Finn is with Robyn in the lounge and Rey has to keep herself from running to him and giving him a hug. His presence is so comforting, even though she’s only met him once.

He stands up when he sees her, coming over to meet her.

“Rey, you look incredible,” he says as he shakes her hand. “I need to update you on a couple of things before we head to our meeting.” He gestures to the table. It’s small and glass topped, and the pedestal is lit from within. The chairs are rather lush and she’s not sure whether to sink back into hers or lean forward and rest her arms on the table. She settles for sitting on the edge of the chair with her hands in her lap.

“Do you want something to drink?” Robyn asks.

“Just a Coke.”

Robyn goes to the bar, leaving Rey and Finn to talk alone.

“Rey, there have been some pretty big changes as of yesterday so I need to fill you in before we go to this meeting.”

“Oh God they haven’t backed out, have they?”

“No. It’s just that… I’m not with First Order anymore. I’ve moved on to Resistance Records. Your meeting is at their office. Now, my resignation isn’t effective until Monday so if you still want to sign with First Order I can facilitate that. But I won’t be there after you’re signed.”

“Finn, this is a lot to take in. Why are you leaving?”

He tells her about the situation with Aayla, and his reservations about how her career would be handled at First Order.

“Oh okay. Well, I definitely want to take the meeting with Resistance. And then we’ll decide from there. You know you could have called me last night.”

“And that’s completely my bad, Rey. I was freaking out a bit, though, going back and forth. I wasn’t even totally sure even after I talked to their head of A&R. That’s who we’re meeting with.”

Robyn comes back with their drinks and they talk about the pros and cons of a major label and an indie.

“But Resistance is barely an indie anymore, really,” Robyn says. “They’ve grown a lot. So it’s probably the best of both worlds.”
“And you were willing to quit, too, to keep working for Finn?”

“Absolutely. Things are a bit miserable over there. Speaking of which, I’m going to take advantage of the quiet time to start slowly cleaning out my desk. It was nice meeting you, Rey.”

After Robyn leaves, Finn looks at his watch. “You ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” Rey says.

They’re ushered in as soon as Finn gives his name to the receptionist at Resistance. The offices take up the ground floor of a converted church in Silver Lake. From the foyer, they push through a pair of heavy wooden doors into what used to be the sanctuary but is now a bullpen of sorts. There are spaces vaguely delineated as offices with rugs and furniture and plants, but the offices have no walls. There are only two people actually at their desks.

“It’s Friday afternoon. Official start to the weekend,” Finn says to her. “We don’t work in the office on the weekends unless we have to.”

They pass through the sanctuary, past the choir loft-turned-breakroom through a smaller wooden door that opens onto a bank of traditional offices. The one on the left has a sign that says “Leia Organa” right below the hand painted gold lettering saying “Pastor.” The one directly ahead is Poe Dameron’s, formerly the Assistant Pastor’s office. Finn knocks on the door and a bright voice tells them to come in.

Poe Dameron’s office is as orderly as the sanctuary is haphazard. He stands and comes around his desk to shake hands with Finn. When he gets to Rey, he looks her in the eyes and smiles while shaking her hand. Her face burns and she can barely get out a “hello,” he’s so good looking. Big sleepy brown eyes, perfect dark hair, and the most generous smile she’s ever seen. From the looks of Finn, Poe has this effect on everyone.

“Have a seat,” Poe says.

When they’re all seated he aims that smile at Rey again and she manages not to duck her head and blush again. Or worse, giggle.

“Did you get a chance to listen to Rey’s demo?” Finn asks.

“Of course! Rey, it’s fantastic. I knew it would be, because Finn has a golden ear, but I was truly blown away. I’m certain we can find a place for you here at Resistance. Now, we won’t be able to offer you as big an advance as First Order, but we believe in making sure that artists get the highest cut of sales possible. Plus, First Order won’t have Finn anymore.”

The door pops open and a short, round person with spiky, bright orange hair and glasses comes in with an armful of beverages. They hand a bottled water to Poe.

“Here Finn,” they say. “Poe said you like pink lemonade Snapple. And he didn’t know what you like, Rey, but, based on your music, figured you for an apple juice kind of girl.”

Rey accepts the juice.

“Rey, this is my assistant, Bebe.”

“Thank you, Bebe.”
“No problem!” Bebe leaves but comes back seconds later with a file folder. They hand it over to Poe and settle into a corner chair with a pen and notepad.

“I’m sure Finn explained a deal memo before? It’s not a contract, it just establishes an official business relationship. We’ll get into negotiations as soon as you hire a manager. Do you have anyone in mind to introduce her to, Finn?”

“A couple of people. One’s going to be at the ASCAP party tonight, but I’m having some trouble pinning down a meeting with Maz.”

Poe sighs. “You’re probably not going to get very far without Han. She keeps saying she’s not taking on anymore clients but Han always talks her into it.”

“Is he in Bali with The General?”

“Lord no,” Poe says. He shoots Finn a look that clearly says he’ll fill him in more later. “I’ll see if I can find him and get something set up.”

Rey reads over the deal memo as they talk. It’s similar to the one she signed for Finn, which he said he’d shredded before anyone at First Order had seen it.

The words blur a bit and then it’s almost like she’s outside of herself observing everything. She’s never trusted anyone as quickly as she does these two men and it’s terrifying. But there are going to be a lot of terrifying things in the months to come and having people to trust is a good thing.

Rey looks up and Bebe hands over a pen.

She takes a deep breath, sets the memo down on Poe’s desk, and signs her name.

After a long talk and a tour of the rest of the headquarters, Poe takes them to a celebratory dinner at an old school steak house where they serve a salad that’s nothing but blue cheese dressing poured over a wedge of lettuce. It’s delicious, as is her steak. It takes all of Rey’s will to eat slowly, but the good conversation helps keep her from gobbling her food and licking her plate.

In Finn’s car on the way to the party, Rey looks at Finn with a raised eyebrow. “You like him.”

“What?”

“You like him. I don’t blame you, but you totally do.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Finn says. “He’s about to be my boss.”

“We’ll see.”

The car pulls between two gates. Finn gives his name and they’re waved through. The driveway meanders up a hill, on top of which sits the most stunning house Rey has ever seen. Like so many things here, it’s right out of a movie. Maybe she has seen it in a movie. It sits low and flat on the plateau, two long wings in an L shape, nothing but steel and glass.

“Do I really look okay?”

“I wouldn’t have brought you if you didn’t look far more than okay. I have a reputation to uphold, you know? Let’s go inside.”
Rey is handed a glass of wine within moments of walking through the door, with no question about her age. She still has that feeling of being slightly outside her body, but maybe that’s a good thing. Everything is too perfect, from the beautiful people and exquisite white furnishings, to the ambient music played at just the right volume for conversation. There’s a good chance she would absolutely freak out if she didn’t feel so detached.

The manager Finn wanted her to meet hasn’t arrived yet, so he introduces her to everyone he knows, emphasizing her songwriting skills at every turn. She meets more than one person whom she’s seen on MTV and in magazines. All of them seem shorter in person.

“By the way, have you joined ASCAP or BMI yet?” Finn asks.

“I hand out my demos to strangers, what do you think?”

“That’s my girl,” he says.

“But one day I want my own publishing company.”

“I can believe it. Wait here a minute. I need to go talk to someone and he gets grabby as hell with women.”

She waits a few minutes for him, but her stomach roils from her two glasses of wine (and the two full meals she’s had.) The hostess, a music publisher’s wife, stops as she passes by.

“Are you alright, dear?”

“Yeah! Great. Just a little warm.”

“You can go out on the west deck for some air. I’ve got it closed off this evening. There’s always someone who needs to get away from the din.” She ushers Rey through a guest bedroom and points the way to the deck.

“Thank you.”

“My pleasure, sweetie.”

Rey steps out onto the dimly lit deck and immediately comes back to her body. The wind kisses her hot cheeks and her stomach stops its rebellion. She walks straight to the railing. This deck is on the opposite side of the plateau from where they came up. Lights from other houses dot the dark canyon below and the downtown skyline looms bright in the distance. She leans over a bit and lets the breeze tickle her face, spots twinkling in front of her eyes when she stands up straight.

She’s not alone.

Unnoticed when she came out, a tall man, wearing a black sweatshirt with the hood up, leans on the railing twenty feet from her, smoking a cigarette. The sweet smell of cloves lingers in the air. He looks over at her, then back out toward the canyon, shaking his head.

“Hello, Rey,” he says.

Rey closes her eyes. Of all the places and all the people. Letting out a breath, she opens her eyes, and looks over at Kylo Ren with what she hopes is a smile.

"Hi."
Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Malibu" by Hole
Hard to Play a Gig In This Town and Keep a Straight Face

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Up until this moment, Kylo’s night has been going exactly as he figured it would. He’d only let Hux drag him out here because he hadn’t left his house since the day he’d signed the record contract. After the press conference, he’d sent Lorna home and holed up, ostensibly writing, but mostly playing Mortal Kombat and eating tofu straight from the container.

In the car over, he’d endured Hux’s prattling on about the band’s upcoming schedule as well as a lecture on his choice of clothing. Once they’d arrived, Kylo put up with an endless stream of small talk and congratulations on the record deal from other guests, before the hostess-- one of those magical creatures whose talent lies in anticipating people’s needs before they’re even aware they need something-- had sent him outside for some “fresh air and quiet time.”

He’d been out on the deck for almost an hour when the sliding door opened and Rey, from New Mexico, fan of The Dagobah System, had stumbled back into his life.

The first time they’d met, she’d been wearing jeans and a t shirt, her hair flowing freely around her shoulders, almost to her waist. She’d reminded him of a young doe, all limbs and eyes and understated danger.

And, honestly, even though she’s more put together tonight, she still does, with her wide eyes and tendrils of hair blowing around her face. She’s smiling at him, but it doesn’t reach her eyes.

“What are you doing here?” he asks.

Rey backs away from the railing and gestures toward the door. “She told me I could come out here to get some air. I didn’t know anyone else was out here.”

“But what are you doing here.”

“Oh…meetings.”

“Meetings.” He looks around the empty deck. “At this party?”

“No,” she says, shaking her head. “In town. In general.”

“What are you meeting about? Are you an actress?”

“Singer songwriter.” She steps back to the railing and runs her hand along the top of it as she draws closer to him, stopping about five feet away. “I’m talking with Resistance Records. Maybe you’ve heard of them?”

Of course. Dozens of record companies in this city alone, and it would be that one. “Rings a bell.” He leans back. “You didn’t mention you were a musician before.”

“I didn’t get a chance to mention much about myself at all.”

He shrugs and takes a final drag off of his cigarette. He drops the butt into his empty beer bottle and sets it on a table.

“Have you had the pleasure of meeting my sainted mother yet?”
“No, I met with Poe Dameron. He said that Ms. Organa is out of town.”

“How unfortunate.”

“Do you really not talk to her, ever?”

Kylo looks at her. “Did you read that in a magazine?”

She flinches away from the edge in his voice. “Yes, actually. Sorry. I guess that’s weird, having strangers know things about you like that.”

“You mostly get used to it. But no, I don’t really talk to her. If we’re at the same place and she comes up to me I don’t like, walk away. I listen while she scolds me about my posture and that I should call my father and then I turn down her invitation to dinner.”

“Oh.” The sadness that flits across her face is disproportionate to what he’s just told her.

He pulls another beer from his sweatshirt pocket and offers it to her.

“Oh, hell no,” she says, shaking her head. “The whole reason I’m out here is because I had too much wine. Besides, I’m still only nineteen.”

He chuckles. “We’re not alone in my dressing room, and obviously our host doesn’t care.”

Kylo twists the cap off the beer and takes a long pull. It’s his fifth and not a good idea, but he does it anyway.

Rey steps closer. “How many beers do you have in that hoodie anyway? It’s like a Mary Poppins bag!”

“Originally, three. Now there’s one left.”

She looks him up and down, now that she’s close enough to really see him. “Do you usually go to fancy parties dressed like you’re going to a kegger?”

“I don’t know. Do you always go to them dressed like it’s a rodeo after party?”

“Hey, fuck off.”

“You insulted me first.”

“Yeah but I actually tried. These are literally the nicest things I own, and it still all probably costs less than your jeans.”

“I didn’t want to come to this thing in the first place, and anyway, at this point I can do whatever the fuck I want. And I don’t know how much these jeans cost. They were given to me.”

Rey presses her fingers into her temples and looks down. “Oh my God. I just...can we talk about music or something? Because I swear I have never related to anyone less in my entire life.”

“Oookay.” He lights another cigarette and almost puts it out right away, he wants an honest to goodness Marlboro Red so badly. “So, Rey, what kind of music do you make?”

She stares at him, long and hard, then sits on the table, arms folded in front of her, kicking her feet and looking one wrong word away from going back inside. “Folk rock, I guess. That’s what Finn called it, anyway.”
“Finn?”

“He’s my A&R guy.”

“There’s a Finn in A&R at First Order, too.”

“Oh?” she says, looking away. “That’s, yeah that’s… I… so you’re really good with names, though. How did you remember my name? You must meet so many people on tour.”

His mind catches her change of subject briefly but it slips through his fingers before he can make anything of it. “It’s a trick my mother taught me. You immediately associate someone’s name with a physical feature. You were Rey with the—um. Yeah. Nevermind. It’s stupid. Most business people do it. The President does it, too.”

“Rey with the what?”

“I don’t remember. So, what’s your story?”

“My story?”

“You came here to be a star, right?” He pushes himself away from the railing, weaving slightly as he stands in front of her. “All stars have a story. Kind of like a super hero origin story. They usually base it off of one aspect of your life and then build your media persona around it. Think about any celebrity you follow. What’s the one thing that gets repeated in every interview or article?”

She looks up at him. Her mascara is smudged and she smells like baby shampoo. “We haven’t really made it that far. I haven’t signed anything yet, except a deal memo?”

“Gotta start thinking about it so you know what to hold back.”

“I don’t know. I’m basically an orphan. I bought my guitar at a pawn shop and I barely ever have enough to eat.”

He smiles. “Like Jewel, without the van.”

“No van, just a trailer.”

“You live in a trailer?”

“Yeah, and it’s smaller than your tour bus.”

He slumps down in the nearest chair and leans back, remembering his cigarette and taking a deep drag.

“Well,” she says, looking down at him. “What’s your story?”

“What do you think it is?”

“Hmm. I’ve only read the one interview but I’d say, rock scion striking out on his own with dubious results?”

“That’s about it.” He smokes in silence and she swings her feet.

“Kylo,” she says.

“That’s me.”
“If you can do whatever you want, but you didn’t want to come, why did you come?

“My manager wouldn’t shut up about it. There are people here he wants to shake hands with and he couldn’t get in without being my plus one.”

“So, you’re doing him a favor?”

“He keeps whining because I refused to do MTV Spring Break this year so I threw him a bone hoping he’d shut the fuck up about it. And I was bored. Do you have a manager yet?”

“In the process of finding one, apparently.”

Kylo leans forward, resting an elbow on the table and pointing at her with his cigarette. “Don’t sign with one that doesn’t understand that they work for you. There’s a weird line because you have to listen to them sometimes so they can do their jobs. Hux dances across that line sometimes, and if he didn’t get results he’d be gone.” He leans back again.

“Okay.”

He propels himself forward again. “And don’t let anyone put you in hot pants or try to sell you on a Max Martin song.”

“I wouldn’t mind a Max Martin song.”

“Yeah, me neither,” he says, leaning back again.

“But I’ll stay away from hot pants. Unless I really like them.”

He finishes his cigarette and disposes of it in the same way as the previous one. The wind has picked up and he’s not sure if he should offer her his sweatshirt since she’s already wearing a jacket. Her bare legs are covered in goosebumps.

“I should go in,” she says. “Finn will be looking for me.”

“Okay. Good luck.”

“Thanks.” She hops off the table. “Can I ask you one more thing?”

“You can ask, sure.”

“Do you like doing any of this?”

“I like playing music.”

“Is that all?”

“It’s all I want to do. But I like the power, too, a little. Sometimes a lot. You’ll understand when you play your first big gig, or hear your song on the radio.”

“Is the rest of it worth it, the times when you don’t have any power?”

“When do I not have power?”

“Well…never mind. Good night.”

“Goodbye, Rey.”
When the door slides shut behind her, Kylo pops open his final beer. He hauls himself out of the low chair and leans out over the railing, lifting his feet off the ground. About five seconds into this it becomes apparent that putting that kind of pressure on his stomach is a mistake and he rights himself.

“Fuck,” he mutters, looking around. The few visible stars spin along with the lights in the canyon and the spots in front of his eyes. He shuffles over to a lounge chair in the corner that looks like it will do. He dives onto it, face down, limbs dangling. Within seconds he’s oblivious.

The music from the house has died down when Hux shakes him awake.

“For such a large person, you are the most ridiculous lightweight,” Hux says as he hoists Kylo to his feet.

“And you’re just ridiculous,” Kylo says.

“Obviously, or my life would not have led to this point.”

“Hey, I figured it out,” he says as Hux and a security guard pour him into the car. “A solution. To my problem.”

“You’re going to have to narrow it down for me, Kylo.”

“You know,” Kylo murmurs. “The girlfriend problem.” Hux says something about calling him tomorrow and Kylo knows nothing more until he wakes up the next morning on his bathroom floor.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Lullaby" by Shawn Mullins
There’s an assortment of products from the hotel’s spa arranged on Rey’s bathroom counter, and she’s picked up enough from Ahsoka to choose the lavender bath oil to help her relax. Physically, she’s bone tired, but her thoughts race faster than she can hope to catch them. She lights a vanilla scented candle and runs the water hot enough that she has to inch her way into it, but she goes in up to her neck, with only the tops of her knees peeking out of the water.

When she’d gone back in at the party, she’d found Finn talking to a man about his age, wearing an untucked dress shirt, loose linen pants, and skate shoes. He had kind brown eyes and a struggling goatee.

“Rey, this is Lance Shelby. He’s an artist manager.”

Shelby’s handshake had been surprisingly firm. He hadn’t listened to Rey’s demo yet but said he was excited to hear it and dropped a few other buzz words before giving her his card and excusing himself. He was nice enough, but Rey didn’t feel any sort of connection to him. Finn seemed to sense the lack of chemistry and took her back to her hotel soon after.

She moves her hands gently through the water and broods. Not clicking with the first manager she met is not a huge stumbling block. You can probably kick over a trashcan and have five managers come crawling out in this town, like lifting up a rock and finding scorpions on a hot day.

Weak kneed, Rey climbs out of the tub once her fingers have gone pruney and steam no longer rises from the surface, and wraps herself in the fluffy white bathrobe hanging on the door. Grabbing a lavender scented lotion from the counter, she flops onto the bed. It would feel amazing to just lay there and go to sleep, but she needs to deal with her hair, and she ordered room service before she got in the bath, so she sits up and starts taking the bobby pins out of her hair. She shakes her hair free and brushes it, letting the motion and pressure on her scalp soothe her further.

The food arrives when she’s halfway through the first episode of a *Real World* marathon.

She’d ordered nachos because they were relatively inexpensive but also not likely to consist of two or three bites. The room service waiter lifts the cover off the dish and reveals enough food for at least two people. Even as hungry as she is, there’s no way she’ll be able to finish it, and the little refrigerator in the corner is already brimming with snacks and liquor, so there’s no room to store leftovers. Her heart races and her stomach flops at the idea of wasting any of the food and for one wild second she considers asking the waiter to take half of it for himself.

“Um, thank you,” she says as she signs the receipt with shaking hands. “I don’t know what to do for a tip.”

“I believe your company will take care of it when you check out, Miss Kenobi.”

“Okay.”

“Is everything to your satisfaction?”

“Yes. I just wasn’t expecting so much.”
“You can ask for a half order next time.”

“Oh, thank you. I’ll do that.”

He takes his leave, and Rey settles on the bed with the tray in front of her. For the first time that day she eats slowly, taking the time to load each chip with a bit of every flavor. She chews slowly and watches television, half focusing as she replays the day. Honestly, out of all of it, the conversation with Kylo Ren is the hardest to process as having taken place in reality. He’d been thinner than she remembered, his cheeks hollower and his eyes and mouth more prominent. Sadness still simmered underneath that studied arrogance, yet despite how strange and rude he’d been there was something about him that kept her on that deck talking to him. The fact that she would run into the only person she “knows” in LA (outside of an online friend or two) on her first day in town has her mildly panicked, because today’s events are sure to shape the course of her life. So what does it mean?

“You’ve been hanging out with Ahsoka too much. You’re drunk and it means nothing,” she mutters. She hauls her tray to the door and sets it down in the hallway, pausing to pick up the single daisy in its vase and bring it back into the room. She puts it on the windowsill and opens the shade. Her room looks out over a golf course, pockets of light illuminating palm trees, sand traps, and a couple walking arm and arm away from the hotel, carrying a blanket and a bottle of wine. Looking up, Rey can’t make out any stars, but does catch the lights of a plane moving across the sky.

“Please, just let this be it,” she says. “I can’t go back now.”

She brushes her teeth and slathers her body with the lavender lotion before crawling between the cool sheets. They’re crisp, making a sound almost like tissue paper, and smell like they’ve just come out of the dryer. The bed is so soft that her body rebels at first, refusing to relax into it, but she’s been up or almost twenty-four hours, is well fed and still a little tipsy, so finally she drifts off, her window a blank slate beside her and the television creating soft patterns on the back of her eyelids.

Hours later, she stands by a fountain of chocolate while a mariachi band plays. The trumpet starts ringing like a telephone. After trying twice to answer it, in her dream, it occurs to Rey that she needs to wake up, and claws her way to consciousness. The room is fully bright and The Real World is still on. She fumbles for the phone.

“Hello?” she croaks.

“Rey? It’s Robyn. Can you be ready in fifteen?”

She glances at the clock. 8:30. “Sure, why?”

“Poe talked to Han and he managed to get us a meeting with Maz Kanata but she’s only got a few minutes to spare, at 9:30.”

“Ohay.”

“Great. I’ll see you down stairs.”

Fifteen minutes is not enough time to order anything for breakfast, but she’s gone hungry before and has plenty of fuel from the day before to go on. Besides, at this rate she’s going to gain a ton of weight, which means buying new clothes. And as much as she’d like to do that, no one has shown her any actual money yet. So chilling out on the enormous meals might be a good idea. One that
she’s certain she’ll be able to stick with until the next steak is put in front of her.

She brushes her hair and puts it in two braids, then throws on the same skirt and tank she’d worn for her gig last Saturday. The weather channel says it’s going to be sixty and sunny so she grabs her cable knit sweater and slips on her battered red Chucks. It’s definitely a pinched cheeks and lip gloss kind of morning. She digs the knockoff Raybans out of her backpack and shoves them on her face.

Robyn and Finn are waiting for her in the lobby and both look like they’ve been taken straight out of a brand new package. Robyn hands Rey a coffee and a banana and they get in the car. On the way, Finn briefs her about Maz Kanata.

“I think you’ll like her a hell of a lot better than you liked Shelby” he says.

“He was okay.”

“I could tell you didn’t really click, though. And it’s important that you click.”

“So you know Maz pretty well?”

“I haven’t actually met her, but Poe has, and thinks it’ll be a good fit. She’s been around for a minute and her clients are fiercely loyal. Fair warning, she’s got a reputation for being more than a little blunt.

“That’s something I can appreciate.”

“Good, here we are.”

They pull up in front of a smoothie shop, nestled in a strip of law offices and dental practices.

Robyn waits in the car. Finn opens the door for Rey and follows her into the shop. It’s little more than a store front, with crates of fresh fruit stacked everywhere, including a few of the tables. A short woman with copper skin, her hair tucked into a bright blue knit tam, is chatting with the proprietor. She turns at the sound of the bell ringing over the door and peers at them through thick round glasses.

“Finn Storm, it’s good to finally meet you. It’s about time you left that cesspool.”

“You’ve heard of me?”

“Of course!” she says, shaking Finn’s hand. “And this is Rey? Let’s get a look at you.” Maz gives Rey a thorough look up and down. Thankfully, she doesn’t ask her to turn around. “I think you’ll do. Beautiful hair, nice skin. On the scrawny side but photographers will love that. Yes, I think we’ve got something to work with here. And your demo is breathtaking.”

“Really?”

“I don’t care how pretty you are, if the demo wasn’t exceptional, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Wow. Thank you.”

“What did you record it on?”

“The demo? In my bathroom with a DAT recorder and a Blue mic.”

“Not bad, considering. You’re going to freak out when we get you in a real studio. But let’s talk
business. I’m not in the habit of sugarcoating, especially with fresh meat. They’re gonna try to eat you alive. Resistance is better than most labels, but that’s like saying a hammerhead shark is better than a great white. No matter what, they’re going to own your ass as soon as you sign on the line. You understand?”

“Yeah, I’ve read a lot about the business side.”

“Good, that helps, a little, but let me be clear, there’s nothing that will mess with your head more than being in a room with a bunch of people offering you the world as long as you’re willing to go into debt with them for a million or so dollars. Now, my job is to get you a good deal, because that’s how I make my money. But it’s also my job to keep you from having a platinum album and no furniture in your house, because I want you to still be making money for me when you’re fifty. Understand?”

“Yes.”

“But I want you to remember one thing. I’m only going to tell you this once, but you can remind me about it anytime. I work for you. Sometimes it won’t feel like it. Sometimes I’m going to tell you things you don’t like and push you to do things you don’t want to do, so you need to always remember that you can draw that line anytime.” Maz looks at her watch. “Damn. I have to be downtown in twenty minutes. I want to take you on. If that works for you, Finn can set up an appointment with my office.”

“Oh.”

“Good.” She takes her smoothie from the proprietor, kisses Rey on the cheek, shakes Finn hand and is gone, leaving behind a cloud of jasmine and coconut.

Rey and Finn watch her hop into a green Kharmann Ghia convertible and speed away.

“Was that real?” Rey says. “Did that just happen?”

“I’m not actually sure.” They both look around the small shop. The proprietor has gone to the back. “Do you want a smoothie?”

“I think I’m okay.”

They walk back to the car and Finn slides in beside her instead of in the passenger seat up front.

“What do you think?” he says as Robyn eases into traffic.

“About hiring Maz? You said she’s one of the best. Her client list is solid, and she wants me. Why not?”

“It’s still up to you.”

“I know, and I like her. And I think she’ll look out for me.”

“Good. Robyn will get a meeting set up, and then we’ll be able to start with negotiations ASAP. Maz is an entertainment lawyer so that’s one less middle man you’ll have to deal with.”

“Cool.” Rey says. They ride in silence for a few minutes.

“Finn?”

“Yeah.”
“Is it always this crazy here?”

“You haven’t seen the half of it.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Screenwriter's Blues" by Soul Coughing
Seems It's High Noon and I Ain't Got No Gun

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Alistair Snoke’s office has a one eighty view of downtown LA, perched on the top floor of First Order’s headquarters. When Kylo is summoned to that office on Tuesday morning, the view is hazy, the sun still low in the sky and sending streaky ribbons of light between the high rises. Despite the early hour and last minute summons, he sports a suit and tie—black on black on black—as well as a clean shaven face and styled hair.

A full tea service is set up on the coffee table and Snoke waits for him in a wingback chair. His assistant, a new one who Snoke does not introduce, pours Kylo a cup, adding a splash of almond milk, and hands it to him as he sits down on the settee across from Snoke. The eighteenth century cup is ridiculous in Kylo’s hand but he musters as much dignity as possible as he takes a sip.

“Kylo,” Snoke starts. “Do you remember why you were so desperate to sign with First Order?”

“I don’t remember any desperation,” Kylo says. “I remember a generous offer.”

“My boy, you were dying to be taken seriously and that would never have happened on your parents’ label. Which leads me to wonder, now, why you’re so stubbornly resisting your manager’s efforts to that affect.”

“Sir, with all due respect, you don’t honestly believe Hux’s bullshit?”

“I believe I’ve been incredibly generous and that I’d like a return on my investment. You’ve gone to greater lengths before, this should be nothing.”

“I don’t know what to say, sir. As much as Hux says it’s purely business, it involves blurring the line between my private life and my professional life.”

Snoke puts his cup down and within seconds his assistant is back to pour another cup. Is she hovering outside the door desperately listening for the clink of the cup on the saucer? Kylo watches her leave, her heels making the softest sound imaginable on the wood floor.

“According to Hux, you said you had a solution on Friday night, but when he rang you on Saturday you claimed to have no idea what he was talking about.”

“Did Hux mention that I was completely wasted, or that he dumped me in my downstairs bathroom without even calling Lorna to make sure she checked on me?”

“He did mention that you overindulged, but your memory has always been exceptional, even when you’re inebriated, so I’m a bit surprised.”

“I wasn’t trying to hide anything. It was just a stupid idea.”

“Why don’t you let me decide that?”

Kylo looks at his boss. Snoke sits back with his elbows on the chair arms, long fingers pressed together. Standing, he is almost as tall as Kylo, but weighs at least fifty pounds less. He looks far older than fifty, but his blue eyes are sharp. He smiles gently and Kylo sighs.
“Just some girl I met last year at a show. I ran into her again Friday night. She’s a musician. Said she’s in talks with Resistance.”

Snoke sits up at this, hands gripping the chair arms. “What is her name?”

“Rey. Kenobi. I met her in Las Cruces.”

His boss smiles and laughs, a wheezing chuckle.

“Sir?”

“Don’t ever let anyone tell you that there’s no such thing as destiny, Kylo Ren.”

“I’m not following, sir.”

“You’ve probably been holed up in your little house doing whatever it is you do all weekend, but we had a bit of drama yesterday. Seems our bright young A&R star Finn Storm defected to Resistance over the weekend. Sent a messenger to collect his things and deliver his resignation yesterday, and it seems this little messenger has some other talents, because we can’t get a thing off of his computer or the server. The only thing we were able to track was a plane ticket on his company card, reserved for a Rey Kenobi. She arrived Friday at noon, from Albuquerque. Was this Rey you’re acquainted with accompanied by Mr. Storm when you saw her?”

“No, Sir.” Kylo hesitates.

“But?”

“She did mention that her A&R guy at Resistance was named Finn. Do we know why he left?”

“The letter mentioned an ethical objection to the Aayla situation, which would explain his abrupt departure. However, he flew in this artist on our dime and poached her. My sources tell me she signed with Resistance yesterday. I would consider legal action but a plane ticket isn’t enough to establish intent to sign. Her advance was only half a million. It’d be less expensive to convince her to come back to First Order and buy out her contract with them.”

“Have you even heard her music?”

Snoke waves a bony hand. “Mr. Storm’s ear is impeccable. If she’s really good, I might even let her release an album. Then I’d let it tank, of course.”

“How would ruining her career hurt Finn Storm? I don’t understand.”

“Oh, my boy, that’s because you have no understanding of people who possess integrity. Mr. Storm will be personally invested in this girl’s career by now. Her failure will feel like his.

“What do you want me to do, exactly?”

“Date her, like you planned, then convince her to sign with First Order. You’ve managed to convince millions of people that you’re a songwriter, so convincing one young girl to move to a bigger label for more money shouldn’t be a problem.”

“I was drunk when I thought about dating her. She’s not really the type to agree to date someone for their image.”

“Why on earth would you tell her? Hux was going about this entirely the wrong way. Contracts and actresses are needless complications.”
“Sir, I don’t think—“

“I’m not asking you to think. I’m telling you what you need to do and I don’t think I could have been more clear. Do I need to be explicit about the consequences if you refuse?”

“No, sir.” He sets his cup back on the saucer and stands. Snoke rises and returns to his desk without further acknowledging his presence.

Kylo leaves, passing the silent assistant on his way out. In the elevator, he takes off his tie and shoves it in his pocket. Luck is with him, and the elevator doesn’t stop until he reaches the ground floor.

A trio of girls ask for his autograph and a photo while he’s waiting for his car. They have one of the valets take it with one of their digital cameras. Two of them press into his sides, all but forcing him to put his arms around their shoulders. The one on his left, a blonde who is almost his height in her platform sandals, kisses his cheek as the shutter snaps.

“I’m Tanisha,” the prettiest of the three says. “We just finished a tour of the label.” She vaguely indicates one of the other girls. “Lauren’s uncle works here. We’re taking an extended spring break. From Dartmouth.”

Clearly she’s expecting him to say something about how he thought they were models or actresses instead of college students, or at least act impressed about their school, but he just smiles and says “Cool. Hope you’re having a good time.”

She writes something on her valet ticket, slips it in Kylo’s breast pocket and climbs into a waiting BMW, taking her time so as to properly showcase her long, smooth legs. “We’re at the Chateau Marmont. Bungalow Three.”

“Oh, neat. John Belushi died there.” He catches a glimpse of her horrified face before the valet shuts her car door. His Land Rover pulls up immediately after.

Traffic is shit so it takes him nearly an hour to get to his business manager’s office in Reseda. He makes a few phone calls and listens to most of Disintegration. It was one of his first CDs, bought the same day his parents gave him a Discman for his birthday. They had been dubious about CDs and told him he could only buy new music on disc because they weren’t buying anything a third time. He listened to it non-stop through most of junior year, and still uses it to focus and calm himself. By the time “Lovesong” is over, he’s managed to rationalize what Snoke has asked him to do. It’s only a few dates, after all, not a relationship, and she never has to know. It’s clear she can barely stand him anyway so it will likely only last a date or two anyway, if she agrees to go out with him at all.

He parks in front of a coffee shop a block away from Unamo’s office, sheds his suit jacket and untucks his shirt before getting out. He makes it in and out of the shop with no hassle, but as he’s about to open the door to Unamo’s office building, someone comes out, barreling into him and sending his soy latte flying. It lands on the hood of a parked car.

“What the fuck?” he says. He grabs the person’s arms to keep them from knocking him over, and looks down.

It’s Rey Kenobi. And she’s crying.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” she says. “Aren’t there like ten million people in this goddamned town?”
“Hey, shhh,” he says.

“Don’t fucking shush me.”

He bends down to look her in the eye. “If you attract enough attention someone is going to recognize me. Come inside.” He pulls her into the lobby, which is really just an entryway with mail boxes and a flight of stairs, no receptionist. She doesn’t protest but she won’t look at him. He lets go of her arms. “What are you doing here?” he asks.

“I needed some air. What are you doing here?”

“I have an appointment with my business manager.”

Rey sniffs and wipes her nose on her sleeve. The cuff is frayed, and her hip bones jut out above the waistband of her cargo pants. “Me, too. I mean, I just hired her, or I’m about to. I had eighty-six dollars in my bank account on Friday and now I’m hiring a business manager.”

“Unamo?”

“No, um, Korr Sella. How many more people am I going to have to hire?”

“Do you have an assistant yet?”

“Oh God,” she says, slouching against the wall and pressing the heels of her hands to her eyes. “This is all too much, too fast. I can’t do this.”

“Rey.” He touches her shoulder and she flinches away. “Hey, Rey. Look at me.”

She drops her hands to her sides and looks at him. This is the first time he’s seen her eyes in full light. He’d thought they were brown, but they’re hazel, almost green at the moment. Her wet eyelashes are stuck together in clumps and her nose is red.

“Rey, it’s never going to stop moving this fast. It’s like riding a wave.”

“I’ve never even been in the ocean.”

He presses his lips together and inhales through his nose. “Okay,” he sighs. “But you’ve seen people surfing, right, in the movies? TV?”

“Yeah.”

“They look like they’re in control but it’s a lie. They’re always seconds away from disaster, riding something that’s bigger than they can ever hope to be.”

“This isn’t making me feel any better.”

“It’s not supposed to. It’s just a fact.” He straightens up. “Do you want a cigarette?”

“I don’t smoke.”

“Do you want one?”

“No. I need to go back up there. I told them I was going to the bathroom.” She starts up the stairs.

“Hey, Rey.”
“Yeah?”

He looks down. He could always just wish her luck or say goodbye.

He looks up at her. “Would you like to go have dinner with me sometime?”

It looks like she might actually laugh, until her eyes fill again. But these aren’t the sad, frustrated tears from before.

“I just told you that my whole life is moving too fast, that everything is too much, and you’re asking me out?”

“Well…yes?”

“Unbelievable.”

“So is that a yes or a no?”

“Oh my God,” she says, turning and stomping up the stairs.

“Fuck.”

He waits for the bathroom door to close before trudging up to Unamo’s office.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from the ”Big Star” by the Jayhawks
The day has turned hot, but Finn is cool on the porch of a Greek Revival mansion in Brentwood, waiting with Poe for Rey. Poe, as always, looks unruffled in a grey summer weight suit.

“What time is she supposed to get here?” he asks Finn.

“They’re supposed to come straight here from her meeting with Korr. She’s still got a couple of minutes, and Robyn’s driving so they’ll be on time.” Finn looks around, at the flower beds, the porch swing, and back to Poe. “You didn’t have to come.”

“She seemed a little overwhelmed yesterday after she signed everything, so I figured I’d lend some extra support.”

The door opens and a pleasant looking man in his fifties looks out. “Are you the 11:30?”

“Sort of,” Poe says.

“I could have sworn Maz said it was a single girl, not a couple.”

“Oh, no,” Finn says. “We’re not, um. A couple.”

The man raises an eyebrow and shrugs. “Well, if you’re the 12:30 you’re going to have to wait, unless this girl of Maz’s doesn’t show.”

“We’re not renters, either,” Poe steps in. “We’re business associates of your 11:30.”

“Oh of course, should have known, with it being Maz’s client. They always come with an entourage. Well, come on in.” He leads them into a lofty foyer, filled with potted palms and papered in a tropical print, through a pastel Victorian sitting room and into a modern kitchen overlooking a pool. “I’m Mun. That’s Jashco.” He points toward the pool, where a younger man is floating on an air mattress, then to a cottage just beyond the pool. “And that’s the guest house.”

“Nice,” Finn says.

“It’s cozy. She’s not a partier is she?”

“Not that we know of.”

“Shame. You boys want some lemonade?”

“Sure,” Finn says. Poe nods his head.

The doorbell rings as Mun sets the filled glasses on the counter, complete with sugar rims and a lemon garnish. “Help yourselves, boys. The glasses are in the cabinet by the fridge. I don’t know why we scheduled these on Condie’s day off.”

A few seconds later, Mun returns with a wide eyed Rey.

“How’d it go with Korr?” Poe asks, kissing her cheek.
“Fine. Fine. I think it’s going to work out.”

“Did Robyn drop you off?” Finn asks.

“I thought she was right behind me.”

“Well!” Mun says. “Let’s move this party to the guest house.” They follow him out and around the pool.

“Rey, that’s Jashco. Jashco this is Finn, Poe, and Rey. Rey’s the potential renter.”

The younger man waves. “Cool name.”

“You, too!”

Mun ushers them into the guest house. The door opens onto one large, bright room, furnished with whicker, rattan, and an overstuffed sofa and chairs in Laura Ashley prints.

“Kitchen and living room. We haven’t updated the furniture since 93 but it’s all in good shape. Redid the sink and put in new appliances last year.” He points to his right. “Bedroom through that door, with its own bath. Half bath to the left. You can use the pool whenever but you also have your own personal little patio out back there. It’s not much, but you’re pretty small.”

“How much is it again?”

“We basically owe Maz our souls so for you it’s $1500 a month, six-month lease. First and last up front. You can have a small pet but talk to us first. You can move in right away since we’re so close to the first of the month.”

Rey’s smile drops and she goes pale. Finn steps to her side. Her hands are shaking.

“Mun will you excuse us for a moment?”

“Of course. Look around, have a chat. I’ll be by the pool.”

Rey sinks into the sofa. “Okay on a certain level I know that I can afford this and that it’s an amazing deal but can you talk me through it?”

Finn sits beside her and Poe goes to get her a glass of water. “Did you and Korr start a budget at all?”

“Yes and this is well within that. I just need a minute.”

She sips the water and breathes. Poe lifts the hair from the back of her neck and fans it with his hands. Finn looks up at Poe, then past him, to the little back porch.

“Hey Rey,” he says.

“Yes?”

“Let’s go check out the patio.”

“Okay.”

A set of French doors leads out to the little patio. It’s a small area, paved with warm red brick, about twenty feet by ten feet, bound by the house on one side and a tall hedge on the other, with a
small redwood door in it. There’s a white wrought iron table and two chairs, as well as a newer pair of Adirondack lounge chairs with a glass top table in between.

“Close your eyes.” Finn instructs. Rey closes her eyes and breathes. “What do you hear?”

“Nothing much. Just a few birds. Traffic way in the distance.”

“There’s likely an alley on the other side of that door in the hedge, and another hedge or fence and an enormous yard. It’s quiet here. You can sit out here and play your guitar and write. You can eat out here, read, nap, whatever you want. No one will bother you, and you’ll never bother anyone. You’re not going to find anything close to this for the price Mun is asking. And it’ll end up being more expensive in the long run to stay in New Mexico and fly back and forth while you’re working on your album.”

Rey opens her eyes and smiles at him, eyes brimming. “You’re right. And it smells like jasmine out here. But before I say yes I’m going to go check out the bedroom.” She kisses Finn on the cheek and goes back inside.

“You saved the day, man,” Poe says. “I was close to panicking along with her.”

“She doesn’t think she deserves nice things, so she needed to see it as something useful.”

“I’m stoked you’re on our team now. It’s getting harder finding people that look at the artists as people instead of commodities.”

“Well, it’s not official that I’m on the team until Ms. Organa’s back in town.”

“Just a formality. It’ll be fine, I swear.” He puts his hand on Finn’s shoulder. “Hey—”

“Oh my God, I totally forgot something!” Rey says, popping back onto the patio. “The bedroom’s fine by the way. Looks like a rose garden threw up in it but it’s fine. Anyway, I ran into Kylo Ren at Korr’s office and he asked me out? On a date?”

“Kylo Ren? From the Knights of Ren?” Finn says. “He may as well have said that a pterodactyl had risen from the tar pits and asked her out.”

Rey looks back and forth between the two of them, brow furrowed. “Oh, I guess I haven’t told either of you. I met him after one of his shows last year and then I ran into him again at that party on Friday night. So then I was having a little tiny bit of a freak out at Korr’s office and literally ran into him, and he said some strange but almost helpful things to me and then asked me to dinner. Isn’t that wild?”

Poe squints at Rey. “Wild.”

“Did you accept?” Finn asks. He’s got a bad feeling about this.

“God, no,” she says.

“Why not?” They all turn to see Robyn standing in the doorway behind Rey.

“Because I’m not interested in dating anyone, really, especially not someone like that. I don’t really think he likes me anyway. I think he felt sorry for me.”

“Robyn,” Finn says as she joins them on the patio. “You know Kylo Ren at least as well as I do, which admittedly isn’t well, but we both know what he’s like. Why would you want Rey to go out
with him?”

She sits down on one of the lounge chairs and takes out a cigarette. “Is this okay, Rey?”

“Sure, whatever.”

Robyn lights the cigarette and takes a long drag. “You’re the one with the marketing degree from Wharton, Finn. So why don’t you tell me why?”

“I don’t know. She gets photographed leaving Mr. Chow with him and some of his fan girls play Sherlock Holmes and find out she’s a newly signed artist, so they call her a star fucker and she never gets taken seriously?”

Robyn leans back and smiles. “Not exactly. Yes, they’ll find out who she is, probably faster than the paps. And some of them will call her a slut. But they’ll also buy a shit ton of her music and click on her website and talk about her all day on the LiveDaily boards, because they think all of that will somehow lead to the secret code of why he likes her. And that’ll just motivate the ones who don’t care—or at least know not to let their jealousy show—to defend her. So then they’ll buy her album and visit her website and watch her interviews. But that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Even outside his fan base it’s smart. He hasn’t been seen with a girl in years. Rey goes out on a couple of dates with him and people will flip, I guarantee.” She turns to Rey “And look, it won’t take him long to do or say something stupid, so you’ll have a valid excuse to dump him. Then you can deny you were ever an item. I don’t know, say he was a friend showing you around the city. You never even have to hold his hand.”

Finn stares at Robyn, lolling on the lounge chair, coolly smoking her cigarette while masterminding a publicity stunt. She’s worked with him for three years and he’s never seen this level of ruthlessness.

“Not that I ever want to lose you Robyn, but why didn’t you go into publicity?”

She shrugs. “I still might. That’s one thing Rey still hasn’t hired.”

“The label will handle her publicity for now,” Poe breaks in. “Come on, Robyn. Do we really want her starting out being known for who she dated?”

“She’s talented, so in the long run it’s a blip. But it catches people’s attention. And with the budget you have for this album it’s going to depend on grass roots stuff. Besides Kylo Ren is an asshole but he’s not a womanizer, so she won’t be one in a long line. Her rep will be fine.”

“Do I get a say in this?” Rey asks. She moves from her spot by the door and sits in the chair next to Robyn, legs tucked under her.

“Of course, Rey. I’m just saying it’s not the worst thing you could do.”

Finn starts to speak but Mun appears in the doorway.

“So! Have we made a decision on the house yet or is there someone else that needs to weigh in? Masseusse? Personal psychic reader? Colonic therapist?”

“I’ll take it.” Rey says. “When can I sign the lease?”

“As soon as you can cut us a check, darling.”

“Great. Oh! I have a really old, ugly car that I’m not giving up anytime soon. Is that a problem?”
Mun waves his hand and laughs. “Han Solo once crashed here for six months. Nothing could be uglier than that old T-bird. We’ve got space in the garage, though, if the neighbors complain.”

Rey rises and goes to shake Mun’s hand. “I guess I’ll call my business manager then.”

“Actually, Rey, just have Korr call Mun,” Robyn says.

“Oh?”

“That’s what you hired her for.”

“Oh! Okay, then. Now, um, Finn, do you mind sticking with Poe? I’d like to talk to Robyn privately.”

Finn looks over at Poe, who nods.

“Sure. Why not.”

“Thanks.” She kisses both men on the cheek and the women leave, followed by Munn. Finn watches them go and sighs.

“Feeling lost without her?” Poe says.

“She’s my right hand. Speaking of, how’s Bebe?”

“Great. And they’ve never gotten flowers at the office before, so thank you.”

“I’d send them every week for a year if I could. Bebe saved my ass. And Rey’s. Thank you.”

The brilliance of the smile Poe gives in return is a little much for Finn in this small, beautiful place, so he clears his throat and turns for the door, and heads to the front door of the little cottage. “Um, yeah. So I should get back home. Rey’s set. She’s going back at the end of the week to get her stuff. I don’t have an office yet so I should work from home. Probably find a show to go to tonight.”

“Where are you living now?”

“Still in the Valley.”

“Aw man, you’re killing me. I have to get on the 405 at lunch hour? Come back to headquarters. We’ll get you a desk.”

“The 10’s not going to be much better you know”

“I know, that’s why we’re taking Santa Monica.”

“You’re out of your mind.”

“Trust me,” Poe says. Finn watches as he walks back to the main house, skirting the pool and waving to a still-floating Jashco.

“Well, I guess it’s worked out so far.” He closes the guest house door and follows.
Chapter title from "Sing for Your Supper," by Rodgers and Hart (check out the covers by The Mamas & The Papas, and Cher)
Rey’s trailer costs $250 a month to rent. The little house she’s agreed to rent for half a year costs six times that and is worth twenty times that. She’s never made more than minimum wage, and in the last few days she’s hired a manager and a business manager. She hasn’t been out on a date since she graduated from high school, and now she’s seriously contemplating going to dinner with a rock star, not because she likes him, but so she’ll be seen with him.

“What is my life?” she says.

Robyn merges onto the freeway and checks her mirror one more time before acknowledging Rey’s outburst. “Your life is becoming what it should be, and you should embrace it. It’s good to be cautious, Rey. You should see some of the stupid shit I’ve seen people blow all their money on. But it’s also okay to relax and enjoy it. You’re young and beautiful and talented and that’s all being recognized. You’re not rich yet, at least not by industry standards, but you’re not poor anymore. Okay?”

“It’s going to take a long time to get used to that.”

“You said you wanted to talk to me privately?”

“Oh, yeah. Do you really think it’s a smart move to go out on a date with Kylo?”

“I’ll be honest. It’s a gamble, but everything here is and the odds are in your favor. I meant everything I said back there, and your success is just as important to me as it is to Finn. But it’s all your choice. I don’t think it’s something you need to do, it just won’t hurt matters, is all.”

Rey looks out the window. The city sprawls out in every direction, every road promising adventure.

“I’ll do it.” she says with a nod. “If nothing else it’ll be fun to see what Kylo Ren considers a good time.”

“That’s the spirit,” Robyn says. “Now, do you want to stay in your hotel room tonight or in your new place?”

“It’s not quite mine yet. I haven’t signed the lease.”

“It’s practically a done deal, and Mun said you could move in.”

Rey shrugs and squints out the window. “I guess I might as well, then.”

When they pull up to Rey’s hotel, Robyn pops the trunk, hops out of the car and digs a Rolodex out of a box. “Don’t take it far,” she says as she gives the keys to the valet.

Back in Rey’s room, Robyn clunks the Rolodex on the desk.

“How many cards are in there?” Rey asks as she turns the knob. The cards are packed tight and some of the plastic sleeves are yellow and brittle.

“Five hundred, and this just A through L.”
“Are you serious?”

Robyn sits at the desks and flips through the Rolodex. “I worked for a movie producer for five years before Finn. And because of what Finn does, he’s got contacts everywhere. Music, television, movies, hospitality, almost everyone at First Order. It’s nuts, and probably the most valuable thing I own. Okay here it is.”

“Who?”

“Brendan Hux, he’s the Knights’ manager. I probably have Kylo’s assistant in here but it’ll be easier to get it out of Hux.” She dials a number and waits. “Hello, Hux it’s Robyn Reissman! Yep, that’s me. Oh it’s been great. He’s doing just great. Listen, I need Kylo Ren’s number. Nope, never made it into the Rolodex. No it’s got nothing to do with music or his mother.” She grabs a pen and notepad. “It requires direct contact, no middle men. I’m sure he’ll fill you in later.” She’s quiet for several seconds. “Great. Yeah, go ahead and give me both.” She gives Rey a thumbs up and starts writing. “Got it. Thanks.” She hangs up. “So, do I call or do you want to call?”

“I probably should.”

“Yeah but it’ll intimidate him more if I do.”

“No, I’ll do it.”

Robyn pushes the notepad toward Rey. “First number is his cell, the other’s his land line. I’m going down stairs to get us some coffee. I’ll help you pack when I get back.”

“Sounds good,” Rey says, and sits at the desk.

In middle school, Logan, a boy that Rey had a crush on for months, had asked her to go to the Harvest Dance. She wasn’t a trusting person, and she talked to teachers more than other students, but she’d been so overcome with happiness that she hadn’t stopped to wonder why he’d suddenly become interested in her. The night of the dance, his parents and he were supposed to pick her up, but no one had ever shown up. When they were half an hour late, she’d called his house and his parents had told her they had just gotten back from dropping him off, with his date.

As she stares at the phone, she oscillates between fear that Kylo is playing a prank on her, and the awful feeling that she’s the Logan in this situation.

Several minutes after Robyn leaves, she picks up the phone and dials. It rings four times before he answers.

“Who is this?”

“What?”

“I don’t know this number. Who is this?”

“It’s Rey Kenobi.”

 Silence. A long enough silence that she’d think the call had dropped if she couldn’t hear music in the background. It’s faint but she’s pretty sure he’s listening to Destiny’s Child.

“Hi?” he says, voice low and quiet.

“Hi.”
“Sorry about that,” he says, drawing out the first word. “Every once in a while some fan gets my number and instead of keeping it to herself and calling me ten times a day she posts it on a message board and a hundred of them call me ten times a day until I can get it changed. I like this number, it was easy to memorize.”

“It’s a good one.”

“So, what’s up? And how did you get this number?”

“Finn’s assistant called Hux.”

“Sweet. So…”

“I was just…” she stands up and goes to sit on the bed. “If the offer’s still open I’d love to have dinner with you.” She twists the phone cord around her hand and pulls it tight.

“Okay. What made you change your mind?”

Shit. She hadn’t realized he might ask that. “Um, I just thought it might be…fun.”

“You sound thrilled.”

“I’m just really bad on the phone. Anyway, I’m going back to New Mexico on Saturday to get my stuff, officially quit my job, all that. So I don’t know if you were thinking like this weekend or—“

“Tonight.”

“Tonight?”

“Why not? I’ll pick you up at seven.”

“Yeah. Sure.” She walks over to the window. The golf course is teeming with men in plaid pants. “Um, I just got a new place so I’ll probably be there later. I think.”

“Oh yeah? Where?”

“In Brentwood. It’s a guest house behind this stupidly enormous house.”

“No shit! I’m in Manhattan Beach.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“We’re practically neighbors.”

“Well that definitely…rocks.”

“What kind of food do you like?”

“Anything. You’re the one with the restricted diet.”

“Yeah but I can get whatever I want anywhere.”

“Seriously, anything. I don’t care. I just need to know what to wear.”

“Wear whatever you were wearing the other night.”

“Oh, my goat roping ensemble?”
“Yeah, but lose the boots.”

“Charming.”

“That’s what they all say.”

She gives him her new address, telling him to come around back to the alley, and they hang up. Rey walks around the room, takes a look in her suitcase and at the room service menu, then stares at the phone. Finn’s number is in her backpack.

“Finn Storm’s office,” he answers.

“Hey, Finn, it’s Rey.”

“Rey! What’s up?”

“I wanted you to know that I’m going out to dinner with Kylo Ren. Tonight.”

“Rey, you don’t need my permission. It’s your personal life.” He sounds like he wants to say more.

“I know but, you don’t think it’s too shitty, do you?”

“If you were going out with him because you actually liked him, I’d still be worried, but not as worried as now.”

Rey fiddles with the phone cord, wrapping the coils around her index finger. “I don’t not like him. I mean, he’s rude and obnoxious and completely oblivious to anything that happens in the real world but I don’t hate him.”

“Well, there you go.”

“I’m going to be okay. It’s just dinner.”

“I wish you’d talk to Maz first.”

“Hey, like you said, it’s my personal life.”

“True. Well, have fun. Take care of yourself. Call us if you need anything. Robyn, me, Maz, even Poe, okay?”

“I will.”

She hangs up and takes a look at her clothes. The dress from Friday will work with a bit of ironing, but she doesn’t really want to wear it again. Robyn finds her sitting on the bed surrounded by clothes.

“You know you’re supposed to be putting things in the suitcase, right?” she says, handing Rey her coffee. “What’s wrong?” she says, when Rey doesn’t answer. “He didn’t change his mind?”

“No, he just wanted to go out tonight.”

“Well, then. Let’s get you packed and back to Brentwood.”

“Can we make a stop before then?”

“Sure, honey. Where?”
“I think I’ve decided to buy myself something nice. Just a dress. And maybe some shoes. And a jacket or something. And a purse? Like, an outfit is I guess what I’m saying.”

Robyn smiles. “Music to my ears, and I know just the place.”

The place is a boutique in Venice owned by one of Robyn’s friends. The clothes range from boho beach wear to trendy club wear.

“I didn’t just bring you here because she’s my friend,”’ Robyn tells Rey. “I know she won’t pressure you to spend more than you want. And since your cash flow is weird right now, she’ll bill you.”

It’s not a Pretty Woman moment, exactly, but Rey has never had a shopping experience like this. They give her sparkling water to drink and bring the clothes to her as she sits on a big round bench by the dressing rooms.

In the end she buys a shimmery green slip dress that falls just above the knee, silvery platform sandals, a grey ballet shrug and—she has to close her eyes and breath deep when she says she’ll take it—brown hobo bag of the softest leather she has ever put her hands on. It all fits two shopping bags, but walking into the door of her cottage with those bags in hand is one of the most satisfying moments of her life so far.

There’s a bottle of wine and a note sitting on the counter, along with a stack of papers. Korr had messengered a check over while Rey was gone. The note and wine are from Jascho and Mun, welcoming her to the cottage. The papers are her lease. Robyn looks it over after Rey reads it.

“Looks sound to me.” She hands Rey a pen.

“I’m starting to feel like being a rock star is nothing but signing things.”

“You’re not totally wrong,” Robyn says. “Do you need anything else? I can have some groceries delivered.”

“No, I’m looking forward to doing that myself.”

“Well, call me if you need anything.”

At 6:45, she’s sitting at the counter with a clear view of the patio, sipping a glass of wine as though it was the last one in the world. Every once in a while she runs her hand over her thigh, admiring how the light hits the fabric. She holds her leg out. From a distance, her toenails don’t look too bad. There’d been a frantic run to CVS with Jashco when she’d realized that painted nails would be a good idea with open toed shoes. He’d been a good sport about giving her a ride, steered her toward a sparkly midnight blue shade, then stuck around and gossiped with her while she did her makeup.

At 7:10 she’s about to pour another glass of wine when the door in the hedge opens and Kylo emerges, fighting a bit with some stray branches as he ducks through. His pants and shirt are the same as earlier, but he’s tucked the shirt in and added a black jacket.

She meets him at the door. There’s a step down onto the patio so they’re temporarily the same height.

“You found it.”

His expression is unreadable as he looks her up and down. “That’s an improvement.”
“Thanks?”

He gestures to his head. “Your hair. It’s down.”

“You’re way observant. Do you want a glass of wine?”

“No, I’m good. Let’s go.”

A black Land Rover waits in the alley. He doesn’t open the door for her, which is not a thing she usually expects, but it is something that’s happened so often since she’s been here that him not doing it feels weird.

“Where are we going?”

“Nobu. It’s in Malibu so you’ll see some of the coast.”

With traffic, it takes them half an hour to get to the coast, and Kylo keeps the radio volume too loud for conversation, so she rides along in silence. He’s got Johnny Cash in when they first start out, but switches it to *The White Album* as he turns on to the highway.

The sunset is at its peak, turning the water shades of pink and gold. The road is so close to the edge that even in the right lane she experiences vertigo on the turns. Endless hills march into the distance into the distance, fading into mist.

Kylo rolls down the window and lights a cigarette, a regular Marlboro rather than a clove. Shoshanna always smells of Big Red and Marlboros, and Rey wants to tell her about all of this so badly. She will, on Saturday. But for now she closes her eyes as her hair whips around and breathes in the salt air.

“The light is like liquid,” she says, opening her eyes. “Like honey.”

He takes his eyes off the road long enough to flash her a smile.

Too soon, he turns off the highway and pulls into a shopping center. It’s fancier than the shopping centers Rey has seen, but she’s still surprised this is their destination. Soon enough, Kylo pulls up in front of a small, unassuming restaurant, its curved exterior landscaped with tall stands of bamboo. He parks as close as possible and turns off the car.

“You saw the photographers?”

“Yeah,” Rey says. There were about ten of them standing at a barricade near the valet stand.

“We’re walking up because if I do valet they’ll try to get a shot up your skirt. Doesn’t matter if they don’t know who you are. Just try to ignore them.”

“Okay.”

He opens the door for her this time, and walks slightly in front of her as they approach the door. As soon as the paps recognize him, they begin yelling questions at both of them.

“Kylo! Who’s the lucky lady?”

“Is this your girlfriend, Kylo?”

“Miss! Miss! Are you his girlfriend!”
“Are you sleeping together? What’s your name, Miss?”

Kylo doesn’t acknowledge them, and he puts his hand on the small of her back as they walk up to the host station.

“Mr. Ren!” the hostess, a tall redhead who is most definitely an actress, says. “I don’t remember seeing a reservation for you tonight. Is it under someone else’s name?” She looks at Rey hopefully.

“Hi Rebecca. I’m really sorry but I don’t have one.”

“Ooh. It’s a little tricky tonight. We’re booked solid. We’ve got room at the bar, though?”

“I’m sure you can figure something out. I come often enough.”

A short man in a suit rushes over and joins Rebecca. “Mr. Ren? Has there been a mixup?”

“No mixup, Donovan. I don’t have a reservation, but I’m sure the paps out there will be dying to hear about how I’m never eating here again.”

Mr. Donovan purses his lips. “Of course, Mr. Ren. Let me take a look.”

Kylo exhibits zero outer signs of agitation. He’s even smiling. But there’s an energy wafting off of him that’s palpable. It’s as though the relatively chill person she’d driven here with has disappeared.

Rey wants to crawl in a hole, or drag him out of here and find the nearest McDonald’s. She tries to telegraph her mortification to the hostess, but she’s flipping through the reservation book while Mr. Donovan looks at the table diagram. After another tense minute of consultation, they both look up, beaming.

“Ah, here we are,” Mr. Donovan says. “I will seat you personally.”

He leads them to banquette with a row of two-person tables.

“I think we’d be more comfortable by the window,” Kylo says, and if there were a way to teleport herself directly back to New Mexico, Rey would have jumped at the chance.

“Of course,” Mr. Donovan says and takes them to a two-person table by one of the large windows. A bamboo shade is drawn tight to keep out prying eyes and lenses.

After they’re seated, Rey exhales slowly and opens her menu. “The other table was fine. Or the bar, or we could have gone somewhere else.”

Kylo raises his eyebrow and shrugs, absorbed in his menu. “Anyway, we’re here.” He opens his menu. “Get whatever you want.”

“Hey, do they always ask questions like that?”

“Who?”

“The photographers.”

“Yeah but I tune them out. What did they ask you?”

“They just straight up asked if we were sleeping together.”
Kylo chuckles, not looking up. “Did you answer them?”

“No!”

“I’m surprised they didn’t call you a slut just to see if I’d fight them.”

“Would you?”

He screws up his mouth, considering. “Not on a first date.”

“Well, I wouldn’t need you to. I’d break their camera on their face.”

At that, Kylo looks at her for the first time since they arrived. “Somehow I believe you.” He looks back down. “If you’re not into sushi, I hear the ribeye with truffle butter is delicious.”

Rey finds it on the menu. It’s the most expensive entrée other than the lobster. She swallows hard.

“That’s okay, I think—“

“You can have it if you want it. I don’t expect anything from you.” His face is indecipherable, somewhere between serious and offended. He tosses his bangs out of his eyes with a shake of his head.

Rey laughs.

“What?”

“I was just thinking about prom night.”

“Yeah?”

“I got to go freshman year. A senior invited me.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, exactly. I wore a prairie dress from the thrift store, with cowboy boots. Yes, the same ones. And we were only at the dance for about five minutes because this guy thought I would be so happy about getting a steak dinner that I would fuck him. Wow. That’s really not that funny of a story, is it?”

There’s a lengthy silence, then he closes his menu. “I’m sorry if steak makes you sad.”

“Oh, I’m not sad. It’s funny.”

“Okay.”

Another spell of silence while Rey weighs the pros and cons of the ribeye vs the filet. “So…why are you vegan?”

“Meat is gross.”

“That’s it?”

“Yeah. The texture. Where it comes from.” He shudders.

“Dairy, too?”
“Even worse,” he says, and makes a wretching noise.

“How long have you been vegan?”

“Ever since I had a choice about what I eat. They just thought I was a picky eater until it became clear I was only rejecting animal products. It went over really well with my dad. He’s never met a steak he didn’t like.”

“Sounds like my kind of guy.”

“Yeah, the ladies love Han Solo.”

He says it with such dejection, she’s clearly hurt his feelings.

“I didn’t mean—“

“Forget it. I don’t judge anybody for their diet. Don’t worry about getting a steak.”

For the rest of the meal, they’re fine as long as it’s the two of them talking, but as soon as Kylo needs something it becomes an ordeal. And he always needs something. He’s too impatient to wait for their server so he asks anyone on staff who walks by for the most specific things, one at a time. She keeps her head down every time, becoming intimately familiar with the grain of the table cloth.

When he finally orders, his requests are so detailed that it doesn’t resemble anything that’s on the menu. Rey asks for her meal exactly as it comes.

“Do you do that on purpose?” she asks, after he’s requested low sodium soy sauce from a bus boy before their food even arrives.

“What?”

“Most people ask their server for things and try to list everything at once.”

“Do they?”

“Yes!”

He manages to look genuinely surprised.

Their food arrives, gives further instructions to the server, Rey sits in awe of her plate. Everything is arranged so artfully that it seems criminal to ruin it. But the aroma overwhelms her and she digs in. On the first bite, she has to stifle a moan.

“What?”

“So now the steak is making you sad?”

“From happiness,” she says. Mercifully, he shuts up and lets her enjoy it.
They’re halfway through when Kylo starts patting his pockets.

“Shit. I forgot my wallet. I ordered some gear online and I left it on the counter. Fuck.”

“Well, they know you here, do you think they’d let you pay it later?”

“That guy’s not doing me any more favors tonight. Do you have a cell phone? Mine’s in the car.”

“No, I haven’t gotten—“

“Hold on.” He gets up and goes to the front. Rey picks at her food and looks around. All the other diners look so glamorous and care free. After ten minutes, Rey begins to suspect that Kylo has ditched her and the check, but he finally breezes back in.

“Taken care of, but it’ll be a minute. Do you want dessert?”

She’s finishing her bread pudding when a woman approaches and tosses a wallet onto the table. She’s short, compact and pretty, wearing a softball jersey, cutoff shorts and Timbs.

“I’m billing you for an entire work day,” she says. “I was on a date.”

Kylo looks over the woman’s shoulder. “Oh yeah? Is she outside? You’re not dressed for a date.”

“She’s in the car. And it was a day date that turned into an evening date.” She looks at him pointedly, then turns to Rey. “Hi, I’m Lorna Vargas, his assistant.”

“I’m Rey. Kenobi.”

“Nice to meet you.” She turns back to Kylo. “Funny, I don’t remember making a reservation for you at Nobu tonight.”

Kylo smiles. “Didn’t have one.”

“Dammit, Kylo, you’ve got to stop doing this.” Lorna has said everything to Kylo with a smile on her face, so that anyone looking over at them would think it was a pleasant conversation. She’s got deep dimples and big brown eyes, so the contrast between her words and face are disconcerting.”

“Doing what?”

“Just showing up places. They probably had to bump somebody to fit you in. You might have ruined someone’s anniversary dinner or birthday.”

He shrugs. “Hey can you stop by my house—“

“No. It’s my day off. I’ll see you tomorrow. Use the black card, not the Visa. Nice to meet you, Rey. Good luck.”

Rey watches her leave, dark ponytail bouncing. Their server swoops in immediately to take Kylo’s card.

“Wow. And I thought Robyn was tough,” Rey says.

“Who’s Robyn?”

“Finn’s assistant.”
“Yeah they all think they’re governesses or something. You ready to get out of here?”

“Sure. Where are we going?”

“Some girls invited me to party with them at the Chateau.”

“I don’t know if I’m quite ready for that level of…immersion.”

“It’ll be fun. They were fans so it’ll be cool for them.”

“Even if you show up with a girl?”

“They’ll be nice to you because you’re with me.”

“It doesn’t always work that way.”

He sticks his lower lip out. “Come on.”

“Really? How old are you?”

“Twenty-six in May. Now are you going to come?”

“Whatever.”

“Okay let’s go.” He signs the credit card slip and puts it in the little folder along with two hundred-dollar bills.

There are at least ten more photographers out front when they leave. Kylo had been the only really famous person in the restaurant as far as Rey could tell, so word must have gotten out that he’d shown up with a woman. A barrage of flashes goes off and Rey stumbles, seeing stars. Kylo reaches out to steady her, then takes her hand, leading her to the car, and when her stomach drops and her heart beats a little faster, she blames it on adrenaline.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Cover of the Rolling Stone" by Dr. Hook and the Medicine Show
The digital clock on Finn’s nightstand reads 2:33 AM when his phone wakes him. He grabs the handset and stares at it for a moment, not quite comprehending what he’s supposed to do with it. He shakes his head and answers it.

“Hello?”

“Finn? It’s Rey. I’m so sorry to bother you but I couldn’t get ahold of Robyn and I don’t want to bother Maz.”

Finn bolts upright. “Rey, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”

“Yes. I need you to come to Chateau Marmont.”

“The Chateau? Did he leave you there? Did he hurt you?”

“Nothing like that. He’s just passed out. I can drive his car but I need you to follow me to his house so I can get home from there. Well, actually I need to follow you to his house because I don’t know where anything is here.”

“Do you know his address?”

“I’ve got his wallet. It’s on his driver’s license, at least I hope it’s current. It’s in Manhattan Beach and that’s where he said he lives.”

“Rey, did he take anything or is he just drunk?” Finn has the number for more than one doctor who’s willing to make discreet house calls at all hours of the night.

“I honestly don’t know. I was talking to these girls--it’s their bungalow--and then next thing I know he was passed out on a sofa.”

He gets out of bed and goes to his dresser. “Does he look ill in any way or just drunk?”

“He’s breathing fine and he grunts if you poke him?”

“Do you have his manager’s number, or his assistant?”

“It’s not in his wallet and his cell phone is in the car.”

“Okay, I’m coming to get you, but one last thing. Were there photographers out front when you went in?”

“A few.”

“All right. I’ll be there in about twenty minutes. Which bungalow is it?”

“Um, three.”

Finn pulls on a pair of jeans and a t shirt and shoves his feet into sneakers. In the bathroom, he splashes cold water on his face. He’d just gotten to bed an hour ago so he feels slightly drunk, like
he took a long nap in the middle of the day. At least the freeway will be clear this time of night.

As he merges onto the 101, he rolls down the windows and turns up the stereo. The band he and Poe had gone to see hadn’t been spectacular live, but their EP is something else. Heavily influenced by Weezer—with the same pop sensibilities minus the innocence, it might be exactly what people will be looking for in a couple of years when they’re tired of teen pop.

Traffic is at a crawl on The Strip. It’s past last call and patrons are spilling out of bars. Between the cars and the drunk people trying to get to their cars, it’s stop and start most of the way. He should have gone around but he’d gotten distracted. He’s never liked the Chateau, and it’s the last place he wants Rey to be when she’s so new in town. When he finally pulls up to the looming castle on the hill, he hands the car over to a valet, and heads straight for the concierge. Luckily he’s known the on-duty concierge for years.

“Finn, my man! How long has it been since you’ve graced us with your presence?” he says.

“Too long, Terrence.” Finn says, shaking his hand and going in for a hug. “Listen, Kylo Ren is in Bungalow Three with one of my artists.

“Aw man, it’s been such a quiet night, too. Do I need to get security?”

“It’s not that kind of situation. He passed out and she wants to get him home, but the paps are still out there so I think it’d be best to just get him a room and let him sleep it off here.”

“For sure. I’ve got all his contact info on file so I’ll make sure his assistant knows where to find him. You go ahead to the bungalow and I’ll get us some muscle. That cat’s a beast.”

Finn winds his way through the grounds to the bungalow, where he finds Rey sitting on the porch with a girl who could pass for Naomi Campbell’s sister.

“Finn!” she says, and runs over, giving him a tight hug. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t want to just leave him here. I’ll tell you why, later.” She lets go of him and gestures to the other girl. “This is Tanisha. Her friends went to bed and she was nice enough to wait up with me.”

“Thank you, Tanisha.”

“No problem. Rey’s cool to talk to.”

They’re joined by Terrence and two bouncer types. Tanisha shows them into the living room, where Kylo Ren is sprawled across the sofa, face down, his shins resting on the sofa’s arm and one arm dangling on the floor. There’s a trash can near his head.

“Has he been vomiting?” Terrence asks.

“No, that was just a precaution,” Tanisha says.

“Okay.” Finn says. “Rey, we think it’s best if he sleeps it off here. Terrence will check him in and contact his people.”

“But what if he gets sick? Should he be alone?”

“He’s less alone here than he would be at home. Terrence can have someone check on him periodically. Trust me, they do not want anyone else dying here. Besides, do you think there’s any chance we’re getting his home security system code out of him in this state?” He turns to Tanisha. “Was he doing any drugs or just drinking?”
“Just drinking as far as I know.”

“Yeah but are there any drugs around that you know of?” Tanisha looks warily at Terrence. “He doesn’t care. He’s seen way worse, and it’s important that we know.”

“There were a couple of people doing coke earlier but they weren’t sharing and they left. I didn’t even invite them. They just kind of wandered in.”

Finn crouches down to look at Kylo. It’s well known at First Order that Kylo Ren has a ridiculously low tolerance for someone of his size, but Finn’s never seen him in action. His pulse and breathing are fine and his skin is no paler than you’d expect. Finn tries to open his eye to look at his pupil but Kylo swats his hand away.

“I’m fucking done with school, Mom,” he mumbles and turns on his side, facing the back of the sofa.

“He’s okay,” Finn says as he rises. “Just completely shit faced. Let’s get him up.”

Kylo fights weakly, flailing his arms when the security guys try to rouse him, but they get him on his feet. He squints. “Hey, I know you,” he says, pointing about two feet to the right of Finn. He looks at the two men who are supporting him and tries to break away. “Do you know who I am?” he mutters.

“Yes, sir. Now let’s get you to beddy bye.”

“No, I’m on a date,” he says and looks around. “Where is she? Rey?”

“I’m right here, Kylo. Finn’s going to drive me home and these guys are going to take you to your room.”

“Whatever.” The guards take his arms again and he shakes them off. “I can walk. I’ve got this,” he says before closing his eyes, and sinking to the floor.

“Okay, buddy,” the larger guard says and hoists Kylo across his shoulders, firefighter style.

Rey gives his wallet and car keys to Terrence. He takes his leave with the guards and their charge.

Finn turns to follow with Rey, but stops. “Tanisha, did anyone take photos of him after he passed out?”

“Oh, I think Lauren did. Hold on.” She picks up a digital camera from the coffee table and hands it to Finn. He browses through the photos. There are at least twenty of Kylo before he passed out, taking shots, throwing peace signs, a few of him smoking cigarettes. There are several of Rey taken at the worst possible angles, and a dozen of Kylo on the couch. “If you don’t mind I’d like to delete the ones of Rey and the ones of Kylo passed out?”

“Yes, whatever. I told her not to take those.”

“It’s fine, and thank you,” he says, shaking the girl’s hand.

“Good night, Tanisha,” Rey says. “It was nice meeting you. Sorry about…this.”

“It’s all good,” Tanisha says and hugs Rey, promising to IM her.

They make their way back to the main hotel, Rey carrying her shoes.
“Is he going to be okay?” she asks.

“He’ll be out about five hundred, which is pocket change, but they’ll take care of him. Probably going to have a wicked hangover. But at least there won’t be any photos of him being bundled into his car or passed out in it.”

“Yeah that was good thinking. Thank you.”

“Not my first crisis and not my worst, it measures about a three on the crisis management scale. But it was mainly for you. Somehow I don’t think this is what Robyn had in mind.”

“Yeah, probably not.”

It’s a short drive to Brentwood, and Rey fills Finn in on the way.

“I have never been more mortified in my life, Finn. I wanted the earth to swallow me. The food was delicious but I don’t think I can ever go back there, I don’t care how big a tip he left. And things were okay at first, at the party. It was small and everyone was just talking. He did a few shots with some actor from Melrose Place but I didn’t see anything else. I was going to just call a cab but that Lauren girl kept trying to get him to go to her room. I mean, he’s a total dickhead but I didn’t think it was safe to leave him even after she went to bed.”

“You did the right thing.”

“I’m so sorry I had to wake you, though. How’s the rest of your night been?”

“It’s been chill. Poe and I went out for Guatemalan tamales and then went to see a band at the Whisky.”

“Wait!” Rey says, turning to him and smacking him on the shoulder. “You went out with Poe Dameron?”

“I’m driving here, Rey. And it was for business. We were scouting the band.”

“But you went to dinner first!”

“Yeah, we left the office and grabbed dinner before the show. I do that all the time with people I work with. It wasn’t a date.”

“May as well have been,” Rey says.

“It wasn’t. And get your feet off my dash.”

“Yes, sir!” she says, with a faux salute, then falls silent, bopping along to the radio. “You know,” she adds when the song ends. “The first half hour of my date wasn’t that bad.”

“Oh yeah? What’d you do?”

“Drove along the coast listening to music.”

“So you’re saying he’s cool as long as he’s quiet and not in public.”

Rey laughs. “Yes, I guess so.”

He walks her to the door of her cottage and makes sure her key works. “Thank you, again,” she says, kissing him on the cheek. “I promise I won’t make a habit of this.”
“I’m holding you to that.”

“Good night, Finn.”

The freeway is empty, the glow of the street lights scrolling over Finn as he drives. Worry nibbles at the edge of his thoughts. Something about the way Rey had looked at Kylo Ren. Something she hadn’t even been aware of. He tells himself it was just regular human empathy. Nothing to worry about. She’d have to be crazy to go out with him again.

Still, he tosses and turns for an hour before he can sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Hotel California" by the Eagles
Believe I'm Sinkin' Down

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The ceiling is spinning at a gentle pace when Kylo opens his eyes. It’s full daylight, and the sound of someone playing chromatic scales on an electric guitar filters from above. He takes a few breaths and moves his head to the side. It starts pounding. He rolls to his side and pushes himself up, looking around the room. Beige carpet. TV on a mid-century stand. A chair in the corner. French doors leading outside. Nothing on the walls. Some stranger’s shitty apartment? No. Wait. He’s been here before. He gets up and stumbles to the French doors, stepping out onto a terrace with a view of the Strip in all its faded daytime glory, looking like a sequined dress on a dirty bathroom floor. He’s still at the Chateau, in a suite.

“What the fuck?” he says, and goes back inside, headache compounded by the light and heat. His shoes and jacket are on the chair in the corner, with his wallet and watch on the table next to it.

The bedroom opens to a long, narrow hallway. The bathroom is the first door but he can’t get it to open all the way. He sticks his head through to make sure it’s not hitting on something like a dead body, but the floor is clear. The door is just stuck. Either it’s warped or the floor has buckled or some pissed off Old Hollywood ghost is fucking with him. He squeezes himself through, with one terrifying moment when he thought his shoulders were caught, and nearly falls into the bathtub.

“Fuck this fucking shithole!” He screams it loud enough that the guitarist upstairs stops momentarily, before diving back into their scales with more frenzy. By propping himself against the wall with one arm he manages to piss without falling over, and squeezing through the door a second time is easier with an empty bladder. He wanders down the hall to the kitchen to see what the fridge has to offer.

He’d lived here for three months—though his suite had a functioning bathroom door--when he’d first moved out of his parents’ house after the release of the first Dagobah EP. He’d wanted out of their house but didn’t know if he wanted to move to New York permanently, and was gun shy about signing a lease in LA.

Living here had been fascinating at first. His parents’ friends always had some wild story to tell about it, and for the first few weeks it’d felt like he was living instead of just listening to stories about how everyone else lived. This is where he met Katia. She’d been drinking champagne by the pool at ten in the morning wearing an evening gown. A week later, he’d lost his virginity to her in Room 64, even though neither of them were staying there at the time. The charm wore off soon, though. It’s never quiet here, even at four in the morning, and the energy is always full of desperation, even when some of the most successful people in the world are around. Everyone saying “don’t look at me” while simultaneously hoping their antics would become legend.

Plus, he’d realized he was dropping way too much money on an apartment that many of his friends wouldn’t set foot in if it weren’t at the Chateau. So he’d moved to an apartment in North Hollywood with the Dagobah guys until that fell apart, then bought his house with his first advance from First Order.

He has to crouch in front of the 1950s fridge to get a good view, and as he pushes past the bottles of champagne to get to the orange juice, he replays the events of last night.
It didn’t get blurry until after he’d started taking shots with that actor. Rey had still been there, talking to Tanisha about wind farms. Lauren had finally given up trying to get into his pants and gone to bed. After that he’s got nothing.

Where the hell is Rey? He checks the living room, but it’s empty. He leans in the doorway holding the orange juice bottle to his head. He should probably start his search at Bungalow Three and pray she’s still willing to talk to him. There should be some good shots of them together but he hadn’t even gotten to talk to her about music, much less extol the virtues of his record label.

Someone knocks on the door. He looks through the peephole to see Lorna. He opens up and she shoves a coffee in his hand as she pushes past him into the room. She’s got a duffle bag thrown over her shoulder and is back to her usual dress, cardigan and sensible shoes.

“Change of clothes, shaving kit. You don’t have to shower or shave but you aren’t leaving here in the same clothes you had on last night. Everyone and their mother is eating lunch here today apparently so it’s wild out front.”

“What the fuck am I doing here?” He takes a sip of the coffee, gags, and hands it back to her.

She shrugs and drops the bag onto the sofa. “I got a voicemail from the concierge saying you were here if I was looking for you. I don’t know anything else.”

“Where did Rey go?”

“Oh yeah, that was on the message, too. Finn Storm came and picked her up. Have you ordered food?”

“I don’t want to eat here.”

Lorna leans against the sofa arm and looks up at him. “So, this is the second time in a week you’ve been blackout drunk. Anything on your mind?”

“Are you my therapist now?”

“No, you fired him and never got another one. I just need to know for my own sake if this is going to become a regular occurrence.”

“I don’t think so. I don’t even like to drink.”

“Then stop doing it, idiot. I’ve got to go. I’ll meet you at your house. You’re supposed to be writing today, and you’re meeting the guy from SPIN at Langer’s at five.”

“Fuck. That guy’s a prick.”

“You’ll be in good company. I’ll check you out.”

He feels like he spent the night in an ashtray, but he’d also rather eat an ashtray than go back in that bathroom. He looks in the bag Lorna brought. Navy Dickies, white A shirt, Led Zeppelin t shirt and Chucks. He changes clothes, washes his face in the sink, and takes the elevator to the garage. He smoked all his cigarettes last night but he bums a couple off the valet, tucking one behind his ear and lighting the other while he’s waiting for his car. He waves to the paps waiting near the entrance and flips them off. It’s childish, and he usually refrains because it’s pointless, but there’s a bit of sick satisfaction in it. His neck cracks as he rolls it and a faint reminder of his headache returns. When he gets in his car, he blasts the a/c but leaves the music off.
His intention is to go straight home and crash, but he finds himself passing the freeway onramp and staying on Sunset. The whole way to Brentwood he tells himself this isn’t weird. He doesn’t have a phone number for her and he wants to make sure she’s okay. That’s what anyone would do after they’ve more than likely made an ass out of themselves on a date, right?

Once he pulls up in her alley, he hesitates. This is totally weird. But he’s here so he may as well get on with it.

As soon as he opens his car door, he hears her singing, her voice clear and low on a Billy Holiday tune. This is the first time he’s heard her sing. A jolt of frisson travels down his scalp and neck and he almost turns to leave. He listens to another verse before knocking on the door in the hedge. There’s no answer, not even a pause in the singing. She must have headphones on. Opening the door slowly, he sees her before she sees him. Her hair is down, wavy and damp. She’s wearing flared jeans and a tie-dyed cropped tank top, one hand full of eucalyptus sprigs and the other wielding a pair of kitchen shears. When she looks up and sees him, she jumps and thrusts the shears out defensively before she realizes it’s him.

“Jesus Christ, Kylo!” She pushes her headphones off her ears. “What the fuck?”

“I’m sorry,” he says. “I knocked but you didn’t answer.”

She looks him up and down. “Wow, you look like shit.”

“I feel worse.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I was on my way home and I think I need to apologize for last night but I don’t have a phone number.”

“You know, Manhattan Beach isn’t really that close to here. I’ve been studying the county map.”

“It’s closer than a lot of places. You’ll get it when you start driving here. What are you doing?”

“I’m taking some of this home to my friend.”

“You said you’re leaving Saturday?”

“Yeah. I wanted to let them dry out beforehand.” She sets down her bundle and goes back to cutting.

“So, I know it’s probably hard to believe considering the last two times we’ve seen each other but I really don’t drink. At all. I mean hardly ever. And I don’t remember much from last night after I started drinking but if I did anything stupid I’m sorry, and I’d like to take you out again to make up for it. When you get back.”

She faces him, arms folded across her chest, and looks down. Her eyes are sharp when she looks back up. “Why did you have my New Mexico address in your wallet?”

He flails for a moment, mouth agape, but since there is nothing that he can make up that would be better than the truth, he tells her about how he keeps tracks of the fans he meets on tour.

“Okay. Well, that’s smart, I guess. Kind of creepy and obsessive, but smart. But why was my address in your wallet instead of your notebook.”
He shrugs. “My notebook was on the bus so I used a receipt to write it before I forgot, then I just never got around to putting it in there. I’d think about it when I’d come across it but of course that was always when I was in the middle of something else, then I’d forget.”

“I took it out. You don’t need it anymore anyway since I live here now and I haven’t sprung any paternity suits on you.”

“I guess that means a second date is a no.”

She sighs and starts laying the branches out on a lounge chair. “I don’t know. I have a lot going on and I probably shouldn’t worry about my social life right now.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Goodbye, Kylo,” she says, still busy, with her back to him.

“Bye, Rey.”

He ducks out of the gate. A block from her house, he pulls onto a side street and parks. Maybe it’s for the best. Hux will be off his back for a while and Snoke will figure out a more direct way to poach Rey and none of it will be in Kylo’s hands. Of course, Snoke will still figure out a way to make Kylo’s life hell. There’s no way he’ll let such an outrageous failure slide.

“Fuck!” he screams and pounds on the steering wheel. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!” For a long time, he sits with his forehead against the steering wheel, breathing. His mother used to tell him to think of his lungs catching all the bad thoughts when he inhaled and kicking them all out when he exhaled. It works enough to get him back on the road and home.

The plan is to write. He’d told Lorna to lock that into his schedule last week They’re recording the next album soon and his focus has been everywhere but new music since he got off tour. Lorna has stocked the studio with water and juice, he just needs his notebook. There’s a shelf full of them in his room, new and used. He chooses a new one, a regular composition book, but his hand lingers on another comp book, far older, and thick from writing and years of page turning. It’s the source of his success, and the proof that he’s a fraud.

When Ben Solo first got the crate of Anakin Skywalker’s things from his mother, he’d focused on the guitar, which sat on top in a battered case covered in travel labels, and hadn’t delved into the rest of it for several days. The notebook had been on the bottom, underneath stacks of western shirts and hats, photo albums, as well as several thick bundles of letters and post cards. It was typical for a songwriter’s notebook, with full songs and snippets and random pieces of paper tucked between the pages. Ben owned everything Anakin Skywalker had ever recorded, including some unreleased masters, so he recognized many of the lyrics, but there were plenty that had never been laid down.

Dagobah was just a garage band at the time, though they’d started talking about using Ben’s parents’ studio to record something for fun. Outside of band practice, he’d work on some of Anakin’s songs, mostly the ones that had chord notations. One afternoon, one of the guys came in early and heard him working on a completed song and had lost his mind over how good it was. No one had ever reacted to anything Ben had written that way, and without any consideration for the consequences—how could he possibly have known? --he let his friend think he’d written it. That song became “City in the Sky,” the one that launched his career.

Even after the album went platinum he could have come clean and it wouldn’t have ruined him. He was just a stupid kid, and it wasn’t like anyone was out any money, since it all stayed in the
family. But he’d missed the opportunity and let it go on too long.

Then he made the mistake of confessing to the worst possible person. There’d been an industry party at his parents’ house, not long before he moved out. Ben had been on his way out the door when Snoke stopped him, congratulating him on the EP and praising “City in the Sky” in particular. He’d gone on to talk about how much the style hearkened back to his grandfather and asked if that was intentional. Ben had panicked, believing that Snoke already knew and was just baiting him—the man always seemed to know everything about everyone—and had told him about the song and the notebook.

Snoke had hand waved Ben’s distress. “Oh, don’t worry about that! Who’s it hurting, anyway? Anakin’s been dead for decades. I am something of an Anakin Skywalker enthusiast, though. Would it be alright if I had a look at the notebook?”

And like an absolute fool, Ben had not only taken Snoke to his room and let him see it, but let him borrow it, since he was late meeting his friends. Snoke had it messenged over a week later.

Ben Solo had handed his future over to Snoke that night and he sat on it for two years before striking. It started with meetings, talking to Ben about his future with Resistance, getting out from under his parents’ shadow, perhaps experimenting with new sounds that were nothing like Han’s or Leia’s. How he can forge his own path, like Anakin did. Then he’d begun telling him how much better he was than his bandmates, how they were holding him back from his true potential—a risky move since Ben had known the guys since middle school. Snoke flat out offered him a multi album deal with a huge advance so long as he cut all ties with his band and everything Resistance. Ben balked at that so Snoke pulled out the big gun.

During the week Snoke had possession of Anakin’s notebook, he’d had every page scanned. The page of most interest, of course, was the one with the full lyrics and chord progression for an unnamed song that was nearly word for word the Dagobah System’s song “City in the Sky.”

And since Ben Solo was still a dumb kid whose parents would be disappointed either way, he chose the path that would bring him glory instead of shame. He signed on the line then and there, and went back to the studio to tell his uncle and bandmates.

In the end, he’d traded Han and Leia’s shadow for Snoke’s.

Kylo Ren takes out the notebook and thumbs through it. It smells like an old library book, with a whiff of tobacco. He shoves it back on the shelf, takes his new notebook downstairs and locks himself in the studio. He turns off the phone and plays until his fingers are numb. He misses his meeting with the asshole from SPIN but he’ll let Lorna deal with it. He’s got nothing new to say, anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Title from "Crossroad Blues" by Robert Johnson
As soon as she hears Kylo drive away, Rey puts her headphones back on and busies herself with cutting twine, tying the eucalyptus into small bundles, and hanging them on a length of twine she rigged up between two plant hooks. She goes to the main house to return the shears and twine and finds Maz, Jashco and Mun at the kitchen counter, looking at a laptop. Maz’s hair is down today, dreadlocks reaching to the middle of her back.

“Rey!” Maz says. “You know, dear, I have absolutely zero say in your social life, but you need to give me a heads up if you’re going to go out with a rock star.”

“It was kind of last minute.” She says as she puts her borrowed supplies away.

“Well, now you know. I won’t judge, I just need to be in the loop. Now, aren’t you curious?” Maz waves her over to the laptop. “You didn’t make the cutoff for any of the paper rags but I subscribe to all the bigger gossip news groups, so imagine my surprise when I click through to find out you went to Nobu and Chateau Marmont with Kylo Ren.” She clicks on a link in an email.

“You look amazing, Rey,” Mun says as the photos load. They’re posted on a music gossip site, in a photo gallery titled “Kylo Ren Mystery Date!!!”

“Oh they like you,” Jashco says.

Rey leans in closer. “How can you tell?”

“Look, they consistently chose the shots where you look beautiful, even if it’s a bad angle for him.” He tilts his head and squints. “And he certainly is all about the angle, isn’t he?”

“Where did they get these?” Rey asks as Maz clicks through the photoset.

“Stole them from Getty Images,” Mun says, pointing to the watermark on a photo of Rey and Kylo leaving Nobu. She’s walking behind him, hand in his, but she still somehow looks strong, with her head held high and her hair blowing behind her.

“That’s really me,” Rey says, like she’s never seen a photo of herself before. It’s exactly what she saw in the mirror before she left last night, but so much more. She’s seen a million photos like this, but the women in them always seemed like they occupied an entirely different sphere. But this is her, and there’s no trace of the desert rat. She doesn’t look like she stepped out of a trailer.

Maz closes the window and clicks on another link. This one goes to a message board thread titled “Who’s the Skinny Bitch????” She swivels on her stool, facing Rey and peering at her through her thick glasses. “Are you ready for this? It’s not going to be easy.”

Rey looks at her landlords, who decide suddenly that they really need to take a look at the pool filter. They leave and Maz scrolls down the thread.

Whoever started this thread had chosen the shots from when Rey had stumbled on her way out of Nobu. They chose shots where both she and Kylo looked angry. Others, going into the Chateau, where it looked like he was ignoring her. Several where she had her eyes closed or a weird look on her face. And they all had captions, things like “What a clumsy bitch,” and “Did she ride in his car
After the string of photos, there’s a tirade about how Rey was probably just a one-night stand, how Kylo had really great taste which is why he doesn’t date so why would he be serious about some skank in stripper shoes. Maz watches closely her as she reads it.

Rey may as well be back in the lunch room in middle school. Once she’d put her books down at a spot in the corner, and when she’d come back with her tray, a boy was sitting in her spot and her things were shoved on the floor. When she’d told him that was her spot he’d told her she smelled like horse shit and it made him want to puke, so she’d hit him upside the head with her tray. He lost a tooth and she got suspended for a week. When she came back she had to eat lunch in the counselor’s office the rest of the year.

She swallows, throat aching, and scrolls down to read the comments. Robyn had warned her about this. She knew about this going in. She can handle it.

A few things happened after the lunchroom incident that improved her life marginally. Ahsoka had given her that first guitar, and she was placed in a new foster home after the Plutts lost their foster care license. It wasn’t the best place to live but at least at her new home she could wash her clothes regularly, and they provided her with soap, shampoo and toothpaste. By the time she got to high school the worst of the bullying had stopped, due in part to her having broken a kid’s face, and also to her improved hygiene. Though, she did develop a bit of a reputation, and it wasn’t completely undeserved.

The thread has about fifty replies already, eviscerating her, then tearing her into little pieces to play with. Her clothes, her hair, the length of her legs, the circumference of her thighs, the space between her eyes, her supposed sexual history, the shape of her eyebrows.

She’s too tall but also too short to look good with Kylo Ren.

She’s too skinny, but her arms are too fat.

She’s way too pretty, but also a plain Jane.

She’s apparently both skanky and snobby.

Her boobs are too small but are also obviously implants.

She is a slut but also a cold fish who can’t possibly satisfy Kylo Ren.

Rey lost her virginity to the cousin of one of her foster sisters when she was fourteen. He had been sixteen, visiting from Oregon. She’d wanted to find out what it was like but didn’t want to do it with anyone at school, and he was pretty nice and fairly handsome. He’d looked like Mark Paul Gosselaar would if you made a copy of him and then made a copy of that copy. Unfortunately, her foster sister had found out, and told people at school. Boys who’d never looked at Rey popped out of the woodwork to ask her out, but they never wanted to do anything but go driving. And not even cruising, because that would mean being seen. It was wine coolers and back roads. Most of the time she said no but there were times when she just wanted to feel wanted, even for a few hours, so she went.

The thread is peppered with a few girls who stick up for her, saying that she’s pretty, or that no one knows anything about her so why are they being so mean. The other girls jump on them, saying they’re being suck ups.

_What, do you think she’ll ever see this and then she’ll personally thank you or something? You_
think Kylo will love you for sticking up for his whore?

Rey closes the window and steps away.

Junior year, Ahsoka had started encouraging her to do open mic at The Sacred Song. She started out doing covers of Lisa Loeb and Joni Mitchell songs, but as she built up a bit of a following (hardly ever anyone from school) she gained the confidence to start writing her own. She’d also stopped accepting dates from boys she knew didn’t actually like her.

“Oh, God,” she whispers.

“Rey, this is something that was bound to happen, even if you were to remain single the rest of your life. True, it’s worse because of who you chose to go out with, but for any woman, nothing you do will ever be quite right, and it’s especially bad if there’s any kind of spotlight on you. So you can either let it hurt you, let it toughen you up, or choose to ignore it.”

“It’s not that,” Rey says. “I mean, it kind of is, but I’ve got a damned thick skin. It’s just that I wasn’t an angel in high school, and there are people who could tell stories.”

“Did you kill someone?”

“No.”

“Were you in a cult?”

“No.”

“Drugs?”

“Just weed every now and then.”

“Ah, so you slept around a bit?”

“A…bit.”

Maz smiles and takes Rey’s hand, bangle bracelets jangling. “Rey, you were never going to be marketed as pure and virginal. That’s for pop stars. And the people that tell those kinds of stories always come off looking more desperate than you ever could.” She looks at the laptop. “Almost everything bad that can be said about you so far has already been said. Though I’m going to warn you that if you continue to be associated with him they’ll attack your talent. But that was also going to happen anyway, because we can’t please everyone.”

Rey’s eyes sting and she blinks hard, but it can’t stop a few tears from falling. “You know I hadn’t planned on going out with him again.”

“Really? I suppose it’s not surprising. He has a reputation for being difficult. Though people who try to be polite call him ‘fussy.’”

“Yeah. Difficult is a better word. A walking disaster is probably the best way to describe him. But now, I think I want to go out with him again just to make those little assholes cry.”

Maz peers at her through her lenses, her eyes seeming to grow bigger as she does. “Rey, I’ll admit I’ve been a more than a bit worried about you. But I see it again, that fighting spirit I saw the first time we met. Now come on, I’m going to take you to lunch and we’re going to talk about more important things. We’re hitting the ground running when you get back into town on Monday.”
Rey goes back to her house and throws on a t shirt, self-conscious about her body in a way she hasn’t been in years. She looks in the mirror, at her shiny face and tangled hair, until Maz calls to her across the yard to hurry up.

“Get it together,” she tells her reflection. She shoves her hairbrush in her new handbag and hurries across the yard to Maz’s car.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Cornflake Girl" by Tori Amos
It’s impossible to work out of a box, so, despite his efforts to not settle in at his desk at Resistance until he’s officially on the payroll, Finn has moved in just enough to complete some vital tasks. Robyn and he have been busy all morning sorting through the emails that have been sent to their personal accounts since Monday, over a hundred for him and eighty-five for her. Their desks face each other, since Resistance’s main floor is basically a bull pen, and while the arrangement is different, he doesn’t mind. None of the other A&R people here have assistants that work in the same capacity as Robyn, and it’d be strange in this more egalitarian environment to have her set up outside his office, even if it did have walls.

There are a series of conference rooms and offices in the basement of the old church that can be used for more private meetings, but overall, Resistance Records climate is one of community.

Finn is sidetracked from answering emails from artists and industry people by an email from Maz, with some links to message board and fan site posts about Rey. The email includes an admonishment about keeping her in the know about Rey’s comings and goings. He also had a strongly worded email from the label publicist assigned to Rey with the same request.

Communication is usually one of Finn’s stronger suits, so he assures both of them that it won’t happen again.

On the thread he has open, on a Knights of Ren message board, they’re comparing and contrasting Rey to Kylo Ren’s ex-girlfriend, Katia, and it’s devolved into a flame war because one girl said that Katia was obviously prettier and perfect for Kylo and another girl brought up a post from not long ago where the first girl had called Katia an evil Russian skank, and now everyone is taking sides. At least Rey is forgotten for the moment.

“They’ve completely lost their minds over this,” he says.

Robyn comes around the desk to look at his screen. “Are you surprised? I said this would happen. I’m only surprised they haven’t found out her name yet.”

Finn refreshes the page to find that a new thread has popped up. “Oh, here we go.” The thread is lovingly titled “I think I’ve found the bitch.” He opens it and there’s the photo of Rey from the newspaper that he’d found last week. He’d known her name before finding that, though. How the hell had they figured it out?

I have a friend who lives in Santa Fe, NM and she told me this chick looked familiar, said she couldn’t forget those big ass teeth, then she remembered she went to this singer songwriter thing her friend entered last year and this was the chick who won even though her friend’s song was way better. So she’s totally an aspiring musician you guys. Of course, right? And she’s only like 19 years old. Way too young for Kylo. What is he thinking?

Robyn reads over his shoulder. “Told you they’d figure it out before the press.”

Before Finn can answer, the chatter in the room fades. They both look up to see Poe standing in the doorway with Leia Organa.

“Well,” Robyn whispers. “Looks like your employment situation will be figured out today.”
As Poe and Ms. Organa make their way over, Finn’s first impression of “The General” is that she’s shorter than he thought she’d be. Finn knew, conceptually, that she was a small person, having seen pictures of her, but he hadn’t been truly prepared for just how diminutive she is. At the same time, her presence is overwhelming. Everyone stays silent even after she’s passed by.

“Mr. Storm,” she says as she approaches. Her eyes are deep and kind, and his nerves calm as she takes his hand. “Poe has told me all about what’s happened at First Order. I’m sorry, for your sake, that you had to leave so abruptly, but I can’t say I’m anything less than thrilled that you’re here. Poe played me Rey’s demo on the ride over. What a wonderful find!”

“Thank you, Ms. Organa. Call me Finn, please. This is my assistant, Robyn.”

“Nice to have you on board, too,” she says, shaking Robyn’s hand. “Finn, we do need to talk. Do you think there are any other artists you can get to follow you? We’ve had the kind of year where we could make some very generous offers.”

“I have a couple who are coming to the end of their contracts, but they’ll be on high alert over there. We’ll have to be discreet.”

“Secret missions are my specialty,” she says, leaning in.

Leia Organa’s exploits in the industry are legendary, but the most daring thing she’d done had been thirty years ago when, after a fallout with her record label, Empire, she’d stolen the masters for her second album and flooded the market with free bootleg copies. Poaching artists would be a breeze for her.

“I want to meet Rey as soon as possible,” she continues. “Dinner. Nothing elaborate. Me, you, Poe, Rey and Maz.”

“Of course. Robyn can set that up. And about Rey, Ms. Organa—”

“Please call me Leia.”

“Okay, Leia. In the spirit of full disclosure, you should know that Rey went out on a date with your son last night.”

At the mention of her boy, Leia’s face changes. It’s as if a wall goes up, but she’s peeking around the side, wary but eager at the same time.”

“How did that happen? She’s been in town less than a week and my son is not exactly Don Juan.”

“They met last year when he was on tour and then ran into each other the first night she was in town.” Finn looks over at Poe, who shakes his head. “I guess they just clicked. I don’t know if she’s going to go out with him again, though.”

Finn begins to tell her about the date but Leia holds up her hand and laughs softly. “That boy...I can only imagine. Were they photographed?”

“Yes.”

“Can’t hurt, I suppose, and maybe...never mind. Get something set up so I can meet her. Do you have her album schedule set?”
“Yes,” Poe says. “Do you want to see it now?”

“We can go over it when we meet,” she says, and goes into her office.

The moment the door shuts, everyone springs into motion again, with renewed energy, like they’ve all had a good nap and a Red Bull.

“Well,” Poe says, turning his smile on Finn. “Looks like we’ve got some paperwork to look at. If you don’t mind a working lunch, I can send Bebe for food and we can work in my office.”

“Sure but let me pick the place this time.”

Poe looks taken aback. “Oh, not into tamales?”

“No, man, they were delicious. But if we’re doing a cultural exchange let’s make it an exchange and hit up Dulan’s. But I’ll send Robyn since they know her there and they’ll do it up right for me. Bebe can tag along if they want.”

Once they’re settled into Poe’s office with their food, Poe takes a stack of papers from a tray on his desk. “Let’s get this out of the way first. He hands the papers across the desk to Finn. “Salary, bonus, and benefits offer. Take a day or so to look it over. HR has an office in the basement if you have any questions. You’ll be paid retroactively from Monday.”

“Sweet,” Finn says. “You know, I had total faith in you but I have to say I’ve been holding my breath since Monday.”

“What do you think about the General?”


“That’s about right,” Poe says.

Finn takes a moment to focus hard on buttering his cornbread. Poe laughs. “Go ahead, ask.”

“Okay,” Finn says. “How the hell did that woman raise a kid like Kylo Ren?”

Poe doesn’t answer immediately. He considers, mouth set, while he puts hot sauce on his collards. Finally, he leans forward, dark eyes solemn. “Don’t tell anyone I told you this. I don’t even know if Leia remembers telling me this, and I’m only telling you so you have some insight in case Rey does decide she wants to see him again.”

“I wouldn’t have gotten this far if I didn’t know when to keep my mouth shut.”

“I went with her to the Grammy’s last year. The Knights of Ren performed, and she was fine the whole time, even joked with me some about those stupid masks, but you could tell she was proud. He’s a fantastic guitar player. But then he snubbed her at the after party. Usually if they run into each other he’ll at least acknowledge her but this time he just walked past, and there’s no way he didn’t see her, that fucking prick.”

Finn’s known Poe for a couple of years and he’s never seen him this intense and has rarely heard him insult anyone, but he already understands the loyalty that someone like Leia Organa can inspire. He’s known her for an hour and is already planning how to poach as many artists as he can for her.

“What’d she do?” Finn asks.
“Now, Leia doesn’t drink often, but when she does, she gets sentimental. She drank a few more glasses of champagne and started talking about how it was her fault. Said that since she and Han were absent a lot, she always tried to make up for it by giving him whatever he wanted. That all he ever wanted to do was please Han but he and Han were never on the same page, so Ben never understood the ways Han showed his love. She thought his uncle could help him, give him some direction, but then Snoke got his claws into him. She hates Snoke, as you can imagine. Like, you can practically see steam coming out of her ears when she talks about him. That kind of hatred. Anyway, it got pretty heavy so I got her out of there.”

“Hmm,” Finn says, digging into his peach cobbler.

“I know, it’s not the worst thing that can happen to a kid, but I can see how it can warp someone, being neglected and overindulged at the same time.”

“My dad sent me to military school when I was ten. I got in trouble throwing rocks at cars with this kid whose brother was rumored to be in a gang. Dad was terrified I was going to become a gang banger so he sent me away. We lived in Leimert Park, and I barely knew what a gang was, but he was so afraid.”

“Military school, for real?”

“Yeah. In Virginia. I was only home for summers and he had my days booked solid even then. Then I got a scholarship to a regular prep school on the east coast for high school and that fed me directly into Penn. I talk a lot about being an LA native but even after five years back I feel like I barely know it, or my parents.”

“Is that why you live in Encino?”

“That was a happy accident. A guy I went to school with, an actor’s son, didn’t want to lose his apartment while he travelled so I sublet it. He pays half the rent so I don’t have to have a roommate because he doesn’t trust anyone else. He’s been bumming around Europe and Asia for five years on his dad’s dime.”

Poe shakes his head. “It’s unreal what these kids get to do. I came out here from Miami for school.”

“Oh yeah, UCLA, right?”

“Yeah. My parents are both musicians. They weren’t thrilled that I went into the business side of things but I think A&R’s a happy medium. And I was never as good a musician as either of them.” Poe shrugs and shakes his head. “Jesus, though, enough with the sob stories. Talking about that kid is such a downer.”

“You’re right.” Finn says. “So, we should probably talk strategy on the artists I want to bring over.”

“Of course. Let’s go see the General.”

Poe puts his hand on Finn’s shoulder as they leave his office, and even though Finn’s stomach flips over on itself, he tells himself it’s just business. It has to be.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter title from "Skin Trade" by Duran Duran
The screening room at Kylo’s house seats ten people comfortably, but tonight his only guest is Hux, who’s come over to watch video director show reels. A song Kylo contributed to a movie soundtrack has been selected as a single, and they have a limited window to get a video out before the release. The movie’s director—a Dagobah System fan—had come to Kylo initially to see if there was any chance of a reunion for one track. Kylo had said he absolutely wasn’t interested. Besides, Snoke wouldn’t allow it even if he wanted to, even if the Dagobah guys would work with him again. The director had agreed on a solo effort, written in the Dagobah style. The song is a haunting acoustic ballad played on Anakin’s guitar, and though he hasn’t said it out loud, Kylo believes it’s the best work he’s ever done on his own.

Hux starts the projector and hands Kylo the first director’s treatment for the song. It starts with Kylo in his Knights mask and involves a dramatic unmasking. He hands it back to Hux.

“I don’t need to see any more.”

“Okay, the treatment could use some work but this director is top tier. He’s basically the next Hype Williams, but for rock videos. At least watch his reel.

“Have you listened to the song, Hux?”

“Once, in the car. On the way here.”

“What?”

“You were in studio on it for a day. I figured it was a rerecording of a throwaway from Starkiller.”

“Then what the fuck are you even doing with an opinion here?”

“Fine, we’ll move on to the next one,” he says, stalking over to change the DVD. He stops to avail himself of some Scotch from the bar. “Saw the photos of your date the other night, by the way. Your fans have really outdone themselves. I think I saw one with devil horns and a mustache drawn on the poor girl’s face. Though they’re also desperate to find out where she got that dress.”

“I haven’t looked, but Lorna filled me in.”

“Her background check came back clean, too. Strange to find a foster child who doesn’t even have a shoplifting arrest.”

“Background check? Seriously, Hux?”

Hux comes back to his chair and flops into it, splashing Scotch onto the leather. “Of course I did a bloody background check. I’d run one on any girl you dated. I did it on those girls from the agency before I even brought their photos to you. Good job, by the way. She’s a much more realistic match for you. Anyway, a couple more dates should do it, at least in terms of publicity. Try to go out on a Monday, next time, so the rags have time to get them in on Wednesday.”

“There’s not going to be a next time.”
“Oh right, girls don’t usually fall all over themselves for guys who pass out, leaving them stranded at a strange hotel and make them a target of online bullies. Have you tried sending her flowers?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t think she’s the type to appreciate flowers.”

“Oh?”

Kylo goes to the fridge for an apple juice. “She grew up really poor or whatever, in the desert. She’d probably think they’re a waste.”

“That’s all the _more_ reason to send them. I’d be willing to bet that the only flowers she’s ever gotten from a guy was a wilted prom corsage.”

“No offense, Hux. Actually, yes, all the offense, you’re the last person I’d go to for advice about women. When’s the last time you had a second date?”

Hux leans back and stares at the blank projection screen. “I don’t do second dates. It’s a conscious decision, Kylo, to avoid distraction. Send her the damned flowers.”

“No. You and Snoke are just going to have to figure something else out.”

“You know as well as I do that Snoke’s not going to just ‘figure something else out’, especially if he wants you to get the girl to sign with First Order. If he wants _you_ to do it, he’s got his reasons.”

“Yes, to tug at the strings. Whatever. I’ll get Lorna to send her flowers. Let’s watch the next reel.”

The phone rings in another room, and a few seconds later, Lindsey comes in.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, Mr. Ren, but—“

“You’re still here?” Kylo says.

“Oh, um, you said to stay until Mr. Hux leaves,” she says. She holds the phone out. “It’s for you.”

“Did you ask who it is?”

“She said her name is Rey Kenobi and Lorna had me put her on the okay list the other day.”

Kylo looks at Hux, who raises an eyebrow and his glass. “Well done, you.”

Taking the phone from Lindsey, Kylo crosses the hallway into the studio and shuts the door.

“This is Kylo.”

“Kylo, hi.”

“Hi.”

“Okay so this is so stupid, I know, but technically I did just tell you maybe and not no, even though it was the kind of maybe that really was basically a no.”

Kylo fiddles with the soundboard controls as she talks. “And…”
She takes a deep breath. “I guess I’d be fine if we went out again, is what I’m trying to say.”

“What made you change your mind this time?”

“I believe in second chances. I’ve had a few in my life.”

“Wouldn’t this be like, a fourth chance?”

“No, the other times we met don’t count. They weren’t actual dates.”

“Is that how it works?”

“I don’t make the rules.”

“Okay, then. Tomorrow?”

“No, I’m leaving town tomorrow. Sometime after I get back. And I get to choose what we do. I’ll call you.”

“Sure. What are you doing right now?”

“I’m packing, of course. Has anyone ever told you you’re impatient as hell?”

“Every day.” He sits down on a stool and starts spinning. “So if you’re going home to get all your stuff, why are you packing the stuff you already brought out here?”

“I’m not taking all of it, but I bought some gifts for a few people and I do need my toothbrush and my hairbrush, among other things.”

“Yeah I guess. But that means it shouldn’t take you long to pack. What time’s your flight?”

“Eight twenty in the morning. And it’s after nine o’clock right now. I will call you after I get back.”

“When is that?”

“I don’t know. I don’t have a lot of stuff, or a lot of people to say goodbye to. But I’m driving back out here so I may make some detours. I absolutely have to be back by Tuesday, though, because I have a big meeting with—with your mother actually.”

Kylo stands up. “Oh. Cool. I guess.”

“Should I tell her hello?”

“Fuck no.”

“Alright, then. I have to go. Talk to you soon.”

“Later.”

He hangs up the phone and leans his head against the studio door until Hux knocks.

“What are you doing, planning your honeymoon?”

Kylo opens the door to find Hux and Lindsey standing in the hall. He passes the phone to Lindsey on his way back to the screening room. “She says she’s fine with another date, but it’s not until after she gets back from New Mexico, and she’s choosing what we do.”
“That sounds almost promising. Hopefully you won’t muck it up permanently. Try to stay away from anything stronger than grape juice?”

“Fuck off.” Kylo presses play on the DVD player but can’t focus on the screen. He should be relieved that Rey has decided to give him a second chance, but instead there’s dread crawling up and down his spine and settling in his belly, squirming around in his head. After a few minutes of staring blankly at the screen, he hauls himself out of his chair.

“I’m going to bed. I’ll have Lorna look at these tomorrow, and narrow it down to two. You can see yourself out.”

Hux says something that Kylo doesn’t catch as he slams the door. On the second floor, Lindsey is peering into the refrigerator and making a grocery list.

“Leave,” he says, bounding up the second flight of stairs to his room. “You can do that tomorrow.”

He grabs his cigarettes off the dresser on his way out to his balcony, where he flops onto a lounge chair. With an ashtray resting on his chest, he chain smokes three cigarettes. With each one he grows more calm, though that may have more to do with the salt air and the crash of the surf on the beach below. The dread is still there, alongside the general fear that underscores almost every moment of every day, but it’s muted enough that he can almost see his situation clearly and find the best way out, but it’s like trying to pinpoint a single star through the haze covering the Los Angeles sky.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is from "Starman" by David Bowie
During her week in LA, Rey hadn’t noticed the lack of stars in the night sky. Too much going on, too much to hold her attention on the ground. Now, she sits on the stoop of her trailer, looking out at a dusty silver and purple swath of the Milky Way with a lump rising in her throat. This is the sky she’s known for most of her life. It’s the sky that’s witnessed her joys and sorrows, her struggles and triumphs. In her room at Aunt Ginny’s house, there’d been a big window beside her bed with a clear view of the sky. On the worst of those first nights without her mother, she’d taken to counting the stars to get to sleep. She didn’t always have a window near her bed in her foster homes, but when she did, the stars had been a comfort.

She’s going to miss this, dreadfully.

She’s not so sure how much she’ll miss the trailer. Packing up had been easier than she imagined. Clothes, records, books, memory box and recording equipment all fit in the back of her Eagle. Her cottage came equipped with everything else she needed. What she’s leaving behind is boxed up and ready for Ahsoka to donate to the reservation.

Rey walks through one more time. It doesn’t take long. The scuffed linoleum and the worn carpet seem dingier than she remembered, even though she’d never held any romantic notions about this place.

Locking the door behind her, she puts the last box in the car and allows herself one long look before getting in. She pulls out of the driveway, then heads toward the highway. Ahsoka had offered to let Rey stay the night at her house, since she finished packing so late, but Rey wants to rip the Band Aid off and get on the road. She likes driving at night, and figures that it’s best she doesn’t really see the only home she’s ever known receding into the background.

The drive is around thirteen hours--an almost straight shot once she reaches the Interstate--and she’s sure she can do in one long stretch, though she’s never done anything close to that before.

“One-mile marker at a time,” she says as she takes a swig of Mountain Dew.

Despite nearly fifteen years here, she’d had few goodbyes to take care of. Ahsoka didn’t feel like a goodbye, because she has the freedom to come visit Rey anytime she wants, but Soshanna was hard. Their relationship has always felt more sisterly than employer/employee. They don’t share a lot of common interests but they have massive respect for each other. As she’d hugged her tight, Rey had promised herself that she wouldn’t lose touch with this wonderful woman whom she owed so much.

Dolores and Paulo had been the hardest. They were so young, and readily believed her when she said she’d see them again soon. Honestly, she believed it, at least a bit, if “soon” meant maybe as soon as her album was recorded but possibly not until well after if she goes on tour. And she gave them that false hope even though she knows exactly what it’s like to keep hoping for someone to come back. Because she’d rather have lived with that hope as a child, even to have it dashed, than to live without it.

She wipes away a couple of tears and rolls down her window. The air helps, even if it’s chilled.
She runs her fingers along the tapes in the case on the driver’s seat and pulls one out at random. It’s Joni Mitchell’s *Ladies of the Canyon*, dubbed from another tape, given to her by one of the Sacred Song regulars years ago. She puts it in and lets the music guide her to the tears she knows she needs to shed.

She makes it eight hours before pulling over at a tiny motor lodge outside Quartzsite, Arizona, a little after sunrise. It’s a midcentury era single-story strip of rooms, blue paint chipping, a dry kidney shaped pool in back. It’s clean, though, and relatively quiet despite the proximity of the Interstate. As tired as she was when she pulled up to the hotel, she’s wired when she gets into her room. She lays down on top of the nubby bedspread, stretches her limbs and begins the breathing exercises that Ahsoka taught her.

Her dreams are jumbled, jumping from place to place and person to person before she can get a grasp on a narrative, feeling all the while as if she’s being chased, until she finds herself in a round stone room with no doors. Looking up, a shaft of light cuts down from a hole in a peaked wooden roof. She’s in the turret of a castle. Someone breathes beside her and though she can’t quite see his face she recognizes him, in the way you recognize anyone in a dream no matter what your subconscious has decided they will look like. Kylo takes her by the shoulders and guides her to the moss covered wall. He presses her against it, one hand on her neck and the other on her waist.

“Don’t be afraid,” he whispers, and leans in.

Rey jerks awake and sits up, hot and disoriented. She looks around. Hotel, yes. In Arizona. Late afternoon. Time to hit the road again.

She’s not even going to consider what that dream meant or why she woke up with hard nipples and damp underwear. She splashes water on her face, pulls her hair into a ponytail, and goes.

The sun is setting, she’s heading straight west, and she can’t find her sunglasses, so she buys a pair of cheap ones when she stops for gas. The rest of the ride is smooth. It’s funny how she told Kylo that she might make some detours. She’d fully expected to make an experience of it, but once she’d packed up, all she wanted to do was get to her new home and get started on the rest of her life.

It’s relatively early when she arrives at her cottage, but she goes straight to bed and waits until the next morning to unpack the car. She wakes up to a knock at the door. It’s Mun, holding a giant basket wrapped in layers of purple cellophane. He kisses her cheek as he passes it to her.

“A little housewarming gift, I’m assuming? Don’t worry, I didn’t read the card. Come over later for lunch and catch up.”

Rey sets the basket on the counter and opens the card, expecting it to be from the record label or Maz.

*It’s Tuesday so I’m going out on a limb and assuming you’re home. Someone told me I should give you flowers but I thought you might appreciate this more. Sorry I passed out on our date. Looking forward to hearing from you.*

--*Kylo Ren*

“Oh.” She unwraps the cellophane to reveal a rainbow of tropical fruit. A pineapple, mangoes, papaya, kiwi, and a few more mundane things like bananas and oranges. “Holy shit.”

Her mouth waters at the smell. It’s especially tantalizing since she ate nothing but fast food the day before. The problem is, she’s not entirely sure how to prepare anything but the bananas and
oranges. She takes a banana and sets about unpacking her car.

The phone rings as she’s bringing the last box into the living room.

“Hey, Rey, it’s Finn!”

“Oh, hey!”

“Listen, we’re going to have to postpone dinner tonight. There’s an artist we’re looking to sign and she wants to meet with Leia, and it’s crucial we get it done ASAP.”

“Oh okay.”

“I’m so sorry, Rey. This doesn’t mean Leia isn’t dying to meet you.”

“No, I know. It’s fine, I can work on unpacking.”

“Sweet. I’ll call you with the new plans.”

“Sure. Good luck!”

“Thanks.”

She is a little disappointed. Unpacking won’t take long, and then she’s got a long evening to fill. Writing is always an option. She hasn’t even taken her guitar out of the case this week.

Or…

She picks up the phone again and hits redial. It rings long enough that she’s sure she’ll have to leave a message, but the phone is picked up, then fumbled. There’s a muffled “Shit!” and he’s on the line.

“What?”

“Did I wake you?”

“Rey? Oh, um, yeah but that’s fine. My alarm was about to go off anyway. What’s up?”

“My evening just opened up so if you’re free---“

“Yes,” he mumbles, and the sound of a cigarette lighter comes over the line. “I’m free. What do you want to do?”

“Meet me at my house at seven. Dress casual.”

He’s only five minutes late this time. Casual to him means dark jeans, a black t shirt (both several sizes too big) and a chain wallet. His hair is wavy and all over the place, like he washed it and then drove here with his windows down. He stands in her little back yard and squints at her while she stands in the doorway.

“Well, what do you have planned?”

“It’s really glamorous. Renting a movie and ordering pizza.”

Rey had consulted with Robyn earlier, and when she’d suggested renting a movie Rey had scoffed. “A night in? I thought the whole point of this is to be seen?”
“Yes, but you can’t be too obvious about it, and this presents you both as down to earth, which fans are really into these days. Don’t worry about the paps. I’ll make sure they know where to find you.”

“Wait, you’re going to call them and purposefully let them know where we’ll be?”

“People do it all the time.”

“There’s so much I need to learn.”

“You’re right. So. Dress should be casual but still give a damn about how you look. Light makeup. Wear your hair down; it looks great that way in photos. Go about a half hour before sunset so the light will be good. Follow his cue as to whether you engage with the photographers or not. But don’t fight them or anything, even if he does.”

“I’m not really familiar with the area yet so where should we go?”

“Is he picking you up?”

“Yes.”

“Going back to your place?”

“I think that’s best, right?”

“Definitely. There’s a Blockbuster right off Robertson. It’s the easiest to get to from your house and it won’t seem odd if you’re papped there. He’ll know where it is.”

True to Robyn’s word, Kylo suggests that exact Blockbuster, saying there’s one fairly close. He’s quiet on the ride there, not saying anything until they get out of the car and a photographer literally jumps from behind the building at them.

“What the fuck?” he says, holding his arm out in front of Rey as another photographer gets out of a parked SUV. Both follow them into the store. Kylo makes eye contact with a manager immediately and the photographers are told to leave. Rey can see them lurking at the front windows, though. She follows Kylo to the New Release wall in the back.

“Sorry about that,” Kylo says. “We should have gone to a different one. Robertson is always crawling with paps. He starts browsing the titles. “We should choose something quick. There’ll be more of them out there if we take too long.”

“Let’s not let them ruin our fun,” Rey says, and she means it. “Two or ten it doesn’t really matter, does it?”

He scratches his head and shrugs. “I guess not. So, what did you have in mind? Something you’ve seen before that you want to show me or something neither of us has seen?”

“My experience is mostly limited to dollar movies and movies of the week. But I think we should get something neither of us has seen or that both of us have seen. Too much pressure if you’re watching something someone really likes.”

A banging sound nearby startles them. The building is all glass on two sides and a photographer has wedged himself between the bushes and the window nearest Kylo and Rey in order to get a shot, and is scuffling with another photographer who had the same idea.
They both laugh and turn back to the wall of videos.

“We should look at the most awful movies they have. So the headline is ‘Kylo Ren and date have the worst taste in movies ever.’”

“Oh, look,” Kylo says. “Dead Man on Campus. I’ve heard this is a masterpiece.” He strikes a pose, scratching his chin while looking at the box, making sure the title is angled so it will show up in a photo.

“Okay, but what about Bride of Chucky?” Rey holds up the box with an open mouthed grin, eyebrows raised.

“Actually…” Kylo says, taking the box from her.

“Nope. I watched the first one of those at like, the one sleepover I was ever invited to. I don’t know what that mom was thinking, letting a bunch of fifth grader watch it, but I didn’t sleep for a week. My foster mom was really religious and she told everyone that the girl’s family were devil worshipers.”

“I was in high school. I think we snuck in, or someone’s dad owned the theatre or something.” He moves down the wall, checking out titles as he walks.

Rey’s never thought much about their age difference, since he comes off as so much younger than he is. Six years doesn’t seem too significant now, but he’d graduated high school when she was finishing the sixth grade, and not long after she’d bought his first record. So she’s known of his existence for a good seven years and he’s known of hers for less than one. She shakes her head and whispers, “Wow.”

“What?” Kylo says, looking at the box for Mulan.

“Nothing, just having a ‘what is my life?’ moment.”

“Well, let’s get out of here before it becomes a full existential crisis.” He walks down the wall and picks up another box. “Out of Sight?”

“Sure. It’s always a good night for Clooney and Lopez.”

Kylo hands over his card when they get to the counter. “Snacks?” he asks Rey.

“Nah, for some reason, I have enough fruit at my house to feed an army.”

“Good point. This is all full of milk and gelatin anyway.”

The clerk frowns and looks at Kylo. “It looks like you’ve got an overdue DVD. We can’t rent to you again until it’s returned.”

“Shit, I didn’t take it out of the player so Lindsey didn’t know to bring it back. You know I’m good for it, obviously. You can make an exception.”

“Yes, Mr. Ren but I don’t have the authorization.”

“Find someone who does.”

The clerk looks around. “Um, okay just a second—“

“Hey!” Rey breaks in, smiling. “You know what? I live here now so why don’t I get a card and
“we’ll put it on there.”

“You don’t have a Blockbuster card?” Kylo says.

“My town has four thousand people. We rent our movies from the grocery store.”

The clerk smiles at her and hands over the form to fill out and a card to sign.

“Let me just get this card laminated and you’ll be on your way,” he says.

Kylo insists on paying even though she’s supposed to be taking him out, and she lets him, as a concession to his wounded pride.

There’s a crowd of photographers outside as they leave. Kylo is stony faced as they go to his car. Remembering Robyn’s advice, Rey follows suit. It’ll give his fans more fuel to claim she makes him miserable, but then again it would probably look weird if she looked like she was enjoying the attention.

It would have been nice to know more of the rules before she was thrown into this game.

One of the paparazzi calls her by name and she looks over right as he takes her photo. That’s going to be a lovely shot.

“Ignore them,” Kylo says. He opens the car door for her and trots around to his side. He’s pulling out of the parking spot, none too concerned about the photographers, before she’s got her seatbelt fastened. He turns up the radio, some random Blink song on KROQ, and lights a cigarette. A clove this time.

“You know I don’t really care about what any of those girls have to say about me.”

“Whatever. Those girls know the moles on my face better than my dermatologist and think that means they own me. You shouldn’t care what they think.” He glances at her, then back at the road. “I’m…never mind.”

By the time they get back to her house, he’s shaken whatever had him down. The first thing he does after she gives him the short tour is recommend a pizza place.

“You’re out of their delivery area but they’ll do it for me,” he says as he dials.

“We can order from a local place. I don’t mind.”

“It’s no big deal, Rey. They know what I like and they like the tips. You really need to learn to accept the perks.”

Rey relents, and while they’re waiting on the pizza, Kylo gives her a quick lesson in how to cut a mango.

“Have you ever had one?” he asks.

Rey’s cheeks burn as she admits she hasn’t. He offers her a cube of the yellow fruit and she takes it. It’s sweet, like a peach, but juicier and pulpier, with, oddly, a hint of pine.

“That’s amazing. Do I cut the papaya the same way?”

“It’s easier since it’s got a bunch of little seeds. You do it more like a cantaloupe.”
“Hmm,” she says as she eats another piece. She doesn’t tell him she’s never cut up a cantaloupe. Surely Mun or Jashco can help.

“What?” he says.

“I know you eat a lot of fruits and vegetables; I’m just surprised you know how to do this yourself.”

“I’m not completely helpless,” he says. “Oh, hold on.” He rummages in the cabinet and finds a shaker of cayenne. “You’re from the Southwest so you’ll like this.” He sprinkles the cayenne on another piece of mango before giving it to her.

She takes a bite. “Holy shit that’s perfect.”

“Try it with lime juice next time.” He smiles and ducks away to start fiddling with the VCR. It came with the cottage, and Rey’s not even sure it actually works.

“You should get a DVD player.”

“Sure, when I have a spare three hundred dollars laying around.”

“Yeah you should probably wait. I only got one because studios kept sending me DVDs.” He stands up and presses play on the remote. “Looks like we’re good to go.”

“Do you want some wine?” she says, going to the fridge. “People keep sending me wine even though they all know how old I am.”

“Welcome to Hollywood, and no thanks.”

“Yeah, probably not a good idea,” she says, grabbing two bottles of water and closing the door.

The pizza arrives and Kylo tries to get her to take a bite of his vegan pie. “The cheese is better melted, I promise.”

“Nope. Gonna stick with all this cow and pork.” She puts the pizza on the coffee table, then it’s a matter of figuring out their seating arrangement and how many lights to leave on. The light over the stove is adequate, and she directs him to the chair while she sits on the sofa, in the corner closest to the chair.

They get fifteen minutes into the movie when it’s apparent to Rey that their choice may have been a mistake. Jennifer Lopez and George Clooney, in all their perfect glory, playing the cop and a robber, are locked in the trunk of the car, curled around each other, and flirting. But it’s more than that. They’ve just met and they’re only talking about movies but it’s more like pillow talk, the way they’re spooning, with him talking low in her ear. Rey feels it deep in her belly when “Jack’s” hand lingers on “Karen’s” thigh and Rey scoops all of her hair to her right side, creating a curtain between herself and Kylo. He keeps shifting in his chair and clearing his throat.

Thankfully, after that scene is over, the movie reverts back to the promised crime caper, but just as Rey has started to relax again, “Karen” and “Jack” meet up in a high rise hotel bar in Detroit with snow falling outside, sharing the same glass of bourbon, their bantering interspersed with a more physical kind of foreplay in a hotel room. The camera lingers on hands touching, resting on bare knees, brushing a lock of hair away. Rey’s mouth goes dry and she’s hyper aware of every inch of her own body and its proximity to Kylo.
He inhales sharply when the two finally fall into bed and kiss, and Rey folds in on herself, arms wrapped around her knees and peeking at the television through her hair.

After the love scene, the movie resolves itself in a haze of violence but Rey barely processes it. Neither of them makes a comment, even though they’d been cracking jokes before.

The moment the credits start, Kylo jumps up. “I should go. I have an early call tomorrow.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” Rey says. She stands and wipes her palms on her jeans. “Thanks for coming over.” She follows him out the back door. She’s about to step down onto the patio when he turns around.

“Oh, hey!” he says. Rey stumbles and he catches her. They’re face to face with her hands on his shoulders.

“What?” she asks.

“I forgot.” He tosses his hair out of his eyes and looks at her mouth.

It’s honestly ridiculous, how this could happen, with just the right amount of breeze making her wind chime sing and toss the scent of jasmine into the air. She licks her lips.

“Okay.”

“I should be going,” he says. He doesn’t move.

The next move is up to Rey. She glances once more at his mouth and takes a step back. “Good night.”

As soon as she steps away, whatever happened is gone. He runs a hand through his hair.

“Can we do this again?”

“Sure,” she says. “I think I’m pretty busy for a while but yeah.”

“Really? You’re not going to say no and call me later to say yes?”

“No, this time I’ll call you later to say no.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

She watches him leave, then turns back inside, leaving the door open for the breeze as she puts away the food, scrubs the counters and cleans all the dishes. She drinks an entire bottle of water, then gets in the shower, turning the water as cold as she can stand it. She looks up at the shower head. Soshanna had once called removable shower heads “A single gal’s best friend.” Rey is inclined to agree as she grabs it and jerks it out of the hook.

“It’s just the movie,” she says, switching to the pulse setting. She braces herself against the shower wall and aims the stream at her clit. It takes about thirty seconds for her to orgasm, and she steadfastly ignores that the images in her head are closer to her dream yesterday than anything that happened in the movie she’d just watched. With shaky hands, she returns the shower head to its normal setting and puts it back on the hook, then finishes washing up.

She braids her wet hair rather than waiting for it to dry, and puts on the pajamas Robyn’s friend had sent over as a thank you for the increase in business at her shop after Rey had been spotted in one of her dresses.
After reading the same paragraphs over and over for ten minutes, she trades the book she took to bed for a big glass of wine in front of the television, watching reruns of “Good Times.”

“What the fuck is my life?” she says, to her empty house, to the television, to the yellow-grey sky, to herself.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Pour Some Sugar On Me" by Def Leppard
At First Order, it hadn't been common practice for Finn to order a car for dinners with higher ups, but tonight there’s some lingering guilt over cancelling on Rey the night before.

It will also ensure he has a chance to talk to her privately before dinner, no distractions.

“Got something to tell me?” he says when she gets in the car. He probably should have complimented her appearance first. She’s wearing the same dress she wore to dinner with Kylo Ren, but with a navy mohair sweater on top and blue Mary Janes.

“Don’t worry,” she says as she settles in. I’m not going on a spending spree. Robyn’s friend Ginny sent me a bunch of clothes.”

“I’m not talking about the clothes, Rey. Though you look nice.”

“What then,” she says, eyes wide.

“Why did I have to hear about your date last night from Robyn?”

“She’s your assistant. Why does it matter if I tell you or her. Besides, it was last minute. I’m sorry. Anyway, you needed to be on your game last night and it wouldn’t have helped you to be worried about me.”

“That’s some smart spin, Rey, but it doesn’t explain why you couldn’t call Maz. Robyn isn’t her assistant. Or yours.”

“Honestly? I forgot. I haven’t really had to check in with anyone about where I’m going and who with since I turned eighteen.”

Of course. Artists did usually balk at this kind of thing, especially younger people who had only recently started to experience the freedom of adulthood, and Rey is more independent than most. The last thing he wants is to be seen as a parental figure.

“I get it. It’ll take some adjustment. But please try to remember. You’re right. You don’t have to call me, just give a heads up to Maz.”

“Do I have to do that every time?”

“I thought there were only going to be two or three dates.”

“I mean, yeah. With him. But what if Lance Bass asks me out tomorrow?”

“Oh I don’t think that’s happening,” Finn says.

“I know he’s got a girlfriend. I was joking”

“Yes,” Finn says. “Anyway, the pictures weren’t bad. Most of them. You both looked like you’d just been told Pantene was going out of business when you were coming out of the store.”

“What?”
“Pantene. The conditioner…you both have good—okay never mind. Have you seen the photos?”

“Yeah, I caved and looked. Went over to the main house and got on Mun’s laptop. At first I just looked at Getty Images because it’d only be the pictures, no commentary, but then I went to LiveDaily.”

“And?”

Rey starts fiddling with the latch on her handbag. “You’ve looked already, right?”

“Yes but I want your impressions.” She’s bound to have been hurt by some of the comments, but talking about it will get her thinking about crafting an image as a positive thing. As something that can protect her. While she did jump feet first into dating someone to get her name out, her music is more personal to her, and like many songwriters, she will reject any hint of artifice in regards to selling it.

“Well,” she says, setting her bag aside and folding her hands in her lap. “They know my name for sure, and that I’ve been signed to Resistance. They know the clothes I was wearing are several years old but not in a cool vintage kind of way. Um, they call Leia “Her Highness” for some reason. One of them said something like ‘I wonder what Her Highness thinks about this?’ Oh and I’ve got split ends and really need to get this ‘mop’ trimmed, which I agree with.”

“We should probably get that taken care of before your website shoot.”

“Sure, okay.” She’s silent for several seconds and then turns to him. “Like, the worst one for me wasn’t even someone who was insulting me though. It was this girl who was so upset. She was talking about how she’d been crying and not eating right since the first pictures came out and how she didn’t want to hate me but she was so sad. And you know there used to be girls like that occasionally on the groupie board but not this bad. It’s like she really thought she was going to marry him, and she was sixteen.”

“Hold up Rey. The groupie boards?”

“Yeah I used to get info on Groupie Central so I could go backstage and get my demos to people.”

“Did you post things on there, like, stories about meeting bands?”

“Only once, just about a guy being a creep. And no I don’t use my real name as a screen name, or anything close to it.”

Finn exhales and leans back. Rey being a groupie, or appearing to be one, wouldn’t have been disastrous on its own, but it wouldn’t have looked good at all with her going out on dates with a musician.

“Well, what was the story you posted?”

“Some guy wanted to eat gummy worms out of my vagina. Had a bag all ready to go. Seemed to think it was a real selling point that it hadn’t been opened yet. It kind of think that’s the bare minimum you’d expect if you were into that kind of thing”

“What? Who?”

“You know Corey from Forest Moon?”

“Oh yeah that doesn’t surprise me. That dude once ate a goldfish at a party because someone dared
Rey shudders and shakes her head. “Ew. Enough about me, though. Did you sign that person last night? Who was it?”

Finn smiles. “We did. And it was Oola. Her contract with First Order was up with her last album. Usually we try to get people to sign a new contract before the old one is fulfilled, but she was dragging her feet on re-uptping until she found out how the Aayla thing turned out.”

“Oh that’s awesome! And I really need to thank her personally for getting my demo to you. Should I send her flowers? That seems to be a thing.”

“Sure,” Finn says. “Or you could thank her when you see her.”

“So…” Rey continues, poking him in the arm.

“So…”

“What about the rest of the evening? Poe was there too, right? Did you all celebrate after?”

“We had champagne at the restaurant where we met. The four of us.” He’s being deliberately obtuse but it’s not a discussion he’s willing to have right now.

“Nothing after?” she says, all wide eyed innocence.

“It’s not going to happen, Rey. He’s my boss.”

“So?”

“So? It means that if we dated and it didn’t work out one of us would have to quit after and that would be me. And even if it did work out, every one of my colleagues will think he’s favoring me even when he’s not. I’m already the new guy with a reputation to uphold. I don’t need that noise.

Rey leans back, arms crossed and silent. Finn has started to zone out, grateful that she’s dropped it, when she pokes him again.

“But what if he wasn’t your boss?”

Finn keeps looking out the window. “That’s pointless speculation, Rey. He is, and I took too big a risk to get this job to even think about jeopardizing it.”

“I’m not saying like, in realistic terms. I only want to know, if Poe wasn’t your boss would there be any other obstacles?”

“Are you planning on getting one of us fired?”

“Finn.”

He turns to face her again. “No, okay! Except that I don’t even know if he likes me.”

Rey waves her hand and sits back. “Of course he does.”

Even though he shouldn’t take stock in the musings of a nineteen-year-old girl with zero real relationship experience, his heart does leap a little at that.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, rather than ask her how she’s so sure.
“For now it doesn’t.”

They pull up to the restaurant and Finn leaps out of the car before he driver can get to his door. They’re back at Taylor’s, where Poe had taken them the night Rey signed her deal memo, because Leia loves the prime rib. Rey is practically vibrating with energy as they walk in.

Poe and Leia are already seated at one of the round corner booths, Poe looking perfectly at ease here, like he’d stepped out of a Rat Pack movie. When they get to the table, Rey slips past Finn to shake Leia’s hand, assuring that she’ll get to sit next to her, leaving Finn to sit next to Poe.

“It’s an honor to finally meet you,” Rey gushes to Leia. “On the drive in from New Mexico ‘Mists of Alderaan’ popped up on one of my mix tapes and it seriously made me almost turn around and drive back. The longing in it is palpable.”

Leia smiles at Rey. “Well, I’m certainly glad you didn’t turn around. And I’m thrilled you decided to sign with us.” Leia gives Rey a hug and Finn looks at Poe with alarm. Poe shrugs and indicates they’re only on their first drink.

Maz arrives and slides in next to Finn, forcing him to sit close enough to Poe that Finn can distinguish all the notes in his cologne. Thankfully, he’s distracted from it in the flurry of order taking and drink delivery.

“So,” Leia begins when the server leaves. “This is primarily a business dinner so let’s talk about Rey’s future.”

Finn opens his leather bound notebook and flips a few pages.

“We’re looking at a target of the end of the year album release with first single push in the fall. We’d shoot for earlier but since she’s completely unknown outside of New Mexico we’d like to build some buzz. Ideally we’d like to get Rey an opening spot on a tour this summer but we can supplement with showcases and festivals if that can’t be secured. Photo shoot for her website is on Friday. We start meeting with songwriters and producers next week and we’re already looking at backing band slash session musicians. Rey has twelve completed songs that we feel are strong and we’d like to go into the studio with at least twenty if we’re aiming for a twelve song LP.”

“Sounds good,” Poe says. “Maz? What have you got cooking?”

“I’ve been speaking to the label publicist and Rey has already managed to garner a bit of buzz in a short amount of time she’s been here, but since we want her to be taken seriously, we’d like to shift focus as much as possible away from her social life.”

Everyone at the table looks at Leia while trying their hardest to look like they aren’t looking at Leia. Leia is focused on Maz.

“There’s been some interest in Rey’s style,” Maz continues. “So I’m looking into a feature in the Alloy catalog or possibly something with Delia’s.”

“Like, modelling?” Rey asks.

“It’s closer to editorial, though it’d be in a catalog. You wear the clothes, the spread is more of a story than their usual photos, and they run a brief article about you. Both of those catalogs have a larger circulation than Seventeen and Elle combined.”

“What demographic are we targeting, then?” Leia asks.
“Older teens and girls in their twenties,” Poe replies. “We want Rey’s album to be the one that gets them through their freshman year, but we don’t want it to be inaccessible to their little sisters.”

Finn looks at Rey. She’s gone pale and keeps looking toward the door.

“Rey, what do you think?” he asks.

She looks at him blankly, then shakes her head, leaning forward to join the conversation again.

“Does this mean I can’t choose what I wear? How does it affect my sound?”

Leia turns to Rey, placing her hand on her arm. “I’m sorry, Rey. You’re part of this conversation, too, and you always will be.”

“You choose what you wear,” Finn says. “And what we’re talking about isn’t about changing your sound to fit a demographic. It’s about matching you to a demographic we think will connect with your music best, and focusing on them.”

“Rey,” Poe says. “We think you’ve got the potential for longevity, so we want to find an audience that’s going to grow with you.”

“I understand,” Rey nods. She looks at Maz. “Is this what you were talking about before? About drawing the line?”

“Indeed it was.”

“Okay, so what does all of this mean, are we talking about image?”

“Well,” Maz says. “As I told you before, we were never going for wholesome, but you’re not going to be posing on your album cover with a bottle of Jack, either.”

As the women continue their conversation, Poe turns to Finn. “You know, everyone always attributed your success to being able to find artists, but I think it’s more about how good you are at keeping them.”

“How so?”

“Twice now, I’ve seen you pick up that Rey was panicking, and you knew exactly what to say to help her. And last night, the way you were able to ease all of Oola’s fears without having to sugarcoat anything.”

“Well, I’ve known Oola a long time.”

“Take the compliment, Finn. You have a gift with people.”

It was a completely professional compliment. One Poe would give to any employee. Maybe not with such a sparkle in his eye, but that’s probably just the martini. Their salads come and Finn gladly focuses on the food.

Leia leans in close to Rey to talk about something Finn can’t quite make out. Maz says she needs to make a phone call and excuses herself, giving Finn a pointed look. He excuses himself to the restroom and they meet up by the front bar.

“I saw those photos this morning,” Maz says to Finn. “I don’t like waking up to surprises.”

“I tried telling her, but she’s going to do what she wants, Maz, and I think the more we try to push
her the more she’s going to assert her independence. Maybe we should trust her. All they did was rent a movie.”

“Hmm,” Maz says, taking off her glasses and polishing them on her pashmina. “They like each other, you know.”

“What? Don’t tell me you got that from a few pap photos.”

“I’ve been doing this for a long time. She may be telling herself she’s doing this for publicity or to spite his fans or whatever her excuse will be for the next date, but I’m worried. It’s true we don’t need to clip her wings but we also need to keep her focused. She’s got all the time in the world for an epic love affair.”

“Well, we’ve got plenty to legitimately keep her busy. And don’t worry. She can barely tolerate the guy.”

Maz shakes her head. “If I were a betting woman this is a wager I’d take. But, I do actually need to make a phone call so excuse me.” She pulls out her phone and turns away, conversation over.

Back at the table, Rey and Leia have finished their tete-a-tete and Leia is debating with Poe about whether Jimi Hendrix or Prince is the better guitar player.

“My point is that Prince was clearly influenced by Jimi but has never really surpassed him,” Leia says. “It’s like a master painter and an apprentice. Who never met.”

“Sometimes apprentices become better than their masters, though. Jimi’s career was cut short. Prince has been playing for longer than Jimi was even alive.”

“Then compare them at the age of twenty-six. Is anything on Purple Rain as good as Electric Ladyland?”

“Yes!” Poe says.

Leia waves her hand. “You know, Prince is a prodigy anyway, it’s not even a fair comparison.”

“Slash.” Rey breaks in. Leia, Finn, and Poe all look at her as though she’s just launched a snot rocket onto the table. “This is a generational debate, isn’t it? So Slash is the best.” She smiles and the server comes with dessert.

In the car on the way home, Rey is quiet, idly scratching her initials on the Styrofoam dessert box. She hadn’t been able to decide between two of the desserts so she’d ordered a second one to go.

“Everything okay?” Finn asks.

“Yeah, I’m not really used to being around people all day long. Even if it was busy at the pawn shop I’d be by myself at night. Every once in a while I’d go from work to the Sacred Song but only if I knew it’d be slow.”

“It’s okay to be homesick, Rey, even if home wasn’t that great.”

She looks down and laughs, a quick, sad little exhalation. “Thank you.”

“What did you and Leia talk about?”

“Her son. She wanted to know if he’s eating enough. She said he’s picky, and sometimes gets busy and forgets.”
Rey kisses his cheek before exiting the car and disappearing through the door in the hedge. He waits until her porch light comes on before telling the driver to continue.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Mmmbop" by Hanson
Over the next month, work makes it impossible for Rey and Kylo to meet again. Kylo is out of the country for two weeks, doing a series of car commercials in Japan with his band. By the time he comes back, Rey is immersed in getting a band together and rehearsing for an upcoming showcase, as well as networking at every event Maz or Finn can get her into. Kylo and Rey keep playing phone tag and emailing occasionally, but they can’t find a day or night when they’re both free or one of them doesn’t have an early morning.

One night, when she’s home but he’s in New York, calls to get her help choosing the top ten favorite albums in his vinyl collection for a magazine feature.

“Isn’t that kind of personal?” she asks. “How can I help you decide what your favorites are?”

“It’s got nothing to do with my actual favorites. Those change all the time anyway. It’s all about being interesting, so not too mainstream, but also not so obscure that it’s totally pretentious.”

“Okay…but isn’t pretentious kind of your thing?”

“Apparently we’re trying to work on that. Anyway there needs to be the right balance. Obviously I’m expected to choose some stuff from my family but I can’t do all three of them so I’m going with Anakin’s first album. I don’t want anybody reading into anything if I chose Leia or Han’s. With the rest, there should be a few classics that are cool but not controversial, then something surprising, like New Kids on the Block or Tiffany. And do I put the Beatles in at all?”

“Well,” Rey says, catching on. She settles in on her sofa. “On the one hand it’s kind of cliché and pretty much just a given. Everyone loves the Beatles. But if you don’t include them, will it come off as pretentious? Like you left them out just so you’d seem more interesting? And if you do put them in you run into the same problem with which album you choose. I mean, you could just go with the Stones or Elvis.”

“Good idea. Sticky Fingers it is. And I actually did dig Debbie Gibson’s first album.”

“Okay but you’re really going to sound like a pretentious prick if you choose that one and not Electric Youth. It’s like people claiming that Pinkerton is their favorite Weezer album.”

“Oh shit, Weezer. But I don’t have that on vinyl and this is all about vinyl.”

“Didn’t you say you like Disintegration? You can’t go wrong with The Cure.”

“Don’t have it on vinyl either, but I should get it. I’ve got time to hit the record stores before the shoot. They want a photo of me with my collection and the actual records. So that’s four. I need a 1950s pioneer. Little Richard or Chuck Berry?”

“Little Richard.”

“I have a 45 of “Long Tall Sally.” That’s five.”

“You only have one woman.”
“You’re in luck because I just put my hands on the Ronettes’ greatest hits. Though I could get obscure with the girl groups and go for The Cake instead. Have you heard them?”

“No.”

“You’d love them. I’ll bring my copy back out to LA for you to borrow. They’re like this perfect bridge between girl groups and late 60s folk with some psychedelic stuff thrown in. It’s like Simon and Garfunkel meets the Supremes meets the Mamas and the Papas.”

They get derailed after that, as the conversation moves from girl groups to Phil Specter to guitar strings and then somehow to their favorite kind of apple. During a pause, Rey tells him, abruptly, that she hasn’t been able to write since she signed her contract.

“I’ve tried all kinds of things,” she says. “Super chill like sitting on my patio with incense and hot tea or whatever. In my living room, acting like it’s a day job. In my bedroom. And now I’m just afraid that the only reason I could write before was because of my sad circumstances and now that they aren’t sad anymore, I don’t have anything to say.”

“You’ve got plenty to say.”

“About what?”

“About change. And fear. You said they were going to market you to college girls, right? They’ll eat that shit up.”

“You know, I think that may be part of the problem, though. I never used to think about who would be hearing it. I’ve got songs I’ve never been able to play in front of anyone. It was always just about what I needed to say. What do you do when you’re blocked?”

“Shit, I don’t know. Break shit until something comes to me. I don’t know what to tell you.”

There’s an edge to his voice that Rey can’t place, so she tells him she needs to go to sleep. They hang up, and Rey sits on the sofa, staring at the blank TV with the phone in her hand. That was probably a weird thing to dump on him. They’re barely friends.

She doesn’t hear from him for a week and a half, other than an email with the other four records he chose: Run—D.M.C., Jesus Christ Superstar, The Man Who Sold the World and Off the Wall. She only knows when he’s back in LA because a messenger shows up with the record Kylo said he’d let her borrow. He was right. She adores it and tracks down her own copy before sending his back to him.

The next night he calls as she’s getting ready for bed.

“Hey, our shoot got cancelled tonight because someone screwed up the permits. Please tell me you’re free.”

“I am, sort of. I’d planned on staying home. I’m standing here with my pajamas in my hand.”

“You’re such an old lady,” he whines. “The Jayhawks are playing a secret show tonight. Come with me.”

“How is it secret if you know about it?”

“It’s only secret for regular fans who’ll find out about it tomorrow and pretend they would have been able to get in if they’d known.”
“And you can definitely get in?”

“Of course.”

“You’re lucky I haven’t washed my face yet,” she says.

“So, that’s a yes?”

“Yes. Tell me where and I’ll meet you.”

He’s right about getting in. They walk past the line of people waiting outside the bar. Rey tries to keep her eyes straight ahead, not knowing if she’s actually being stared at or if she’s just paranoid. She hears Kylo’s name several times as they pass but no one calls out to him. When they get to the entrance, Kylo nods to the bouncer, who unclips the velvet rope and greets both of them by name.

“How did he know my name?” Rey asks when they’re inside.

“It’s his job to know who people are so he doesn’t piss the wrong person off.”

“Yeah but I’m nobody.”

“Not for long, and you’re with ‘somebody’”

They queue up at the bar, and Rey puts a hand on Kylo’s arm when he tries to push through to the front.

“Could I have gotten in on my own?”

“Probably, even if he didn’t know who you are. Looks go a long way.”

“There were some pretty girls in that line.”

“Not by LA standards.”

“That’s pretty gross.”

“I’m not saying I agree. Just stating a fact.”

“Well it’s a pretty gross fact.”

“There are a lot of gross facts about this town.”

“I wish there wasn’t someone reminding me of that every fucking day.”

They don’t say anything else until the bartender gets their order.


“Do you want to get closer to the front or are you fine here?” he asks, leaning in so she can hear him over the opening band.

“I’m fine here.” They lean on the bar, two rock stars sipping their soft drinks. Rey starts to laugh.

“What?” he says.

“We are so fucking uncool. Like, shouldn’t we be doing lines of cocaine off the bar stool and
“Getting into brawls?”

“You’ve seen me drunk; you definitely don’t want to see me on cocaine.”

“You’ve done it?”

He shrugs. “Yeah. First time when I was like fifteen. It was as easy to get at my school as weed is at your average school.”

“What are you like on it?”

“I’m an asshole. I know what you’re thinking but this is like level fifteen when I’m normally on a level ten. And I develop this ability to hone in on a person’s biggest insecurity. I’m not going to lie though it feels fucking great. Which is why I don’t do it anymore.”

When the Jayhawks take the stage, he grabs her hand so they can go up to the VIP area, where there’s a better view, but before they even get to the stairs, a girl comes up, calls Rey a bitch and throws an entire drink on her. She doesn’t even try to hide that it was on purpose, and she’s gone into the crowd before they can get a good look at her.

“Fuck!” Rey says. The drink was clear, probably a gin and tonic going by the smell, but she’s wearing a white ringer tee and no bra and her front is soaked.

“Shit,” Kylo says, scanning the crowd. He’d been torn between going after the girl and making sure Rey wasn’t hurt. “She ran off so quick I can’t see her at all. Are you okay?” he asks, studiously avoiding looking at her chest.

“Yeah, excuse me.” Rey crosses her arms in front of her and jets to the bathroom. She’s able to blot up some of the liquid but it will take a while for it to completely dry.

“Do you want to go home?” he asks when she joins him again.

“Yes…No. I don’t want to go home but I don’t want to stay here.”

“My house is closer. You can get cleaned up and I can show you my studio.”

His house. Absolutely a monumentally bad idea. But it’s probably quiet, and probably near enough to the ocean that you can hear the surf. And she has her car so she can leave anytime.

“That actually sounds really great.”

Kylo finds someone to let them out the back door, since Rey looks like a participant in a wet t-shirt contest. He gives her his address and directions to his house, but she manages to follow his car without getting lost. All of the houses on his side of the street have their backs facing the road. The house itself is tall and white and modern. She pulls up next to him in the garage.

“The front of the house faces the beach,” he says as they enter the house. “ Screening room, kitchenette and studio downstairs,” he says, indicating different doors. “Kitchen, great room and two bedrooms on the second floor. Third floor is the master suite.”

“That’s a weird layout.”

“The view is better from the second floor so it treats the first floor like a basement. Did you want to take a shower?”

“What?”
“You smell like a Christmas tree.”

“Most of it’s on my shirt so I’ll be fine if I can just get that off.”

“Yeah use the second floor bathroom. The laundry room is right off it if you want to wash your shirt. I’ll grab you something to put on.”

The bathroom has a whirlpool tub and a shower. She should be getting used to ridiculous amounts of space in houses by now but somehow it still shocks her. An MTV Moon Man and an AMA sit on the two sink vanity. The Moon Man has at least a dozen friendship bracelets hanging from its flag. There’s a Dagobah song with a line about friendship bracelets. It must drive him crazy that people are still giving them to him all these years later.

Kylo knocks on the door and shoves a black hoodie at her through the door when she cracks it. “Feel free to use any of the towels, too.”

“Thank you.”

“Did you figure out the washer?”

“I really don’t need to wash it. I don’t want to waste the water on one shirt.”

“It’s okay just put it on the smallest setting.”

“Okay.”

Kylo closes the door and Rey slips into his hoodie. It reaches the middle of her thighs and she has to roll the sleeves up, but it’s nice to wear something heavier after being soaked in liquor and stepping into an air conditioned house. The sweatshirt smells like lavender, which smells like home, and when she goes into the laundry room she finds that his detergent is lavender scented. Is that his choice, or is someone trying subtle methods to chill him out? She throws her used towel in with the shirt and starts the machine.

He’s in the kitchen when she comes out. He stops his pacing when he sees her. “It’s big on you.”

“You’re kind of a big guy.”

He scrunches up his face at that and goes to the fridge. “Are you hungry?”

“Always. But I shouldn’t. I’ve already had dinner.”

“If you’re hungry you should eat.”

Walking around the living area, she stops in front of one of his platinum records, mounted on the wall. It’s shiny enough that she can see a distorted reflection of her face. “I’ve gained seven pounds since I moved here.”

“Are people giving you shit about it?”

“Not yet, but I know I’ll look different on camera than I do in my website photos now.”

“You could always go vegan,” he says.

“Absolutely not. I can go easy on how much I eat but I’m not going to cut out two whole food groups now that I can actually afford to eat.”
“Suit yourself, you look fine anyway.”

“How many fans do you think you’ve inspired to be vegan?”

“I don’t know. Most of the ones I meet pretend they were already vegan before they ever heard I was.”

Rey wanders out onto his balcony. It overlooks the ocean, and way out over the water the stars are visible. There’s a well of resentment bubbling in her. It’s true that he’s older than her, and that he has worked hard, but he still has so much, and he doesn’t even seem to care.

She closes her eyes and breathes in. Kylo comes out onto the balcony and stands not far from her, leaning on the railing, and she feels warmer on that side, as though she’s in space, one side facing the sun, the other the void.

She opens her eyes. “How about taking a look at that studio?”

They go back downstairs and he opens the door nearest the stairs, ushering her into the control room. The full-sized console is the focal point, on a long counter flanked by monitors and an effects rack. A sofa and chairs sit several feet behind the console.

While the rest of Kylo’s house is modern and minimalist, almost searing in its white emptiness, this room, even with all of the electronics, is all wood and tapestry and warmth.

Kylo turns on the light revealing the live room, through the window. It’s another room full of warm woods and ochre colored soundproofing, and Oriental rugs spread out on the floor. Besides the drum kit, there’s an upright piano in one corner, and a whole host of stringed instruments in another. The resentment tries to surface again but she tackles it. She can’t let it ruin this.

“You have a sitar?” she says, spotting the larger instrument among the guitars and basses.

“Yeah. I wanted to learn ‘Norwegian Wood.’”

“You bought a sitar. To learn one song.”

“I learned some other things, picked up all the basics, but yeah. Do you want to play something?”

“Sure.”

They go into the live room and she circles the guitars. They’re all beautiful, but she’s drawn to an old acoustic Gibson, black with pearl inlays. She touches it. “This one.”

He’s inscrutable, his face shadowed by his hair in the low light. “That one was my grandfather’s. I played it on the Dagobah stuff, and on that new one. “Ashes of My Enemies.” The one for the movie.”

“Oh.” She backs away. “I don’t have to play that one.”

“No, it’s fine. Go ahead.” She doesn’t move so he brushes past her and picks it up, offering it to her. “Really, it’s cool.” She takes it and he pulls a stool from the corner for her.

Tuning only takes a moment, and she starts to strum, fingers grazing the strings. This is the first time she’s played in front of him. He goes to sit on the other stool, still in the corner, and she picks up momentum, coaxing the full sound from the strings. Even though her guitar is nothing to laugh at, this one makes it sound like a toy. She shifts chords aimlessly until she finds a change she likes,
then another. She changes rhythm and starts humming the melody the strings are singing to her. After going through it a few times she hits on a chorus, still humming as she works through a bridge. On the final chord, she opens her eyes. Kylo is frozen in his spot, staring at her.

“Do you have some paper? I need to write this progression down before I lose it.”

“Yeah, um, actually we can just record it if you want, then you’ll have your melody.” He sets up a mic for her guitar and one for vocals, hands her a head set and goes back in the control room, where he speaks to her through a mic.

“Start playing through so I can get some levels.”

She goes through it again, adding some runs, a few words and phrases coming through, though she gets distracted more than once by the intense look on his face as he makes adjustments, his hair falling into his face as he leans over the board.

Finally, he tells her they’re ready to record and she goes through it a third time, more confident. Most of the words are just placeholders but she keeps coming back to one phrase.

_Somewhere that’s here but nowhere that’s near. Caught up in yesterday drowning in fear._

It’ll need work, but she’s actually writing and she wouldn’t care if it were absolute drivel.

When she’s finished, she puts the guitar back on its stand and joins Kylo in the control room. She leans against the counter, watching him work. He sits on a stool rather than the office chair, with his feet hooked around the legs.

“It’ll be rough,” he says. “But since it’s one track I can just throw it on a CD for you.” He puts a blank CD into the computer and starts burning the song onto it.

“I’m sure ‘rough’ will sound better than anything I did at home.”

“Your home recordings got you a record deal, didn’t they?”

“Yeah.”

Kylo sits back and spins on the stool to face her. “What’s the first song you learned to play on the guitar?”

“‘Joey.’ It has basic chords and it’s not too fast. I swear I almost got kicked out of my house I played it so much before moving on to something else. I was just so amazed that I could do anything with the guitar at all. What about you?”

“‘The Great Pretender.’”

“How old were you?”

“Nine.”

She’s sure she’s seen a photo of him as a kid somewhere, probably in a teen magazine, because the image of him that pops into her head, of big ears and unruly hair, is too clear to come solely from her imagination. She’s about to ask what kind of guitar he had when the computer chimes, letting them know the CD is ready.

Kylo ejects it, labels it with a Sharpie and puts it in a case for her. The computer is right next to where she’s leaning on the counter, so she’s very close to him when he hands her the CD. Their
fingers touch and a jolt of desire shoots through her stomach.

“Thank you,” she whispers. He doesn’t step away from her and for the first time she notices that his eyes are more amber than brown.

She slips the disc into the hoodie pocket and reaches for him, standing on her toes, arms snaking around his neck.

When their lips meet, he’s very still for a moment, but then he wraps an arm around her waist and pulls her tight against him, one hand cradling her neck, the other at the small of her back. As they kiss, both of his hands travel to her waist, under her shirt, and he lifts her onto the counter. He doesn’t have to stoop as much this way, so he’s able to get closer. She buries her hands in his hair. It’s softer than she’d imagined, and when he bites her bottom lip, she grips his hair hard enough to make him wince and gasp.

“Sorry,” she whispers.

“It’s okay,” he says as he finds a spot on her neck right behind her ear that makes her toes curl when he sucks on it.

When he picks her up off the counter, she’s pretty sure his destination is the sofa and in a moment of clarity caused by vertigo, she knows that if she finds herself underneath him she won’t turn back.

“No,” she says, breaking their kiss. She puts her forehead against his, panting. “Put me down.”

He loosens his grip on her as she unwraps her legs from around his waist and she slides down his body. She stands pressed against him for a moment, gripping the sides of his t shirt in her fists, and then backs away.

“I need to go.”

He looks dazed, with unfocused eyes and his hair everywhere. “Okay,” he says. He runs his hands through his hair and sighs. “I’ll go get your bag.”

When he comes back with it, he’s straightened out his hair and his expression is closed off.

“I’m not upset,” she says. “I mean. I’m not mad, okay? You didn’t do anything wrong. It was just…a lot. I need to go.”

“Not that’s fine. Thank you for hanging out with me.”

She fights the urge to kiss him on the cheek but she does give him a pat on the chest as she passes by.

Driving home, she turns off the radio and rolls all the windows down. There is nothing in her collection that fits the exact mixture of guilt and frustration and regret rolling off her. No one has ever written a song about dating someone for publicity and then finding out you sort of want to fuck them.

When she gets home, there’s a message on her machine from Finn, telling her to call him no matter how late she gets in. She’d called Maz to tell her she was going out with Kylo so it can’t be about that. All sorts of scenarios fly through her head as she stares at the phone. Had they decided to drop her? Was there a terrible rumor about her? Had somebody died?
The only way to find out is to face it, so she picks up the phone and calls him.

“Hey,” she says when he answers.

“Rey! I’ve got great news and I figured you’d want to know ASAP.”

Rey collapses onto the sofa, exhaling. “What is it?”

“You’ve got an offer to open for Taybin Ralorsa on her tour. She had an act lined up but they dropped out last minute.”

Taybin Ralorsa had been huge when Rey was in high school as the lead singer of a ska band. When that band broke up, she took a couple of years off and emerged again as a bluesy rock act.

Rey takes a deep breath and tells herself to keep it professional. “How big is this tour?” she asks.

“Midsized venues, mostly theatres and ballrooms. No amphitheatres as far as I can tell. About three months and thirty cities so far. You’ll get a flat fee of $100 a day plus a $35 per diem. They’ll provide a van and lodging, though your whole band will probably have to share a room. Tour starts here May 25th and ends in New York September 1.”

“So I have about three weeks to get ready?”

“You’ve already got your band and have two songs down cold for your showcase. It’s only a thirty-minute set, so about six songs. You have plenty of material. Get everything you can plus a few covers down so you can mix up your sets a little. It’ll give you a head start on the album. Bands always sound better on records after they’ve been touring. You can take a couple of days to think about it.”

Rey’s never been one to run this far from a problem, but she’s also never had the opportunity.

“I’ll do it.”

“They said you can take a day or two.”

“I don’t need it, I’ll do it.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is from "Norwegian Wood" by the Beatles
The summer he was ten, Ben Solo had thrown an antique bookend through a window because his father had told him he couldn’t ride his bike down to the beach. He didn’t throw it at anyone. In fact, they’d been in the kitchen when he’d asked, and he’d stalked into the den, picked up the solid brass bookend, and hurled it. Han had stopped him before he could throw its mate.

That was the first time he’d ever broken something deliberately in anger. It soon became a problem, because it felt good, like his anger breaking into manageable pieces. It was a big enough problem that his parents put him in therapy over it. Eventually, he’d learned ways to control it, but sometimes he slipped. There’s more than one contractor on the list of important numbers Lorna keeps on the fridge, all of them masters at drywall repair, and discretion.

The morning after Rey kissed him, Kylo slumps at his dining table, glowering at a bowl of cereal as Lorna lectures him, struggling to be heard over the work sounds coming from the upstairs bathroom as a new mirror is installed.

“This is the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever said but can you please stick to punching walls and throwing things? You’re lucky none of those cuts are deeper. Do you know what nerve damage or a broken hand could do to your career?”

He chews his food thoroughly and drinks half a glass of orange juice before answering. “When are they going to be done so I can take a shower?”

“Why don’t you take one down here?”

“I like my shower.”

“Holy shit I need a raise,” Lorna says and pours herself another cup of coffee. “What the hell happened? Were you pissed about your video shoot being delayed?”

Kylo eats his cereal and considers. He has to hold the spoon overhanded like a toddler due to the bandage wrapped around his knuckles. Lorna probably loves that, since she’s scolding him like he’s two. He definitely does not want to hear what she’d have to say about last night. Despite being tough as nails, she’s also a huge romantic and she would only encourage him. He hasn’t exactly shared all the details of his relationship with Rey with her, either.

“Yeah,” he lies. “Unprofessional dumbasses leaving the important shit to an eighteen-year-old intern kind of gets to me.”

Lorna sighs. “I sent Lindsey to get your new bedding. You aren’t going to flip out if they don’t carry the exact set anymore, are you?”

“No. But check that it’s at least in the same ballpark before she brings it up. You gave her free reign at Bloomingdales with my credit card. I’ll be lucky if she doesn’t come back with a Hello Kitty bed set.”

“You know she’s not as incompetent as you think she is. Just because she got vanilla soy milk instead of unsweetened one time doesn’t mean she’s useless.”
“She’s annoying. She skulks around like she’s afraid of me.”

“Gee, I wonder why.”

Kylo shoves away from the table and takes his bowl to the sink. He manages to get it rinsed and put in the dishwasher without smashing it.

Lorna walks over and peers up at him, backing him into a corner. “There’s something else going on with you. You were doing better for a few weeks there. Not anything close to acceptable, but better. This isn’t about not shooting. You’ve had worse delays on Knights video shoots.”

“Yeah well this is different and I want it to be perfect.”

She continues to look up at him, doubtful, but eventually shrugs and goes to gather her things. “The nurse will be back in a few hours to change your bandage. She left a shower glove. Use it or she’ll just have to redo your stitches. I’ve let your director know you’re injured, which obviously means another delay, so congratulations.”

The contractor leaves an hour after Lorna, and Kylo goes up to his room. His bed is still stripped and the rug has been taken for cleaning, but looking at the bathroom, you’d have no idea that last night he’d punched the mirror repeatedly with his bare fist, bandaged his bleeding hand in his t-shirt and then watched television until he fell asleep.

After struggling with the shower glove, which is basically a plastic mitten, he manages to get it on and tied. He turns on the shower and strips down, stepping under the stream, as hot as he can stand.

He’d managed to hold it together until after she left. That had seemed like a very smart, and very important thing to do. So he’d stuffed it all down until he thought he felt nothing.

Once he’d closed the garage and shut off everything in the studio he’d gone up to his room. He splashed cold water on his face in the bathroom. Everything was fine until he looked at himself after drying off his face.

He was a monster.

Only a monster would agree to what he’d done in order to save his own ass. Only a monster would have the audacity to develop feelings for a girl he’d tricked into dating him. It was useless to even think he could pursue it honestly, because Snoke still expected him to help destroy her career. So he’d punched his reflection, the first blow bouncing off. So he’d punched again, harder. The glass shattered, splintering his reflection, and he struck out again. Somehow, the shards managed to stay in the frame, but his hand was cut to shit and bleeding freely. During the night, his makeshift bandage had fallen off and he’d bled all over his duvet and sheets. The cuts had scabbed over some but the deepest ones opened up again as soon as he woke up and opened his hand all the way.

Lorna arrived while he was in the bathroom looking at the damage—to his mirror and his hand—and he’d found her, pale and horrified, in his bedroom.

“Shit, Kylo I thought you’d—fuck. What did you do?”

After her initial freak out, she’d pulled herself together, called the concierge doctor, given him what first aid she could, and called the contractor. She waited until the nurse had gone before laying into Kylo, and for the most part, he’d sat and taken it.

Because there was nothing he could say. It was stupid. All of it. From the absurdity of dating someone so people wouldn’t think he was gay, to his reaction to her leaving.
He should have agreed to one of Hux’s models. It would be all over by now if he had.

It’s been years since he felt this way. The longing to be around someone, or wanting someone the way he’d wanted Rey last night. On their last date, he’d told himself it was just the movie. He sometimes gets aroused when watching sex scenes even though he doesn’t want to have sex with anyone involved.

But last night, he’d wanted to take Rey on that sofa. Peel her jeans off and dive face first into her before burying himself inside her. He’s not sure if he ever even wanted Katia as badly as this, and he’d adored her with the obsessive fierceness that comes with first love.

Rey’s lips had tasted like the strawberry Lip Smacker she keeps in her pocket, and underneath the lingering smell of gin she’d smelled like vanilla, her hair like jasmine.

He’d not gotten his hands on her breasts but the bare skin of her stomach and waist had been so soft that the idea of what her breasts must feel like, taste like, makes him growl with frustration.

And now his dick is hard, and his right hand is wrapped in plastic.

He sighs, takes his dick in his left hand and gives a few tentative strokes. It’s awkward, but it’s not bad. Playing guitar does keep his left hand agile.

He closes his eyes and tightens his grip, letting his thoughts float free.

Rey, sighing into his ear when he’d kissed her neck, a shaky exhale bordering on a moan.

Rey’s hand, gripping the back of his neck and sliding through his hair.

Rey’s legs, wrapped around his waist when he’d picked her up and her firm little body pressed against his as he’d put her down.

He increases the pace, circling his thumb around the head on the upstrokes and pumping into his hand on the down strokes. One more image, a wish rather than a memory, floats across his mind. Rey, naked and wanting, on his bed, her hair spread out on his pillow, her legs open—

“Oh fuck,” he grits out, teeth clenched and bracing himself against the shower wall with his other hand. He stands there, panting, stroking himself until the last shudder subsides. He opens his eyes and looks down, at the cum washing off of his hand and down the drain the shoves his face under the shower stream. There’s no point in trying to wash his hair so he fumbles around with the body wash and bath puff until he’s somewhat clean.

When Lindsey comes back with his new bedding, he’s sitting on his balcony, smoking, in boxers and a bathrobe.

“Mr. Ren?” she says from the doorway.

He closes his eyes and breathes in. He’ll be nice. For Lorna’s sake, but he doesn’t turn to face her. “Yes?”

“It’s the exact same set but in a slightly different shade of grey. Lorna said it should be fine.”

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

He can feel her, hesitating in the doorway, so he turns around, looking at her over the back of the lounge chair. “Yes?”
“Well, I’m not sure if I can manage to make the bed myself since it’s a king, and Daya isn’t here today. Lorna didn’t come up with me. She went home. I think she was really shaken up.”

“Are you asking me to help make the bed?”

Lindsey takes a deep breath and straightens her spine. “Yes.”

“I won’t be much help,” he says, holding up his injured hand. “But okay.” He stubs out his cigarette, ties his robe, and follows her into the room.

He holds one corner of the fitted sheet in place while Lindsey stretches it and tucks in the other end, then they move to the other side. “What did you mean about Lorna being scared?”

“Well, she came in your room and there was blood all over your bed and you weren’t here.”

“Did she think someone murdered me?”

“Yeah,” she says, pulling the flat sheet from the bag. “It does happen with people with devoted fans. But, like, I really think she thought you’d really hurt yourself.”

“Well, I did.”

“No, like—never mind.”

“Does Lorna think I’m suicidal?”

“No! I was just being dumb. She was just afraid that someone had broken in and hurt you, especially since the alarm wasn’t armed when she got here. I didn’t mean to imply anything else.”

Once they get the flat sheet on, it looks like Lindsey can handle it so Kylo goes down to the kitchen. The message light is blinking on the answering machine.

“It’s Hux. Don’t tell me you’re still in bed. Check your email when you get this you lazy dildo.”

Kylo follows the Ethernet cable from the wall to the sofa. He’d apparently shoved the laptop under there the last time he’d used it.

Have fun last night?

You didn’t tell me you were taking your little desert flower out again last night so I could make sure there were some decent photos. This one’s been going around the chat boards all morning, though.

Cheers!

Hux

Attached is a grainy photo of Rey and Kylo at the bar last night. She’s facing the camera, and he’s in profile, leaning in to whisper something directly into her ear as she sips her drink. He’s pretty sure this was when he was asking her if she wanted to get closer to the band, but anyone who didn’t know that would think it was an intimate moment. Rey looks small, and blissful, next to him.
He saves the photo to his computer and pecks out a reply to Hux.

It was last minute, and I didn’t feel like being photographed. See if your brilliant background check PI can find out who took this photo. It’s probably the same asshole who threw a drink on Rey last night. If you can find out, put her on the blacklist.

All my love,

Kylo

He considers having Lindsey sort through his overflowing inbox but he’s not ready to trust her that much, despite what Lorna said. She comes down stairs with the packaging and the shopping bag and asks if he needs anything else.

“No I’m good. No, hey, wait.”

“Yeah?”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-one.”

“Good. Um, so, if you kissed a guy for the first time but then stopped it before it went any further, would you expect him to call you the next day?”

“If I liked him I’d hope he would, if I stopped because I didn’t want to move too fast. But if I stopped it because I wasn’t feeling it then probably not.”

“What would you say to a guy when you left, if you stopped because you weren’t feeling it?”

She looks up at the ceiling as she considers. “Um, probably just say I had to work early or something. You never want to say those kinds of things when you’re actually there and alone with a guy.”

“What if a girl says she’s not mad at you, it’s just ‘a lot’?”

“Oh, then she probably really wanted to sleep with you but didn’t think it was a good idea.”

“Thank you, Lindsey. You’ve been helpful.”

She smiles as though he’s just told her she’s won the lottery. “No problem! Um, I’ll just drop this stuff in the garbage outside and be on my way. Lorna said to call her if you need anything.”

When she’s gone, he grabs the phone and sits on the sofa. As he’s about to close his computer he notices a new email. It’s from Rey.

Great News!

I wanted to tell you before you heard from anyone else. I’m going on tour! Opening Taybin Ralorsa. It starts in three weeks and I’ll be gone all summer. I just found out last night. I’m going to be in rehearsal pretty much constantly until I leave. I want you to know, in case we don’t get to talk or anything before I leave, that I did have fun last night, despite the drink incident. Thank you again for letting me play your guitar. It’s beautiful.
Peace,

Rey

He takes a deep breath and exhales, counting down. His fingers hover above the keys, but what can he say? He’s not always the best at picking up cues, but this is a pretty clear sign she can’t (or doesn’t want to) see him before she leaves.

It should be a relief. He should be able to get over this in three months. That’s longer than they’ve been seeing each other, and he’ll be busy. A desperate part of him hopes Snoke will realize it’s a lost cause and let him move on.

But he’s not relieved. And he wants to tear his house apart.

Instead, he gets dressed, gets in his car and drives to a batting cage, five minutes away. He’s wearing a baseball cap, white t shirt and cargo shorts, so he’s able to walk past the occupied cages unnoticed. They’re mostly filled with fathers coaching their children.

Kylo never played any sports when he was younger, but Han or Leia would sometimes take him to hit baseballs when something bad happened or he seemed frustrated. He’s certain now this was a suggestion from his therapist, but it worked. He hasn’t done it in a long time, however. Not since he’s had his own things to break without getting in trouble.

He feeds the machine, steps up to the plate and raises the bat. It’s hard to grip with the bandage but his stitches hold. The first whack of the ball on the bat is almost as satisfying as a wall under his fist. The freedom of making something fly instead of fall apart.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Blister in the Sun" by the Violent Femmes
Two weeks into rehearsal, Rey has to take a day off. Her fingers are developing callouses on top of callouses, and her throat is like sandpaper. At Finn’s suggestion, she gets her throat checked out at the doctor, who tells her to take two days off and talk as little as possible.

After so many long days of working, she can’t sit idle, and ends up in the luggage section at Macy’s, without any real idea what she’s looking for. She doesn’t know what a good price is for a suitcase or what features to look for, and she’s afraid a salesperson will lead her to the most expensive thing she can afford, regardless of quality.

She digs in her purse, looking for her phone to call Finn. Having a cell phone is so strange and new that she often forgets to bring it with her.

“Dammit,” she says. It’s not in her bag and she remembers, now, leaving it on the counter. She looks around, resigned to looking for a salesperson, and spots Kylo’s assistant looking at travel pillows.

“Lorna?” she says.

She looks up and squints at Rey. “Oh! Hello, Rey. Sorry, I’m due for new glasses and haven’t had the time to make an appointment. How’s it going?”

“Great! I’m going on tour in a week so I’m getting a new suitcase.”

“Oh, no, don’t get a suitcase for tour. You’re going to be in a van, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Definitely no suitcases. What you need is a big duffel bag, or two smaller ones. Your driver and your band will thank you. And you’ll find a better quality one at an outdoors store. Try REI.”

“Oh. Thank you. Why didn’t anyone tell me?”

“Did you ask anyone?”

“No.”

“Well, there you go. You’re surrounded by people who presume you’re competent. Which can be nice, because they aren’t treating you like a baby, but it means you gotta ask when you aren’t sure about things.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” Lorna turns back to the travel pillows.

“So, um, how’s Kylo doing?”

Lorna snorts. “Same old. Last week at Jamba Juice they were out of wheat grass because Billy Corgan had come in and bought it all, and Kylo demanded they go out right then and get some more. I had to drag him to Whole Foods.”
“Can I ask you something?”

“You can ask, and I may answer as long as my nondisclosure agreement doesn’t prevent it.”

“Okay. Well, I don’t want to ask what’s wrong with him, exactly but just, why is he like…how he is?”

Lorna starts to laugh but stops when she sees Rey’s face. “Honestly? He’s never had enough people around him to tell him no. You’ll start to notice it, if you have any sort of success, people are going to start being afraid to tell you no, if they think they’ll lose access to you.”

“You told him no, that night at Nobu.”

“Yeah, but right now he needs me more than I need him. If that ever changes, I’ll be out on my ass.”

“I said no to him, and he didn’t get mad.”

Lorna pushes her glasses up her nose and peers at Rey. “When was the last time you saw him?”

“Two weeks ago, we went to a Jayhawks show. Secret show.”

“Hmm. Gotcha. Well, he’s a prick but he’s never been the type of guy who’d force himself on a girl.” She picks up two pillows and tucks them under her arm. “Are you going to see him again?”

“I don’t think I’ll have time.”

“Do you want to?”

“I…sure, I guess.”

“Then you can find time.”

“I guess. Thanks again.”

“No problem. See ya!”

Rey finds a good sized duffel bag and a new backpack at REI, but in the next week she doesn’t find the time to see Kylo, or even call him. The night before tour starts, she finds the hoodie he let her borrow, stuffed under a pile of towels. She should definitely give that back, right? In person, not by messenger. And he still has her shirt. She likes that shirt, a 1970s NASA ringer tee, thin and worn as tissue and one of the most comfortable shirts she owns.

She makes herself call him before she can chicken out.

“Hi,” she says when he answers.

“Hi.”

“My tour starts tomorrow and I still have your hoodie. Do you want it back? We could meet somewhere. I’m going to be up forever packing so maybe somewhere that has coffee?”

He’s quiet for several seconds. “Carney’s. On Sunset. It’s a train car so you can’t miss it. You can keep the hoodie, though. I have like ten black hoodies.”

“Okay. So, see you in like, an hour?”
“Sure.” He hangs up without saying goodbye.

It’s rainy, so the Strip is relatively quiet, but Kylo’s choice to meet in such popular area is still surprising. The diner is bustling, and she takes the only available table rather than wait for him. This is her first time in a train car diner, even though she’d heard of them, and it’s exactly what she expected. White Formica tables with chrome trim, a red squeeze bottle of ketchup on every table, uniformed waitresses, like the whole place had been plopped here in 1955 and never updated.

No one takes any notice of Kylo when he walks in. It’s a late night crowd, more intent on putting grease in their stomachs than ogling a celebrity, and he’s low key, his hair covered by a grey knit cap, his black clothes nondescript. He looks like he might have just gotten off a shift tending bar. If anyone does recognize him, they don’t approach. Kylo told her once that locals tended to leave him alone, especially when they were with friends, because they didn’t want to look uncool.

He spots her and makes his way down the narrow aisle, carrying a small Bloomingdales bag. He sets the bag on the tale and slides into the seat across from Rey.

“What kind of coffee do you use?” Kylo asks the waitress when she comes to get their drink order.

“Hills Brothers.”

“Is it ground here?”

“Um, no, honey.”

“Whatever. I’ll take it. Black.”

“Me, too,” Rey says. “Cream and sugar. Please.”

“Two coffees,” she says and goes to the back.

“Thank you!” Rey calls after her.

“So,” he says, settling in. “Are you ready?”

“No, but I don’t think I’d be any readier if I had more time, so I might as well get it over with.”

“You open here in town, right?”

“Yeah. At the Roxy. Then we leave right after to go to San Francisco.”

“I’d check it out but I’m going to Nashville tomorrow.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah I donated some of my grandfather’s things to a country music museum and they want to do a whole thank-you ceremony or something.”

She looks down and starts fiddling with the roll of silverware, ripping the paper wring off and tearing it into little pieces. “It’s okay. I honestly don’t want anyone I know there. Everyone from the label will be there, of course, but I’m just going to pretend they’re not.”

“Hey.” Kylo puts his hand on hers and she looks up at him. “It’s going to be fine.” He looks down at his hand and pulls it away, clearing his throat. “Tell me about your band?”

“Oh shit they’re amazing, Kylo. I am so glad I was so involved in the audition process. They just
wanted me to watch videos and look at resumes and I was like, no, I need to actually play with people. I was so freaked out, thinking I’d get stuck with people who wouldn’t listen to me because I’m so young and haven’t played with a band before.”

“Who’d you end up with?”

“Snap Wexley on guitar. We switch off rhythm and lead depending on the song. Jess Pava on bass.”

“Testor? Fuck, I’d kill to have her. She could play Mikey under the table. Probably drink him under the table, too. I used to go see her old band just for her.”

“Yeah, she’s great. Um, then I’ve got Bastian on drums.”

Kylo nods and looks up to the ceiling, nods his head a few more times and then smiles. “Yeah, I just put all of that together in my head and yeah, that’s a fucking decent band.”

“Yeah, I know. I put it together and I’ve been playing with them for three weeks.”

They’ve both leaned forward across the tiny table while talking. Rey has even gotten up on her knees in her chair without realizing it. When the waitress comes with the coffee, Kylo leans back abruptly and Rey settles back in her seat, with her first grade teacher’s voice in her head telling everyone to put their bums in their seats.

Rey thanks the waitress and pokes her fork into the top of the creamer container and stops when she notices Kylo eyeing her.

“Oh,” she says. “Just some stupid thing I’ve done since I was a kid. I poke holes in the top with a fork and then squeeze it out. I always called it milking the cow for some reason.” She shows him and earns a chuckle.

“You drank coffee as a kid?”

“Yeah. My aunt Ginny was fine with it. It was more cream and sugar than anything, though. Is that weird?”

“I don’t know. It explains why you’re so short.”

Rey kicks him under the table. “Coffee doesn’t stunt your growth, and I’m not short, you’re just freakishly tall.”

“Yeah you’re right.” He slides the bag across the table to her. “Your shirt.”

Rey looks inside. There’s a CD case sitting on top of her neatly folded shirt. It's a mix, the title scrawled across it in Sharpie, “One More Silver Dollar.”

“It’s mostly road songs,” he says. “Not just songs about being on the road but songs that sound good on the road. Or like you’re on the road. I don’t know.”

“Thank you,” she says. “You didn’t put this together in an hour though.”

“I made it a few days ago and couldn’t decide whether to send it to you or not.”

He looks down at his mug, cradled in both hands and Rey is struck by how huge they are, how one of them could span the width of her lower back. She looks back down at her own coffee.
“Oh,” she says, her face growing hot. “Are you sure you don’t want your hoodie back? I brought it, just in case. It’s in my car.”

“No, I’m serious. You can keep it. If you want.”

She looks at him. He wants her to keep it. She nods, certain that she’s somehow agreed to something by keeping it.

“I think you’ll like touring,” he says. “It’s exhausting as hell and sometimes the only thing you’ll see of a city is your hotel and the stage door of the venue, but you’ll like playing for new people.”

Rey puts her head in her hands. “I’m scared out of my mind. I’ve been at enough shows to know how people treat opening acts.”

“It’s not like that in every city, and when it is, it’s really not about you. Some people are just assholes, and some cities have more assholes than others. I got clocked in the head with a bottle of water at Glastonbury in ’97, and we were headlining.”

“What did you do?”

“Walked the fuck off.”

“I don’t think I could do this at this point in my career.”

“Well I don’t think anyone’s going to throw shit at you. Look at me, in my eyes.” He doesn’t continue until she complies. “You’re going to gain a few fans in every city no matter what. And whoever’s reviewing the show for local press might throw you a few lines. No matter what this will be good for you.”

“Okay.”

He’s about to speak again when a middle aged woman comes up to the table. “I’m so sorry to bother you, but my daughter back home is a huge Knights of Ren fan. She couldn’t come with us because of finals and she would hate me if I told her I saw you and didn’t get your autograph.”

Kylo looks at Rey and she gives him an encouraging smile.

“Sure,” he says, tossing his hair out of his face and checking his pockets. “Rey do you have a Sharpie?”

“Actually, yeah. I was labelling things earlier when I was packing.” She finds it in her purse and hands it over to Kylo.

“What’s your daughter’s name?”

“Debra. Thank you so much.”

He signs the woman’s City Guide with a flourish and hands it back to her. “Tell her thanks for the support.”

“I will. Thank you again.” She goes back to her seat.

“You were so nice to her.”

“So?” he says, leaning closer to Rey. “Is that surprising?” His tone is flirtatious but she presses on.
“A little.”

He shrugs. “Pissed off fans are a lot of trouble. Their moms are even worse. Though I think she was full of shit about her daughter being the fan.”

“How do you know?”

“How many high school girls do you know named Debra?”

“Good point. But, if you can be nice to fans, why aren’t you nice to service workers? I mean, they don’t pay your bills but they’re still people.”

“I was nice to the waitress.”

“You were barely civil; you didn’t even say please when you ordered and you didn’t even acknowledge her when she brought the coffee out.”

“Is this really something you want to get into right now?” he asks, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms.

Rey sits back and looks away. “I’m not trying to start an argument, just giving you something to think about.”

“What’s it to you if I’m nicer to people? Would it make you happy?”

“I don’t know,” she says, looking at him. He looks away. “I guess. I really just think it might make you happier.”

“Whatever. I have an early flight tomorrow, so…”

How has he turned this around so that she feels like she needs to apologize? This isn’t how she wanted this to go. Or is it? Did she want to pick a fight with him to make it easier to leave?

It’s the perfect chance to end it. They can have a public argument and then she can just lose touch with him. Hell, even if this were real they’d probably lose touch anyway. Promise to meet up when she gets back and then keep putting it off, emails getting fewer and farther between.

“Yeah, forget about it. It’s none of my business. And I should go, too. I shouldn’t start tour already sleep deprived.”

Rey pays for the coffee and Kylo leaves a tip. Rey doesn’t get a good look but she’s fairly sure he leaves a twenty.

He walks her to her car and they stand beside it, looking at each other and shuffling their feet. The rain has started again, a light mist that makes Rey shiver.

“Well, good luck,” he says.

“Thanks.”

She steps forward, on her toes, and kisses his cheek, close to the corner of his mouth, holding onto his shirt to steady herself. She starts to step away and he pulls her back, arm around her waist.

He doesn’t kiss her, just holds her there, eyes full of questions she doesn’t know the answer to, so she wraps her arms around him, hugging him, because it seems like it’s what he really needs the most. He smells like cigarettes and pine needles, he’s warm and solid, his heart thundering in her
ear. He wraps his other arm around her and they stay that way until the rain picks up again.

“I’ll email you?” she says, stupidly, as she steps away.

“Sure.”

“Okay.”

She wants to kiss him. She gets in her car.

Her last glimpse of him is in her rear view, a tall dark figure, hunched over, attempting to light a cigarette in the rain.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is from "Big Empty" by Stone Temple Pilots
You can listen to Kylo's mix here
From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>


Subject: Happy Birthday??

OK so why did I have to learn from USA Today that it’s your birthday? Hope it’s a good one and you got to stuff yourself with dairy free ice cream and cake.

How was Nashville? Nashville is so far out for us, like the middle of July. It doesn’t even feel real.

We played Seattle last night and I loved it so so much. And Portland, and Vancouver (where I am now.)

My hair gets super wavy in the humidity and everything up here is just so green and lush. I’ve never seen anything like it in my life. Jess was making fun of me because all the travel was at night and then when I woke up in Portland and looked out the window I yelped and ran outside. Sometimes it’s hard to breath, though. The air feels like soup.

We had a day off in Seattle and we went to Jimi Hendrix’s grave. We also ended up at Viretta Park and smoked a joint and wrote our tributes to Kurt on one of the benches. I haven’t smoked in so long so I made the driver stop at a donut shop, went back the hotel, ate a box of donuts and wrote a song which wasn’t actually that bad even after I sobered up.

The shows have been OK. I don’t know if I’ll ever get the hang of talking to the crowd but musically we’re getting tight.

OK so I’m in the hotel business center and some actual business man looking guy seems to REALLY want to print something out so I’m going to go.

Happy birthday again!!!!

Peace,

Rey

From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

Date: Wednesday, June 2, 1999 at 11:21 PM

RE: Happy Birthday??

Nashville was okay. They kept trying to feed me barbeque, and cream pies. I ate fries most of the time I was there.
My birthday. There’s nothing special about 26 so I didn’t want to make a big deal, but then I was forced to go to fucking Vegas, for the whole weekend, with my band.

The only word to describe it is dismal. We stayed at Caesar’s Palace and had bottle service at the club and everything like in a music video but I just can’t stand to hang with those guys outside of work. I’m sure there are some great photos so Hux and everyone else will be happy but I wanted to punch everyone.

At least it wasn’t the Playboy Mansion. Remind me to tell you about that sometime.

I met Kurt once, in the green room at a festival we were playing at, right around the time Nevermind blew up. I was like 19. He said he dug our record and I probably pissed my pants.

I was actually thinking about that on my birthday, because I’m older now than he was then. And I’m a year younger than he was when he died.

--Kylo

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Sunday, June 6, 1999 at 2:33 PM

RE: Happy Birthday??

We played in Denver last night. We’re about to hit the road to head to Albuquerque (my friend Ahsoka is coming!!!!) I got altitude sickness and played with a headache. I thought I was going to pass out or puke the whole time. It looks like a really beautiful town but I’m not going to miss it. I still don’t feel great.

I’m SO sorry you had to spend your birthday in Las Vegas at a swanky hotel with people at your beck and call. It must have been awful. And how ever did you survive the birthday you spent at one of the most exclusive houses on the planet?

As for musing about Kurt Cobain, I hear that you get more existential as you get older. You’re closer to 30 now than 20 so it’s inevitable you’ll start thinking about mortality.

Peace,

Rey

From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

Date: Monday, June 7, 1999 at 1:56 AM

RE: Happy Birthday??

Don’t you have a birthday coming up soon? 20 is pretty ancient in this industry. I’m surprised
From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

Date: Saturday, June 12, 1999 at 2:04 PM

Subject: Hey

If you’re mad I’m sorry about that last email.

And I hope you’re feeling better.

--Kylo

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Saturday, June 12, 1999 at 3:00 PM

RE: Hey

I’m not mad. It wasn’t any worse than what I said. We just had a string of shitty hotels with no Internet.

My friend Ahsoka brought a bunch of people from T or C to the Albuquerque show. She seriously rented a van and drove up with a bunch of regulars from her coffee shop, and my old boss! And a few followed in their cars. She gave me a scarf that she used to tie around her mic stand when she was still performing. I bawled all over the place. Did you ever meet Ahsoka? You were still little when she left LA I guess.

We’re in Vegas now. We got here yesterday and we don’t play until tomorrow night, at the nightclub here at the MGM Grand. I guess rooms are so cheap here they actually sprung for two rooms for us, so it’s me and Jess in one and the boys in the other. I haven’t slept in a bed by myself in three weeks now so it’s incredible.

I’ve actually been kind of bored because people around here definitely care that I’m not 21. It’s like you have to be over 21 or under 12 to enjoy anything here except the buffets. And I’m the only one in either band that’s not of age.

The buffets are pretty rad, though. Snap took us to the one at the Aladdin because it’s got foods from all over the world. I think I could become addicted to Indian food.

Weird that you were just here a couple of weeks ago.

OK apparently we’re going to go ride a roller coaster?

Peace,
From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

Date: Sunday, June 13, 1999 at 5:28 AM

RE: Hey

That’s cool that you got to see your friends.

I can actually relate on the Vegas thing. I was only 19 when we did our first tour. All of us were. If you have time today before you sound check you should go off strip and find some record shops and thrift stores.

Or get someone to rent a car and go out into the desert tonight after your show.

I’m guessing that you’re about to hit Texas and be there for a couple of years, right? Maybe you can get some decent cowboy boots.

--Kylo

From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

Date: Wednesday, June 16, 1999 at 1:11 AM

Subject: Confession

I almost hopped on a plane to come see your Vegas show.

--Kylo

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Wednesday, June 16, 1999 at 11:46 PM

RE: Confession

I’m glad you didn’t. We were terrible.

You’re going to think I’m the biggest wuss but I’m already freaking exhausted. I can’t believe that you did this for almost a year straight. I guess it was easier for you since you have an actual tour bus and your own hotel room, but still. It’s been three weeks and it’s already hard for me to keep up with what day it is. One of the roadies puts a sign up on both sides of the stage every night that says what town we’re in and at first I thought it was stupid but last night I actually had to use it. IN
LAS VEGAS!!!

If you ever do randomly decide to see a show, don’t tell me you’re there. I don’t even know if I want to know afterward.

You were right, we’re in Texas. El Paso last night, we’re in Dallas now with shows tomorrow night and Thursday. We’re in this monstrosity of a state for a total of 10 days.

The food is amazing. The humidity can bite me. How do people live like this?

Peace,

Rey

P.S. My cowboy boots are FINE.

From: Kylo Ren <bensoloney@yahoo.com>
Date: Thursday, June 17, 1999 at 4:11 AM

RE: Confession

Go to a real tack store and tell them your boots are fine.

My video is done. It premieres on TRL tomorrow. I’m doing a call in.

They wanted me to perform and I said I couldn’t fit it in but to be honest I’m not ready to do it alone.

Don’t tell anyone that.

--Kylo

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>
On: Saturday, June 19, 1999 at 2:33 PM

Subject: Deep in the Heart

I thought the Alamo would be bigger.

We were on the road yesterday so I couldn’t watch but I’m watching Monday!

Peace,

Rey

PS Your secret’s safe with me. And I think you would have killed it.
From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Monday, June 21, 1999 5:11 PM

Subject: WOW

I saw the video.

Kylo.

I don’t know what to say. Your face is so expressive and they shot you so beautifully. And that concept! I’m so jealous because I know there’s no way in the world a director like that is in my album budget but wow. I love directors who don’t take the song literally. Like, I’m sure a lot of people would have had you like in some dungeon covered in ash or whatever but the song’s more about regret than anything and just having you in that hotel room with all that 8mm footage projected on the walls and flickering on your face? I’m in awe.

And a number one debut? I screamed!

But you know what Ashes reminds me of? I didn’t realize this the first couple of times I heard it (and I know I’m getting into deep cuts here and you can roll your eyes all you want) but musically it’s so much like Mirrorbright. At first I thought City in the Sky but that one has always kind of been different from the rest of Dagobah’s stuff, like it was designed to be a single or something.

You should be really, really proud.

Ok though enough gushing. I checked out a tack store in Austin and found some beautiful boots (and you’re right, mine are shit compared to them) but I’m just still not in a place where I can drop $500 on a pair of shoes.

They’re yelling at me because I’m going to make us late for sound check! Bye!

Peace,

Rey

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From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

Date: Tuesday, June 22, 1999 at 1:15 AM

RE: WOW

Rey,

I was just going to say thank you but I realized that what you said deserves more than that. But I suck at actually accepting real compliments.

So I smoked a joint so I wouldn’t be afraid to send this to you.
I am so proud of this song that it scares me. I don’t even know why I was allowed to do it. I almost feel like it was just so I could get a taste of freedom so I’d know what I’m missing out on being chained to this band.

That’s stupid, though.

Right?

Please when you answer this just tell me about what you’ve been doing.

--Kylo

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From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Saturday, June 26, 1999 5:03 AM

RE: WOW

We played Houston last night and we’re going to Shreveport later today. Actually in like a couple of hours. I haven’t slept yet. I’m glad to get out of Texas but we’re in the south forever and as much as I want to see everything I want to DIE everytime I go outside. Like, honestly, just die. I feel gross because the sweat just SITS THERE ON MY BODY. It won’t go away. My clothes stick to me. I feel there’s no point in taking showers but I take two a day and it just saps all of my energy.

But bleh enough about the bad stuff. Taybin is so awesome. I didn’t really get a chance to talk to her until tonight. She invited us out after the show to this crazy enormous Mexican place that stayed open for us, on her, including drinks. (Margaritas are amazing!!!!) And when we got back she got the front desk guy to open up the business center for me so I could check email. Everyone’s pressuring me to get a laptop. I don’t know why people keep wanting me to spend money that’s not really mine yet.

So I’m down here in my pajama bottoms and your hoodie because inside places it’s always FREEZING because of the air conditioning, and I’m pretty sure this is the sexy ensemble I’m going to travel in.

Last night I went out in the audience to watch Taybin’s set and one of your fans told me I was way prettier in person. I didn’t really know how to take that.

I listen to the mix you made me a lot.

I also think about your hands a lot. Your hands on my waist.

Peace,

Rey
From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Monday, June 28 1999 at 10:47 AM

Subject: Yo

I’m sorry about that last email. I’d had a couple of margaritas…I hope you aren’t mad or freaked out.

Peace,

Rey

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Thursday, July 1 1999 at 11:16 PM

Subject: ?

Hello?

Peace,

Rey

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Return to Sender" by Elvis Presley
As a kid, the Fourth of July had been Finn’s favorite holiday, especially after he went away to school. It meant fun with kids in the neighborhood and a day off from structured activities. Plus, he really did love to watch things explode. His dad was the guy who’d buy a trunk full of fireworks and make sure that any neighborhood kids who came by got a good show, and even got to set a few off themselves if they wanted, and he always put extra food on the grill for anyone who came around. He’s still like this, even without any kids living at home.

Finn lingers longer than he should on his parents’ front stoop, watching Calvin Storm show some kids how to light sparklers. He’s patient, and emphasizes the importance of safety without unnecessarily scaring them. It’s not quite dark, but sparklers are bright enough to appease the kids’ impatience until the real show.

It will be dark by the time Finn gets to Leia’s party. That’s something he shouldn’t miss, no matter how much nostalgia he’s drowning in.

He goes inside to kiss his mother goodbye. Camille pats his cheek and tells him to visit more often. He promises he will and makes a mental note to tell Robyn to start clearing some time. There are people who live across the country from their parents and see them more often than he does.

Back outside, he shakes his dad’s hand, telling him he’ll stop by again soon, and waves goodbye to the kids, who are writing their names with light.

Leia Organa lives in a five-bedroom Cape Cod style home right on the edge of Will Rogers Park. It’s understated, despite its size, especially compared to the newly constructed villas and steel-and-glass compounds that dot the area. Definitely a place Finn can see a child growing up in, just not the kind of child who grows up to be Kylo Ren.

Finn parks on the road two blocks away from the house and follows the sound of thumping bass to Leia’s back yard. Carnival lights are strung from the house to the far reaches of the yard. There’s a stage set up on the terrace, where the Max Rebo band is belting out a cover of “American Woman.” Finn signed the band last month, after they were dropped from New Republic. They’re not the most original band in the world but they’re a solid party band with a loyal fan base. Not everyone can be a revolutionary.

The guests, an assortment of Resistance artists and employees, are scattered around the lawn lounge on islands made of blankets and rugs and floor pillows. The only tables seem to be the ones loaded with food.

A small crowd is gathered around the grilling station, which consists of four grills and four chefs. (Kosher, Halal, vegetarian and heathen.) He spots Poe in line for a hamburger, drinking a Red Stripe and talking with Greer Sonnel. He’s as relaxed as he can ever look, in a Viernes Verde t shirt and plaid shorts. His stomach drops a little at the sight of Poe enjoying himself with Greer, with her perfect face and hair, but he shakes his head and starts toward the pair. Leia intercepts him, however, hooking her arm into his and turning him back toward the house.
“Finn, I’m so sorry but I need to talk to you for a moment. I’ve been meaning to for days but there’s been so much going on I haven’t had the chance. Do you mind or do you want to get your food first?”

“No, Leia, we can chat.”

She leads him into the house, through the kitchen, stopping to give instructions to the caterers and grab a bottle of beer for Finn and a glass of wine for herself. She also digs into the far reaches of the freezer and extracts a single cigarette from a box. They settle into wicker chairs on a screened in porch off the kitchen and Leia lights the cigarette.

“Don’t tell anyone,” she says, exhaling. “Technically I quit years ago but sometimes it’s the only thing that keeps me sane.”

“My lips are sealed,” Finn says. “What did you want to talk about? Is it a problem with one of my artists?”

“Finn, as you know, we’ve experienced tremendous growth in the last year. And looking at our first and second quarter numbers, we’re poised to end the year with a bang. So, I’ve decided to bite the bullet and start a subsidiary label to focus on hip hop. Greer Sonnel has already agreed to head the label and I want you to be head of A&R.”

Finn sits up straight. “Leia, that’s amazing. I’m honored, but are you sure? I’ve only been here three months.”

Leia waves her hand. “You’ve been killing it in your field for five years. No one else has your track record, other than Greer. Of course people will grumble. But they always do. People will grumble about Greer getting the head position and she’s been with us for fifteen years. And don’t worry, you’ll be able to finish your current projects if you don’t want to hand over the reins. You can take the rest of the weekend to think about it.”

“Okay. Though I’m leaning toward yes.”

“Good, but take the weekend anyway. I’ll send someone over with a benefits proposal tomorrow.” She stubs out her cigarette and gets up. “Oh, you can talk to Greer and Poe about it but no one else. We’re announcing to the staff on Tuesday and sending out the press release immediately after.”

Finn sits on the porch for a few minutes longer after she leaves, his beer going warm in his hands.

Head of A&R at 26. It won’t be much bigger than an indie at first, but still. Maybe he can finally move out of Encino. And there are a few hip hop acts he’s been dying to develop but who need some extra attention before they’re ready to record. Greer is incredible to work with. Tough and inspiring with an ear to rival Poe’s.

Poe. Who won’t be his boss anymore.

Finn chuckles and takes a drink. Rey will get a kick out of that once she finds out. It’ll probably be the first thing she mentions, even before asking if he’s still going to work with her on her album.

And what will he say to her? She’d asked him, not long ago, what he would do if Poe wasn’t his boss and he’d practically told her he would pursue it.

That’s not a priority right now, no matter how nice Poe looks in a t shirt.
He should go and talk to him—they—though. There’s a lot to talk about.

They aren’t at the grill station anymore, but he finds them sitting under a tree some distance from the band. They’re alone, which would have scared him off ten minutes ago, but he welcomes it now.

“Oh, my man!” Poe says, reaching out and clasping Finn’s hand. “We were just talking about you. Have you said hi to Leia yet.”

“Yeah,” Finn says. “She told me. Asked me.”

“Did you give her an answer?” Greer asks.

“She said to take the weekend but I think we all know it’s yes.”

“Sit down,” Poe says, moving over to make room on the blanket.

Finn sits down, looking at his future boss and soon-to-be-ex boss. “Holy shit, y’all,” he says. “It’s a good day for brown folks. Leia’s got this place looking like United Colors of Benetton.”

Greer laughs. “I wonder if she even noticed.”

“She notices everything,” Poe says.

“True. So, Finn, are you going to finish out Rey’s record before jumping over to all hip hop all the time?”

“Of course. I can’t leave her in the lurch.”

Poe sets his empty plate down and reaches for his beer. “How’s she doing, anyway?”

“Good, as far as I can tell. Exhausted. They ended up with closer to forty-five dates than the thirty I pitched to her. I caught her show in Houston since I was there scouting, but I didn’t tell her. Still haven’t told her. But they’ve gotten real tight, and the band’s chemistry is off the charts. I definitely want to secure them as her performance band, and to play on the album. She’s coming into her own as a performer, too. Developing a recognizable performance style, some signature guitar moves, learning how to work her hair, all of it.”

“Sounds like you found us a star out there in the desert,” Greer says. “Can’t wait for you to work that magic at TwinStar.”

“That’s what she’s calling it? I didn’t even ask.”

“Yep.” Greer says, and holds up her bottle to the light. “Would you look at that. I’m out of beer. Either of you want another?”

“Sure,” Poe says.

Finn shrugs. “Why not?”

They sit and listen to the band finish a cover of “American Pie” and segue into one of their originals.

“I think signing them was one of your best calls so far,” Poe says. “They’re due for a bit of a comeback. Let ‘em be one of those old fart bands that piss off the kids when they swoop in and win a bunch of Grammys.”
“I’ll admit, a big part of it was that I liked them so much as a kid, even if my mom did blast them on Saturday mornings when it was house cleaning time.”

“Oh man, with my mom it was Johnny Pacheco. I still can’t listen to him without thinking about that scrub brush. Poor Mama had bad knees, you know, so I had to do the floors.”

“I had to do the dishes because I was short and didn’t have to lean over as much. The week after I went off to school we suddenly got a dishwasher.”

“I still had to scrub that floor the last time I went home.”

“I ducked out early tonight. I saw that stack of pots and pans.”

“I wonder what Greer had to endure?”

“I’m going to go out on a limb and say Bollywood soundtracks and, I don’t know, dusting the tops of the door jambs because she’s tall.”

Finn laughs, a deep belly laugh that leaves him out of breath. “You know,” he says. “As happy as I am about this promotion I’m going to miss our lunches.”

“Aw,” Poe says. “The new office won’t be far. We can still do our lunches.”

Finn spots Greer picking her way back across the lawn with the beer and takes his chance. “Maybe a dinner or two? Non work?”

Poe looks at him, eyes sparkling. “Why the hell not?”

When Greer rejoins them, Finn asks about Saturday morning cleaning.

“Broadway cast recordings, and laundry. We hung everything to dry and I’ve been taller than my mother since I was ten.”

They crack open the beers and Poe raises his bottle. “To TwinStar,” he says.

“To TwinStar,” Greer and Finn repeat, tapping their bottles with Poe’s as the first firework shoots across the sky.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "America" by Neil Diamond
From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

Date: Sunday, July 11, 1999 at 12:09 PM

Subject: Hi

I’ll start this by saying I should have at least responded to you sooner and told you that I wasn’t mad or freaked out.

Okay I was a little freaked out. Because it brought back memories I’ve been working hard as fuck to suppress. So instead of getting on a plane I jerked off and then threw myself into promoting the single.

I’ve been hiding out in New York since last weekend. It’s hot and smelly and the subways are like the ninth layer of hell but at least most of the time I can go get a slice without someone taking my picture. There are all these rumors that the band is breaking up since Ashes has been so successful, and I think the label is actually fanning those flames so that there’s more interest in us, so it’s been hell in LA. Some fuckwad with a camera followed me into the bathroom at California Pizza Kitchen. That fucker is so lucky Lorna had shoved a valium down my throat before we went out or his camera would have ended up in the urinal. But I had her book a flight for me the second I got home.

The good thing about being out here is I’ve gotten a lot of writing done.

My publicist sent your Teen People feature over because I was mentioned. I’m impressed that I was only a parenthetical, though, and they focused on your music. The pictures were nice, even though they airbrushed out your freckles. I hate when they do that.

Did they let you keep that green dress?

--Kylo

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Monday, July 12 1999 at 3:16 PM

RE: Hi

I thought about not replying for a week or so out of spite but I was really just so glad to hear from you, oversharing and all.

We spent our 4th of July in Minneapolis. Don’t get me wrong it’s a surprisingly cool city but not somewhere I think oh hey I want to spend Independence Day there. BUT at least we didn’t end up staying in Des Moines for the 4th.
We’re in Chicago now or five days total and we’re playing three shows. Taybin is from here, and they added one when the first two sold out so quickly. They’ve actually got us in the same hotel as Taybin and her band again. At the Four Seasons! I’m in heaven. I’m still sharing a room with the rest of the band but since it’s a suite it’s not as cramped, or as smelly. And there’s a computer right in the room.

Dolores, the little girl I used to babysit, emailed me and told me that she’d shown my article to all of her friends and they all flipped out that someone they know was in Teen People. Well, she did say her friend Rosita said it wasn’t that great because it was only Teen People not real People and I wasn’t on the cover. I think Rosita has a good head on her shoulders.

That interviewer was relentless! She was pissed to begin with because Maz told her I wasn’t going to answer any questions about you. She asked anyway and Maz threatened to pull me but I told the journalist you were a friend and then appealed to her feminist ideals by telling her I’d really like to not start out being known by what guys I hang out with. She moved on but wasn’t happy and I think that’s why she didn’t print the thing about us being friends and went with the whole “has been seen around town with dark bad boy Kylo Ren.” Barf.

I thought the whole styling process when I took my website photos was intense but I’ve never been plucked and prodded more than for that shoot. I don’t think they actually airbrushed my skin they just put about five pounds of makeup on my face. They DID let me keep the clothes, though, including the green dress. I wore it on stage last night, actually. I get a little paranoid wearing things that short on stage, though, because I keep thinking people are looking up my skirt. I could pull a Courtney Love and just hike my leg up on the monitor…but you know, with underwear on.

Peace,
Rey

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Saturday, July 17 1999 at 7:08 PM

Subject: !!!!

When we got to Nashville I went straight to a radio station for a live interview and acoustic performance, then we went to visit some of Bastian’s family, who threw us a cookout. His dad and uncles used to have a doo wop group and they sang me Happy Birthday!!

And there I was, drowsy and full and a little tipsy and I dozed off and instead of waking up outside the hotel we were at the Gibson Factory.

I don’t know how you pulled it off, and how so many people knew and I never had a clue (even Jess, who can’t keep a secret for shit!!) but when they told me I could choose whatever I wanted I started to cry. Like in an anime when they just sort of starts spewing tears from their eyes like a faucet.

They wouldn’t even let me look at prices they just brought me things to play after talking to me about my music, and I fell in love with a red spruce Hummingbird. Oh god, she just sings. She’s heavenly.
But I was so overwhelmed and told them I couldn’t take it, but they wouldn’t let me leave without it. And said that if I didn’t take it they’d just send it to my house.

It’s sitting in its case in the corner of our room, and I just keep looking at it, and thinking about how right it felt in my hands.

I have to go now. The band is taking me out.

Peace,

Rey

PS Are you sure? I’m sure they’ll take it back if you tell them to.

From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

Date: Sunday, July 18, 1999 at 2:54 AM

RE: !!!

Rey,

I wouldn’t have given you the guitar if I wasn’t sure. Please take it, and play the shit out of it.

I’m going to Spain until the first week in August. Songwriting sabbatical. They want us in the studio in September and Hux’s family has a house there that I can use to finish things. There’s no Internet, but write me anyway, if you feel like it. There may be internet at a café, otherwise I’ll just read everything when I come back.

It sounds like you had a good birthday and I’m happy I could be part of that.

--Kylo

PS That top ten albums thing came out and I’m so mad I forgot all about Big Star. I should have put them in instead of the Stones.

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Saturday, July 24, 1999 at 4:11 AM

Subject: New Orleans

I think that, despite the humidity, and the insects, I have fallen in love with this city.

I thought I loved Seattle. I was wrong. Seattle was like, if I’d gone to an all-girls school and then met a boy for the first time. New Orleans is like realizing I liked girls all along and finding the right one.

We came in straight from the Baton Rouge show late Thursday night and I haven’t been to sleep yet. I know I should, soon, since we have as how tonight, and it's not like I can’t it's like I don’t
really need to. Jess and I have been walking around popping into shops and restaurants and courtyards and we even stumbled on a wedding reception at a garden district mansion, and they welcomed us and fed us crawfish and gumbo and we ate it sitting barefoot on the roots of a five-hundred-year-old oak tree dripping with Spanish moss and I’ve never felt more like I was in a movie.

A psychic out in front of St. Louis Cathedral read my cards. He had one brown eye and one blue, and I don’t know, but I think maybe that makes him more authentic. He told me my path is bright but the end of the year would bring grave revelations. I don’t know, I think he was hinting that the world really might end on New Year’s.

We were walking down Rampart around sunset tonight and there was this little apartment, above a voodoo shop, with a shady gallery and a garret with gable windows and I just thought oh I could live here forever. I could live here and never grow tired of writing about it.

Everything sounds better and feels better, even the heat and the sweat feel better. And everything tastes so delicious, even simple things like bread and butter.

And I think, that kissing, that having sex, that everything would feel better here.

And now, though, I am thinking about the cool fresh sheets in my room, and that maybe sleeping might feel ridiculously nice, too.

Love,
Rey

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>
On: Friday, July 30 1999 at 7:08 PM
Subject: The Gulf

I swam in the ocean today (well, what passes for swimming with me.) We played Tampa last night but we swung over to St. Petersburg because Snap said the beaches are better there.

I think I’m going to end up writing a song about it, like as a metaphor for your first time falling in love or going all the way.

The final month of tour is about to start and I feel like we’ve hit a groove with the music and I don’t know if my body has gotten used to it or what but I’ve been using the driving time to write sometimes instead of sleeping, and sometimes we even jam a bit in the van. I mean I’m still exhausted but it’s not as mind numbing as before. And I’ve made the audience laugh regularly, on purpose, between songs.

I played the Hummingbird for the first time on stage in New Orleans. She’s magical. Thank you.

I hope the pictures I sent you from New Orleans get to you before you leave Spain. And I hope it’s okay that Lorna gave me the address. Though I guess she wouldn’t have given it to me if it weren’t okay.
San Juan de los Terreros sounds like a made up place. I wonder how my Mexican Spanish learned from public school and bilingual children would sound to Spanish people. Espero voy a averiguar algún día.

Peace,

Rey

From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>
Date: Wednesday, August 4, 1999 at 10:23 AM
RE: The Gulf

I found a café with internet. Not that I was looking too hard. Being reclusive comes easy for me but there are all of these cats hanging round the villa so I came to town in search of cat food and decided to check my email.

I got the photos yesterday. I think my favorite is the one of you marching with that brass band. Though that was a sweet Easy Rider homage in the cemetery.

New Orleans is…intense. I don’t know if I’d want to live there full time but it has its charms and its own special energy. And yes, everything sensual is enhanced.

--Kylo

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>
On: Friday, August 6, 1999 at 2:18 AM
Subject: Big news

I got some big news today and I wanted to let you know personally instead of hearing it through the grapevine.

I don’t know how Leia did it or why he would even want to, but your uncle is coming out of retirement to produce my album. We start recording on September 15th.

Please let me know when you get this, even if it upsets you.

Peace,

Rey
From: Kylo Ren <bensoloney@yahoo.com>

Date: Monday, August 9, 1999 at 12:43 PM

RE: Big news

I just got back into town last night and I hadn’t checked my email since that last time I emailed you, so I found out from a pap shouting in my face asking me what I thought about my uncle coming out of retirement to produce my “girlfriend’s” record.

Honestly, I’m happy for you. He’s good, and it’ll create a lot of buzz for your record. I always thought it was lame as fuck anyway that he ran away just because I decided to move on.

Fair warning, he may come across as a shiny happy hippy but he’ll work you so hard you’ll hate him by the time it’s finished. But you also might win a Best New Artist Grammy.

--Kylo

PS Do you use AIM?

KyloBen: Hey NYC is your last stop on the tour right?

ReyOLight79: Y

KyloBen: when do you fly out?

ReyOLight79: Sept 2

KyloBen: And you’re not recording until the 15th?

ReyOLight79: no. y?

KyloBen: I’m going on TRL on the 3rd to perform Ashes then I’m staying in town for the VMAs. Our planes will practically pass each other. If you go back to LA you won’t see me for at least a week.

ReyOLight79: Who says I want to see you?

KyloBen: I do

ReyOLight79: so…

KyloBen: You should stay in the city. I’ll take care of your ticket.

KyloBen: you still there?

ReyOLight79: where would I stay?

KyloBen: My place

KyloBen: There’s a guest room. It even has walls and a door. A big steel garage door.

ReyOLight79: How long are you asking me to stay?
**KyloBen**: As long as you like, and you can go to the VMAs with me. I guarantee that no matter what they’ve got planned for you next week they’ll put it off for a chance for you to go to the VMAs.

ReyOLight79: Yeah except that if I want to go to the VMAs with you I can still go home on the 2<sup>nd</sup> and fly back on the 8<sup>th</sup>.

**KyloBen**: just tell them you need a vacation. You’ve worked your ass off for three months.

ReyOLight79: You have a point. I’ll think about it.

**KyloBen**: Please?

ReyOLight79: I’ll think about it. We’ve got three weeks. That’s all you’re getting right now.

**KyloBen**: It’s better than a no.

ReyOLight79: you’re damned right.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from the "Wouldn't It Be Nice" by the Beach Boys
By the time Kylo arrives in New York the first day of September, he’s only been able to get out of Rey that she’ll put him on the list for the show. He could easily have let his people do it, but he let her have her moment.

A delayed flight gets him to the city with little more than an hour to spare before the show, and it takes half an hour to get to the loft from La Guardia. He has the car wait for him to drop off his bags and change his shirt. He hasn’t been inside the loft since July but thanks to Lorna and her magic list of contacts it looks like he just stepped out that morning. He double checks that the fridge and pantry have been stocked and that the guest bed has been made up and bounds down the stairs to the waiting car.

It’s a quick trip uptown to the Hammerstein, where the line to get in reaches down the block. He tries to make a run from the car to the door but some girls scream his name and he takes pity and goes over. Those two girls become ten or more clamoring for his autograph and a security guard comes over to escort him inside when the crowd starts pushing. One of the girls calls after him, asking if he’s here to see Rey and when he nods she squeals. “You guys are soooo cute together oh my god.”

“Thanks,” he says, and lets the guard pull him inside.

“You going backstage or right upstairs?” the guard asks as he crosses Kylo’s name off and hands him an all access pass.

“Upstairs. Don’t tell her I’m here.”

“Alright. First level box, house right.”

He takes the elevator up and finds the VIP box, stopping by the bar for a ginger ale on the way. There are a few people waiting already, and a couple give him a double take but don’t talk to him. He doesn’t know or recognize anyone, so they’re probably friends and relatives of the band. A girl in her twenties whispers something to her friend and they giggle behind their hands.

The crowd from outside starts to flow in on the main level, ignoring security’s warnings not to run to get to the railing. Hammerstein shows are always chaos.

He’s never played here as a headliner, but Dagobah opened for Uncle Tupelo on a few east coast dates in ’92 and this had been their New York stop. His parents had invited everybody they knew in town and plenty from out of town.

As far as he can tell, he’s the only one here for Rey.

He’s on his second ginger ale when the lights go down and Rey’s band comes out on stage. He sits down by the ledge, leans on it, with his chin resting on his arms.

Rey walks on stage, blazing with a confidence that leaves him with a sense of his absolute unworthiness, as this is her home and she’s graciously invited everyone to join her.

Her hair is longer, in two braids that fall to the middle of her back, and she’s wearing the dress he’d
liked from her Teen People shoot. It’s dark green, short, and buttons all the way up the front. He can’t quite tell from here but she might be wearing fishnets.

How the hell is he going to survive this?

She straps on her guitar, approaches the mic, and Kylo hears her voice for the first time in three months.

“Hello, New York!” She waits for the applause to die down and laughs. “Thank you. I’m Rey Kenobi. This is the last day of my first tour, and my first time in New York, so it’s kind of bittersweet, but I’ll try my best not to cry. At least until the end of my set.”

Someone in the audience screams, “You’re so fucking hot!”

Rey laughs, and Kylo’s chest tightens. Rey’s laughter isn’t graceful or sweet, but it’s entirely unselfconscious, and he hasn’t heard it enough. Even before she left, it was rare, at least in his presence.

“Thank you,” she says to the enamored audience member. “Um, this first one is pretty new. I started it right before I found out I was going on tour and I’ve been fiddling with it ever since. So this is the first time we’ve played it anywhere but in the van.”

She starts strumming and he recognizes the progression from the song she’d begun at his house. The song that was still ringing in the air when she’d kissed him. He sits up, mouth gone dry. It’s a song about going home, and how home isn’t always where you grew up or where you keep your stuff, and towards the end her voice does waver, and after she strums the last chord, she wipes her eyes, two quick swipes.

He stands for the rest of the set, leaning against the pillar closest to the stage. Two songs in, of the younger girls in the box takes his picture, but it barely registers. Rey plays five originals, none of which he’s heard before, and closes out with an acoustic cover of The Bangles “In Your Room,” that leaves Kylo reeling.

The audience is still clapping for her as he makes his way downstairs and backstage. He should probably give her a few minutes to chill, but then she might think he hadn’t shown.

She’s got her own dressing room (thank god) and he stops to take a deep breath before he knocks. She flings the door open and stops cold when she sees him, an enormous, toothy grin spreading across her face.

“You came!”

“Of course. I said I would.” Until this second, he’d thought he would kiss her right away, but he’s paralyzed, star struck by someone he already knows, who is barely a star.

Giggling, she takes his hand and pulls him into the room. “What did you think? Do you want something to drink? I don’t have a rider or anything but they give me water and soda at least. And hot tea. God I’ve never drank so much hot tea in my life.”

She hands him a sparkling water and starts squeezing honey into a mug of tea. “I can’t believe it’s over, though. Did you want to go watch Taybin? We can watch from the side or go back to where you were. Then there’s an after party, like an end of tour thing, but I was going to skip that anyway.”

“If it’s okay with you I’d rather go grab some food. My plane was late and they messed up my food
request so I haven’t eaten since this morning.”

“Oh my god those poor stewardesses.”

“You’ll be glad to know I was only mildly terse with the stewardesses. And I’ll have Lorna take care of complaining to the airline. So, my house, then order in?”

“Hmm,” Rey says, tapping her cheek with her finger. “Did you make anyone else cry today?”

“I swear I did not. I even signed some autographs out front.”

“Oh! I’m all packed. I just need to say goodbye to my band. Do you want to meet them? Wait. No. I’m probably going to cry. Stay here.”

When she gets back, red eyed and subdued, she wraps her arms around him and rests her head against his chest. “I don’t know why I’m so sad. I’m going to see them again in less than two weeks.”

Kylo holds her, one hand stroking her hair. “I’m impressed that you still like them after three months in a van.”

“I love them.” She sniffs and steps back. “If you’ll grab my guitars I’ll get my bags.”

“How about I take one guitar and your bag and you take the other guitar and your backpack.”

“What? I’ve been hauling this bag around for twelve weeks. I think I can handle it.”

“Hey, I know. But there’s probably press out there by now, since I wasn’t exactly sneaky about coming in here. I don’t want to look like a dick.”

“You’re wearing a Led Zeppelin shirt so you’re basically guaranteed to look like a dick no matter what.”

Kylo opens his mouth to retort, then closes it again.

“What?” Rey says.

“Nothing. I just realized that there’s nothing I could say to insult how you look that wouldn’t be a lie.”

Rey rolls her eyes at this, but blushes all the same.

Kylo calls his driver and tells him to meet them at the stage door, and they make it into the car without seeing a single photographer.

“Either they’re hiding and using telephoto lenses,” Kylo says as they pull out onto 34th Street. “Or they won’t show up until right before Taybin’s show is over.”

“Lucky us,” Rey says, looking out the window. She’s quiet the rest of the ride, which he attributes to post-tour letdown. As much as he ends up hating his bandmates by the end of tour, it’s still bittersweet when it ends. It must be ten times worse when you actually like your band.

She doesn’t say anything until they pull up in front of his building. “Do you own the whole thing?” she asks, looking up.

“Just the second floor. Someone else owns the bottom floor and rents out all these retail places.
She makes an offer on the loft at least twice a year.”

“The entire second floor is your loft?”

“Yep,” he says as he unlocks the front door. They go up the stairs, which are covered in a faded psychedelic flower print. Rey stops to look at the graffiti on the walls, bearing signatures and drawings from his parents’ era all the way to the last time he threw a party, when *Starkiller* was released.

“Holy shit,” she says, touching a name. Based on the location, Kylo guesses it’s Janis Joplin.

“Come on, you’ll be out here for hours if you get sucked in.”

She joins him on the landing and he opens the door, letting her in first.

When new people come over, he likes to picture his apartment through their eyes. It’s impressive for some, run of the mill for others who are used to places twice as large with more recent updates.

Rey is in awe, and for the first time since she walked out on stage he feels like he’s on equal footing with her again.

“I guess there’s no need for a tour since you can see most of it from here,” he says. “But, um, I’ll give you one anyway. Baby grand to your right. No I don’t play. There’s always at least one asshole at a party who does so I never get it tuned unless I’m hiring someone to play it at a party. Kitchen to your left. Watch your step going up. You may laugh but many a drunkard has stubbed their toe in search of a midnight snack. Um, dining area to your right. Seats up to twelve if the leaves are put in. The legendary record collection just past the kitchen. I just got rid of my parents’ sofa last year and put in that sectional. It’s not as comfortable but so far it won’t light up like a Christmas tree under a black light. My bedroom’s over in that corner, three steps up with a fantastic view of the dining table, but it does feature a total of three walls. Well, two walls and the windows. And the guest room is here.”

They’ve reached the far end of the loft and he leads her through the wide bedroom door. “You just pull this down to close it, like any garage door. Don’t worry, it’s counterweighted so it won’t crash down.” He demonstrates closing and opening it, then shows her the door to the bathroom. “This one’s just got a shower but the master bath has a shower and a whirlpool tub. Um…that’s about it. You can put your stuff away and I’ll go order food. Is Thai okay?”

“Sure, get me whatever you think I’ll like.” She’s standing in the center of the room holding her backpack down in front of her by the hand strap. He takes a step toward her, intent on kissing her, but hesitates and loses his nerve, instead turning on his heel and wandering out to the kitchen to find the takeout menus.

He’s in the middle of ordering when she wanders out and goes directly to the record wall, running her fingers along them, hesitant to take any out. While he’s on hold he joins her, and whispers that it’s okay to choose something. He runs back to the kitchen island to get his credit card from his wallet, and when he hangs up, she’s putting a record on the player.

“Don’t laugh,” she says as she lays the needle down. It takes him a few measures to pick up on it, but he can’t suppress his laughter when he recognizes Paula Abdul.

“I said don’t laugh,” she says. “This was the first cassette I ever owned. My caseworker gave it to me and eventually I wore it out. I haven’t listened to it in years.”

“Hey it’s cool. The first album I had that I chose on my own was John Denver.”
“You’re kidding.”

“Yeah, it was Autograph. I was like seven and my mom had taken me with her to see him in concert. I got all obsessed with moving to the mountains.”

“Was that your first concert?”

“No,” he says. “Was that the buzzer?”

“No, you just ordered two minutes ago. What was your first concert?”

“Cher. I was four.”

“Four?”

“Yeah there’s a ton of pictures of me at shows, snot running down my face and wearing those safety headphones like people wear when they’re mowing the lawn.”

“Do you remember it?”

“Vaguely. Supposedly I met her and asked her to marry me but I was a kid and kids like shiny things. What was your first concert?”

“Earth, Wind and Fire at the New Mexico State Fair when I was fourteen. My foster parents took us. It was actually really rad and that’s what got me into going to shows.”

When the food arrives, Kylo switches the record to Sam Cooke and directs Rey to the window seat by the piano to eat. “We can open the curtains but all you’ll get is a view into the apartments across the street.”

“Which means they could see us.”

“Not if we dim the lights over here.” He turns off everything on this end of the loft except a lamp near the piano and the light over the stove, then opens a section of the curtains. Lights are on in most of the windows in the building across the street. There’s a clear view into a second floor apartment with a large arched window, but the people inside are only sitting on their sofa watching TV.

“They’re as boring as we are,” Rey says.

“No we’re way more boring.”

“You’re probably right.”

When Kylo offers Rey some tofu from his pad Thai, Rey screws up her face and turns away, but he persists, waving his chopsticks in her face until she relents. As she chews, surprised pleasure dawns on her face and she steals another piece from his plate.

“That’s incredible. I always thought tofu would be bland and mushy.”

“It is until you cook it.”

“I think I almost like it better than the chicken.” He smiles and she throws a napkin at him. “Don’t look so smug.”

Rey reaches out to get her napkin back and he takes her hand, tugging her forward and cradling her
neck with his other hand as he kisses her. It’s gentle, the barest amount of pressure, and when he pulls back her eyes are wide and dark. For the first time since meeting her, he’s struck by how young she is. They’ve never talked about their sexual histories and it occurs to him he may have been operating based on a lot of assumptions.

She stands up and takes their plates to the kitchen, where she starts putting away the leftovers. Kylo follows, and when she’s put the last of the boxes in the fridge, she turns to him.

Kylo reaches out and takes one of her braids in his hand, at the root, slides his hand down to the tip, tugging the hair tie off. He then works his way back up the braid, unraveling it as he goes, and when it’s loose, he runs his fingers through her hair. She closes her eyes and sighs, and he does the same thing with the other braid. When he’s finished, she stands in front of him, waves cascading around her shoulders, and he bends to kiss her again, this time more insistent, coaxing her mouth open, taking her bottom lip between his teeth.

After a few seconds of this she pulls away, looking into his eyes, questioning, searching, then she turns and goes toward the living area, pausing once to look behind her to make sure he’s following. He catches up to her in front of the record wall and traps her with her back against the shelves, his arms on either side of her. She tips her face up to him but right before their lips meet she ducks under his arm, grabs the back of his shirt and leads him to the sofa, where she gently pushes him down. Before he’s even settled she’s in his lap, straddling him, and her kisses are no longer tentative. Tonight she smells like sweat and the incense she burned on stage during her set. Taking his face in her hands, she looks him in the eye. “I knew this was going to happen when I decided to stay. I need you to know that.”

“Is that why you wore that dress and played a song about fucking?”

She leans back, eyebrows knitted together. “I thought that song was about studying together!” Laughing, she leans in and kisses his neck, whispering in his ear, “I did wear this for you. But I almost changed my mind on the way over.”

“You can change your mind whenever you want,” he says. He touches her cheek, runs his hand down her neck to her collar and begins unbuttoning her dress. The buttons are tiny, and finding the will to not just rip it open is one of the hardest things he’s ever done, but the last thing he wants to do right now is piss her off, so he focuses on each inch of skin that’s revealed with every undone button.

When he’s got five undone, he reaches his hand inside her dress and cups her breast. It’s the perfect size and shape, and she’s not wearing a bra. He silently thanks God, and Rey, and whatever other higher powers are watching over him. She shivers and kisses him again, grinding against him. He’s painfully hard and she’s right there, already so ready that he can smell her arousal, and it wouldn’t take much effort to take her right now. All he has to do is unzip, tear off her fishnets, push her underwear aside and plunge into her. But he lets his forebrain take over again and resumes working on the buttons, this time reaching her waist. He opens her dress and she moans and snakes her fingers into his hair when he takes one of her nipples into his mouth.

“Your mouth is made for this,” she pants.

“What?” he says as he moves to her other breast.

“Everything. All of it.” She grinds into him again, and if she does that too many more times he’s going to lose it, so he tightens his arms around her and shifts on the sofa, positioning her under him with her legs still wrapped around his waist.
He kisses down her body, spending plenty of time on her neck and breasts before stopping to deal with the remainder of her buttons. He manages to get her fishnets off without ripping them, then hooks his thumbs up through the band of her underwear and pulls them down and off. She moves her hands to her tummy and stops, like she wants to cover herself but knows it’s silly. Looking up at him, one leg dangling off the sofa, she trusts him, and all he knows is that however this started, in this moment it’s real, and if he only has this week with her before it goes to shit, he’ll take it.

Starting at and lingering on her gorgeous mouth, he makes his way down her body again, gently opening her legs and planting a kiss on her inner thigh.

“What are you doing?” she asks. He looks up and she’s sat up, resting on her elbows.

“No one’s ever done this for you?” he asks, sitting back with his hands resting on her knees.

“Never,” she says. “You don’t have to.”

His cock twitches at that revelation and he squeezes her knees “I want to. Do you want me to?”

She looks him in the eye and licks her lips, then lays back down, arm thrown over her eyes.

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes,” she whispers.

He starts at her knee and kisses down her thigh, hovering over her center, close enough for her to feel his breath, before moving to her other thigh, making her hiss with frustration. She moans deeply as he runs his finger along her seam and parts her lips, and when he takes his first experimental lick of her clit, she gasps and bucks away, but he winds his around her thighs and pulls her close.

“Oh, fuck,” she moans as he wraps his lips around her and sucks. It’s been years since he’s done this, but it all comes back to him. He starts with slow circles but the sounds she makes are more frustration than pleasure, so he speeds up, flicking at her clit with the tip of his tongue, and Rey is so deprived, and so close, a fist full of his hair in her hand as she rocks into his mouth. He switches to slower swipes and she curses and yanking his hair.

“No, the other way,” she pants, so he speeds up again, reveling in the taste and smell of her as he slides two fingers inside and crooks them finding the right spot with a couple of strokes. She falls apart with a wail, arching her back and pulling his hair so hard that he sees stars as she pulses around his fingers and under his tongue.

As she stills, she releases his hair and he sits up, wiping his mouth. She flexes her hand several times and shakes it out, sending strands of his hair to the floor.

“Sorry.”

“Plenty to spare,” he says. “You okay?”

Still panting, she looks at him and laughs. “I don’t think I can move.”

“That’s okay,” he says, standing up. He kisses her on the forehead as he picks her up, her weight solid and familiar.

“Thank you,” she whispers as he carries her to his bed.
Chapter End Notes

Chapter Title from "These Arms of Mine" by Otis Redding

A little mood music
I Am Folded and Unfolded and Unfolding

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rey had known, without a doubt, that she and Kylo were going to have sex if she stayed with him in New York. She’d known this since he first asked her. She just hadn’t expected it to happen less than an hour after walking in the door. When he’d shown up at her dressing room door, she’d still figured there was a good chance she’d go out to dinner with him, then go back to her hotel alone and get on her flight in the morning. In fact, she’d still been waffling about what to do until he asked her to eat at his place. Still, she’d imagined they would spend at least one tortured night in separate rooms before succumbing.

But here she is, naked on his bed, her ears still ringing from her show, or maybe they’re ringing from the orgasm. She doesn’t know or care because he’s standing at the foot of his bed, taking off his shirt, and her brain is a simmering stew of hormones. Getting to her knees, she helps him with the shirt and gets her hands on his skin the second she has a chance.

Every time she’s had sex in the past, it’s been about expediency. She’s never been able to take her time and explore someone like this, running her hands down his chest, over his nipples, fingers grazing his abs. He leans into her hands as though he’s starved for gentle touch. And maybe he is.

His body is more cut than she’d imagined, and dotted with a universe of freckles and moles. He’d said once that his fans knew his moles better than his dermatologist, and she’s reminded, briefly, of whose bed she’s in, and of how many girls have dreamed themselves into this exact scenario.

All of that is forgotten, though, when he pulls her close and kisses her neck, cupping her ass in both hands. She runs her hands down his back, to his waist and around to tug on his belt. Once it’s loose, she unbuttons and unzips him, and his jeans are so big that they fall to the floor. She sucks a mark into his neck while snaking a hand down into his boxers.

Her eyes fly open when she gets his dick in her hand. Pulling it out, she looks down at it, and back up at him.

“What?” he says. He takes it in his hand and examines it, worried.

“Kylo, did you…are you aware that your dick is huge?”

His already flushed face turns a brighter shade of crimson, the color reaching the tips of his ears. “It’s just my dick.”

“Okay, but…this is the biggest dick I’ve ever seen. And I haven’t had sex in two years so…”

His mouth drops open and he makes a little strangled sound. He swallows, hard. “You can be on top.”

“What?”

“If you’re on top, you can control everything. Depth, speed, motion. Everything.”

“And you’re not going to grab me and slam me down on it?”

“Not unless you want me to.”
That sends a shockwave of arousal through her that she’d rather not examine right now, so she kisses him. His mouth tastes different, salty. He tastes like her and she finds that wildly alluring.

“I’ve got condoms in my bag,” he says. “Hold on.” He slips his boxers off and goes around to the other side of the bed. Rey tracks him, watching how the muscles move in his back and the line of his body as he stoops to unzip his bag.

“You know,” she says, lying on her side with her head resting on her hand. “I brought some, too.”

Kylo’s head pops up. “Then we’ve got a challenge on our hands, using them all in one week.” He tears a packet off a strip, throws the strip on the night stand and gets into the bed, pulling Rey against him, kissing her forehead, her nose, jaw and neck, hand sliding up from her thigh to her breast. “You don’t have to,” he says as he circles her nipple with his index finger.

In answer, she shoves him onto his back and climbs on top of him, hands locked with his. “I never back down from a challenge.” She kisses her way down his neck and chest, plucking the condom from his hand as she goes. When she gets to his belly, she sits back and tears the packet open. He watches her, eyes intense, hands on her thighs, rubbing circles on her skin with his thumbs. She takes out the condom and rolls it onto his cock, trying her hardest not to think about any of the times she’s done this before. When it’s on, he sits up and puts his arms around her, laying open mouthed kisses across her breasts. Rey lifts up and positions him at her entrance, then begins to ease down, closing her eyes and making shallow strokes, taking him in more deeply with each one. It doesn’t hurt, exactly, in fact she’d be more inclined to say it hurts just enough.

When he’s fully inside her, or at least as far as she can handle, she rests her forehead on his shoulder, breathing and taking a moment to adjust not only to his size, but to the feeling of being this close to someone. After a few moments, he tucks her hair behind her ear and lifts her chin with his finger.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

“You feel amazing.”

“So do you,” she says and kisses his collarbone.

He leans back and she falls forward with him, bracing her hands on his shoulders. The change in angle makes her gasp, but it’s perfect because she can move against him without having to take all of him in if she doesn’t want to. Moving her hands from his shoulders to the mattress, she leans down to kiss him as she rolls her hips against his. He moans into her mouth and clasps his hands around her waist, but as promised, does nothing to control her movements.

As she finds a rhythm, she closes her eyes and lets her thoughts float. It’s always been easier like this, letting her body feel whatever happens without involving her mind. She’s merely a body and her partner is merely a body.

“Rey,” he says. She opens her eyes. His eyes are dark and guileless. “Where did you go?”

She stops moving. No one has ever looked at her this way, so open and soft, as if she is something precious and rare.

“I’m here,” she pants. “I’m here.” She closes her eyes and starts moving again, but now she’s aware of him, of the slide of his skin against hers, his hands in her hair, gripping her back, her hips, her face as he kisses her. She is not just a body and neither is he. It’s Kylo inside her, beneath her,
Kylo whose hair smells like coconut and whose lips taste like cloves. Kylo asking if it’s alright as he thrusts up into her, and all she can do is nod because when he does, it takes all of her words away. It’s Kylo whose thumb finds her clit and presses it just the right way so that she explodes again, slowing the movement of her hips to draw out the waves as long as possible. And it’s Kylo who says her name like an epiphany as his hips stutter and still and his fingernails leave marks in her hips.

When it ends, she collapses on him, fighting for air. He drapes his arms around her, fingers tracing circles on the small of her back, and she’s never felt safer in her life.

But then her eyes are burning and her throat is tight and she wills herself to stop as she nuzzles into his neck and runs her fingers through his hair, looking for the safe place, but it won’t stop, and the pressure builds until she can’t contain it and she’s sobbing into his neck, tears flowing large and hot.

“Shit, Rey,” he says. He eases her off of him, rolling onto his side so that he’s facing her. “Did I hurt you?”

She can only shake her head, and hide her face in her hands. “Oh, God I’m so sorry. I’m so embarrassed.”

“Shhh,” he says and pulls her close. She tucks her head under his chin and lets him rub her back as she sobs.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he says, kissing the top of her head. “Do you want to tell me what’s wrong?”

“It’s so stupid.”

“I promise it’s not.”

She shakes her head again and presses closer to him. After a few minutes, she pulls back and looks at him. He pushes the hair out of her face and kisses her forehead.

“I’m sorry,” she begins. “I’ve…I’ve never had anyone look at me like they cared it was…me they were fucking.”

Kylo inhales sharply. “Rey,” he says. “I’ve wanted you like this for a while now. And this is not something I do with just anyone. This is about you. Okay?”

Rey nods.

“Do you want a glass of water?”

“I’m fine. Can I sleep out here with you?”

“Of course,” he says. “I never had any intention of you sleeping anywhere else.”

It’s grey and quiet when Rey wakes up. It’s not raining, but low thunder rumbles in the distance. Or it could be traffic. She turns over and there he is, still sleeping.

He is gorgeous, his face slack, hair in disarray, creases from the sheets on his cheeks and arms as he hugs his pillow.
Reaching out, she stops herself before tucking his hair behind his ear. Mornings after are precarious and spiky anyway, often full of regrets, and none of her previous ones have happened thousands of miles from home. She’ll let him sleep.

Earlier this morning, when the city had gone as still as it ever can, she’d woken him up, frantic, pushing him onto his back, scrambling to put a condom on and impaling herself on him, almost before he could get his hands away. She’d ridden him, hands on his chest, batting his hands away any time he put them on her hips or waist, desperate for control, desperate to wring her pleasure from him. And she’d tumbled forward after her release, panting, and he’d flipped her over and finally buried himself inside her, all the way.

Within a few strokes the pain blossomed into an exquisite sting until she’d been shaken apart all over again, Kylo whimpering her name into her ear as he followed.

Slipping out of bed, she picks his shirt off the floor, puts it on and pads to the guest room to retrieve her notebook before checking out the fridge. There are five different kinds of juice, cow’s milk and soy milk in both chocolate and regular, as well as every kind of soda a person could imagine. She chooses a bottle of apple juice and takes it to the window seat where they ate last night.

The shade is still up, and in the morning light she can see the variations in the panes of glass. Some are warped with age. Some are blue, grey or pink in color. The view isn’t spectacular, by city standards, but it’s new to her so it’s beautiful. The shades are drawn tight in the apartment across the street where they’d peeked last night, the building itself turned rosy from the morning light. She watches the limestone turn from rose to gold as rises in earnest, bathing Rey in an amber glow.

Something hits her and she uncaps her pen, writing smoothly on a blank page.

*Why can’t we stay like this trap us in amber keep us as we lay*

*Why can’t we lay like this can we really make it more than just today*

She writes until she hears him cough and stir. She’s got a straight view to the bed from here. He’s sitting up, looking around and getting his bearings.

“Hi,” she calls to him.

“Hi.”

“I’m writing.”

“Do you want to go get breakfast?”

“Oh. Sure.”

He throws himself half off the bed to reach his bag and hauls it back onto the bed so he can rummage through it. “Okay, get dressed.”

“I can’t take a shower?”

“You can but they have amazing muffins and they run out super early. Besides, the place is full of
“Hippies, so smelling like you’ve been fucking all night won’t even register.”

“You’re not going to just call and tell them to save you some of these amazing muffins?”

“Oh, hey I could do that.”

“No, don’t! I was kidding. It’s cool, I’ll get dressed.”

Her dress from last night is a hopeless mess so she pulls on her jeans and leaves his t-shirt on, tying it in a knot at the waist before shoving her feet into her Chucks.

“Do you have a hat?” she asks. Brushing her hair when it’s this wavy will make it frizz but it since it’s the top of her head that’s the biggest mess, a hat should make her moderately presentable. He tosses her a knit beanie and shoves a military style cap on his own head.

At the door, he stops and kisses her, and it leaves her aching as though his tongue in her mouth has a direct connection to her clit.

“Are these muffins we’re going for really that good?” she breathes when he releases her.

“I promise, they are. Besides you’re going to need plenty of energy for when we get back here.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” he whispers in her ear, then steps away, bounding down the steps two at a time. She follows and they spill out onto the sidewalk laughing.

“Oh fuck,” he says and turns fully to the door as he locks it, motioning for her to do the same.

“What?”

“There’s a photographer over there.”

“Do they hang out outside your house?”

“They know I’m in town and they know where I live. I didn’t think anyone would be out this early though. I’m a notorious late sleeper.”

“What do we do?”

“Well, he’s already got us so not much we can do.” He finishes locking the door and turns to her. “How’s it feel, knowing you’re probably helping pay for some kid’s college tuition right now?”

“What? How?”

“He’s got an exclusive and it’s pretty obvious you slept over. He’s going to be able to name his price.”

“This is so bizarre. It’s like having the whole school know who I slept with but it’s the entire country.”

“Yep.” He takes her hand and they walk down the block, the photographer keeping pace with them on the other side of the street. When Kylo leads them into a small diner at the end of the next block, the photographer doesn’t follow them inside, but posts up outside, shooting through the window.
The diner is all bare wood floors and rickety wooden tables and chairs, but there’s a fresh daisy in a vase on every table and everything behind the counter looks as clean as it can during a morning rush.

Their waitress is a tall woman in overalls and a tube top, dreadlocks piled high on her head. “Heard through the grapevine you’d be in town,” she says to Kylo, then turns to Rey. “I’m Nikya. My wife Fawn owns the place. Kylo’s been coming here since he was still called Ben and has only gotten banned twice, if you can believe it.”

“I’m Rey.”

“Oh, I know,” Nikya says. “Our daughter’s a huge Knights fan.”

“Oh,” Rey says.

“Don’t worry, she thinks you’re cute, and she likes Mikey better anyway.”

“Okay, Nik,” Kylo jumps in. “Can we get um, two lemon blueberry muffins, two apple cinnamon muffins, some coffee and a few minutes to look at the rest of the menu?”

“You’re on thin ice,” Nikya says, pointing at him before heading to the back.

“Do they actually like you here?” Rey teases.

“They tolerate me because every time a magazine asks me about favorite places in New York I recommend them. They’ll get a huge boost from these photos, too.” He gestures to the window where the photographer has been joined by two more. Nikya stops by the table to drop off their coffee and muffins, then goes and closes the blinds in the window and the door, waving to the paps as she does so.

“Thank you,” Kylo says as she walks past.


Rey relaxes a bit, happy to not have to eat while being photographed. She tears a muffin in two and takes an enormous bite.

“Holy shit,” she says. “What do they put in these?” She’d been fully prepared for something with the texture of sawdust.

“Coconut oil instead of butter, I think. I don’t know what they do instead of eggs. I know there’s something you can do with flax seeds. What else do you want to order?”

“I don’t care. Surprise me,” she says, stuffing the rest of the muffin into her mouth and following it with coffee. Even the soy creamer isn’t as terrible as she’d thought it would be. She finishes the lemon blueberry muffin and grabs an apple one.

“Rey.”

“Hmm?” She looks at him, mouth full, and smiles.

“Never mind.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, why wouldn’t it be?”
“If you’re trying to figure out a way to let me down easy, just chill. I don’t expect anything. I know that having sex with someone doesn’t mean things are serious.”

He looks at her then, for a very long time. “Rey, I…” He trails off and looks down. “When I—“ He runs his hands through his hair and looks up, jaw tense and eyes shiny. He shakes his head. “Look, I don’t want to date anyone else but I don’t want to lay any…claim on you if that’s not where you’re at.”

“Oh,” she says. All last night, and this morning, she’d been able to shove aside any inkling of guilt she had about sleeping with him without telling him the truth. The truth doesn’t even really matter, does it, if she likes him now? But it feels like she either needs to tell him the truth, or let him, and this, go.

But looking at him, how guarded he is, how hopeful underneath, she can’t do either of those things. At least not yet.

“I…I’ve never actually been in a relationship. I don’t know how…I…can we just have fun this week and then see what happens when we get home?”

It wasn’t what she wanted to say, but it’ll have to do.

“Okay,” he says, and looks at her again, still somehow sad.

“Alright.”

He clears his throat and looks at the menu again. “Garden tofu scramble. That’s what you want.”

Reaching across the table to take his hand, Rey smiles. Los Angeles may as well be in another galaxy, and their flight home a year from now.

Outside, with a crack of thunder, the sky opens up. Nikya opens the blinds to look outside, just in time to watch the last of the photographers scatter, cameras tucked up under their shirts and jackets.

If it keeps up, it’ll be a wet walk home but at least they can do it in peace, the two of them.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Colorblind" by the Counting Crows

A little more mood music

Rey's song lyrics are from one I wrote several years ago. I don't have a recording other than this video of my best friend rehearsing it
Kylo’s hands are large. His whole body is large, but often, people are still shocked by the size of his hands. People comment on them. A lot.

During the last tour, Mikey and Banks took to reciting things they found online that fans wrote about Kylo’s hands, reading them out on the bus in shrill imitations of teenage girl voices. After a week or so, Derek had told them they seemed way to into the subject and the two had shut up. Even so, Kylo demanded his own bus mid tour, and got it.

His hands do give him an advantage with playing the guitar, opening jars, and holding multiple objects at once. If he’d been athletic, they probably would have given him an advantage in football or basketball.

They do not, however, gain him any advantages when it comes to typing, drawing, or most anything that requires a certain amount of gentleness.

But, even if he were a smaller person, gentleness would never have been a strong suit.

As he walks down Bleecker Street with Rey, toward his favorite record shop, he holds her hand in his and runs his thumb along the tendons and across her knuckles. Much like its owner, Rey’s hand is slight but not small, and like with its owner, he practices constant vigilance to hold it softly, to treat it softly, aware he could hurt her as much by holding on too tightly as he could by pushing her away.

He is inevitably going to hurt her. It was written the moment he decided to use her, possibly before. No matter how he feels now, nothing can erase the callous decision that lead to this.

When he met Katia, he’d been eighteen, Katia twenty-one. She’d been the one to teach him everything. Not just about sex but about meeting people halfway. About lives so far removed from his they may as well have been fairy tales. When Katia talked about her life, she often wove it like a children’s story, and it was years before it occurred to him that it was the only way she could bear to talk about it.

Katia had never really wanted to be a model, but when the scout came to their apartment, her mother had convinced her it was her greatest shot at freedom. At fifteen, after walking her first shows in New York, Katia had skipped her flight back to Moscow, gone straight to the UN and declared herself a defector.

Her mother had died before Katia could get her out, two months before the USSR fell.

They’d already begun to outgrow each other by the time Kylo left Dagobah, but his willingness to cut himself off from his family had been the killing blow. He couldn’t make her understand that it wasn’t trivial without telling her his secret, and he knew that even if he told her, how could it compare? She had the choice of leaving her family or living under an oppressive regime. He’d fled to an oppressive regime because he was too ashamed to admit a childish mistake.

Not long after she left, he’d called her, drunk and crying, and she’d admitted that one of the reasons she’d been drawn to him was that she was tired of thinking and talking about her cold, deprived Soviet childhood, and being around him reminded her that idyllic childhoods could exist. But as
she grew to know him, it became clear that his upbringing had only made him callow and entitled.

“I don’t know what the answer is,” she’d sighed. “No child should ever have to grow up the way I did, and it breaks my heart that so many still do, but having too much may be just as disastrous.”

It should have been wakeup call, but he’d had enough people around him whispering in his ear that she was a bitch, that he was better off without her. He told himself that she hadn’t tried hard enough to understand. And as his career had skyrocketed from indie darling to major label superstar, he’d wrapped himself in a blanket of accolades, shielding himself with all the people who were willing to tell him that whatever he did was right. Even people like Hux and Lorna could be bent to his will, since their financial wellbeing was dependent on him. He lived in a bubble where he could pretend he would never again be as vulnerable as Katia had made him.

And then one night, he’d plucked Rey from the audience, out of fear as much as fascination. She’d slipped through his fingers before he even understood how special she was, and then, when she’d been given back to him, he’d managed to fuck it up in the worst way possible.

There had maybe been a chance, before last night, before he’d been inside her, to come clean, at least about the beginnings of the relationship. To let her go more painlessly. At breakfast, he’d come so close to telling her. While she’d been on tour, he’d started emails to her a half dozen times, sometimes telling her all of it, sometimes only the part relevant to her.

And every time, he’d deleted the email because he was afraid, and because there has to be a way to fix this, so that he can keep her and never have her find out about what he’s done.

Because, while a part of him worships how frank she is with him, how she keeps him in line, a large part of him can’t get enough of the rare moments when she looks at him in awe.

The idea of that never happening again, of her looking at him in anger, or disgust, sends him into an all-out retreat from thinking of anything beyond next Friday.

He spends an hour in the record shop with Rey, helping her choose a dozen new albums, though she refuses to let him pay for them. It starts to pour again as they’re leaving, so she does let him pay for a cab back to his house.

The hems of Rey’s jeans are soaking wet so she sheds them as soon as she gets in the door. To Kylo’s disappointment, she also unties the knot in his shirt so it hangs to her knees. To his delight, she puts on a pair of argyle knee socks.

She takes her shopping bag to the coffee table and spreads out her new records, then starts browsing through his collection, pulling out things she loves and things she hasn’t heard yet and adding those to the pile.

“I can’t believe you have the Harry Smith Anthology,” she says as he joins her on the floor.

“My mom was a West Village folk singer in the 60s. of course she has it. What do you want to listen to?”

She sorts through the pile, her new records already getting mixed in with his, and finally chooses, sliding the sleeve toward him.

“Miss Kenobi are you trying to seduce me?”

“Can’t a girl be in the mood for Al Green without an ulterior motive?”
“Only if it’s one of his gospel albums.”

He takes the record but she doesn’t release it right away. He pulls her toward him. Her mouth tastes like maple syrup. “I’ll put it on,” he says.

While he’s at the stereo she moves to the sofa and he comes back to kneel in front of her, sliding his hands under her shirt. She untucks her legs and lets him find the waistband of her underwear.

“Do you like New York or LA better?” he asks as he works her panties down her legs.

“I haven’t seen much of New York,” she says, lifting her shirt over her head. “But I like you better here.”

“Why?” He tugs at the neck of his own shirt and she helps him get it the rest of the way off.

“I don’t know,” she says, hands flat on his chest, working their way down. “You seem more… centered? Less angry?”

“Will you still like me when we get back to LA?” he asks, looking down as she tugs at this belt.

Rey stops, hand still on his belt buckle. “Hey.” He looks up to find her quavering smile. “Of course I will.” She runs her hand along his jaw. “I’ll like you so much.” She presses her lips to his and returns her attention to his belt and jeans.

“Do you want to move this to the bed?”

“No,” she whispers, reaching into his boxers.

“I can get a condom.”

“I have an implant.”

He pulls back and searches her face, as all of Leia’s old warnings before his first tour race through his mind.

“Really?”

“You can feel it,” she says. Taking his hand, she guides him to a spot on her left arm, a few inches below her armpit. He presses lightly as he runs his fingers over her skin, feeling five ridges in the shape of a fan. Rey wrinkles her nose. “It’s gnarly, isn’t it?”

“A little.”

“Mood killer?”

“Not even remotely,” he says, taking her by the hips and pulling her to the edge of the sofa. He runs his hands up her body, over her breasts and back down underneath her, cupping her ass. Her body is out of this world, slender but solid, with this beautiful, perfectly shaped ass. He still can’t quite believe that she gave him access to her body in the first place, much less that she continues to. He bends forward and takes a nipple into his mouth, testing her by grazing his teeth across it, biting lightly when she responds.

With one hand, he runs the head of his dick over her clit a few times before getting in position at her entrance.

“You sure?” he asks.
She nods. Kylo sits up, grips her hips and presses into her. Halfway, he meets resistance, despite how wet she already is, and she hisses, digging her fingernails into his forearms.

He looks down as he pulls back and thrusts into her again, slowly, watching himself disappear inside her. Watching her belly move as she gasps. He stops and closes his eyes. In his head, he goes through the fingerings for the E minor pentatonic scale. He gets to the third position before it’s safe to continue.

When he opens his eyes, she’s staring at him. She smiles and rolls her hips, taking him in deeper, and he almost loses it again.

“I’m not going to last very long, Rey.”

“It’s okay,” she says, licking her hand and reaching for her clit. As her eyes flutter closed he tightens his grip on her waist.

“Stay with me.”

“I am,” she says, her other hand gripping his wrist.

She wraps one leg around his waist leaving the other on the floor for leverage, and he starts thrusting, snapping his hips against hers as she rises to meet him. He’s never going to be able to listen to this record again without hearing the slap of his skin against hers, her sharp inhalations, his own staccato breathing. She’s still holding onto his right hand and he palms her breasts with his left.

When she opens her eyes, they lock onto his and he can’t look away, doesn’t look away until she throws her head back and tenses around him. He slams into her, over and over and with a cry she starts fluttering around him. A few more strokes after she relaxes and he pulls out, taking his dick in his hand and stroking himself to completion. It shoots all over her, and when he’s done, he lays his hand flat on her tummy, almost spanning the width of her, and rubs his cum across her belly and up to her tits, Rey’s hand on top of his.

She sits up and he pulls her into a tight hug. She sniffs a bit into his neck but doesn’t cry, and gradually her breathing slows.

“I think it’s time for a shower,” she says.

“You think?” he answers.

They talk little in the shower. He washes his cum off of her first, then she shows him how she manages her long hair, which he helps her detangle with a wide toothed comb. Then they wash his hair, Kylo stooping so she can give his scalp a good scrub. Rey passes the time waiting for the conditioner to set in by jerking Kylo off, and as soon as their hair is rinsed, he kneels, props her against the wall with one arm, throws her leg over his shoulder and goes down on her again.

Consequently, they’re sleepy and sated when they get out of the shower. While Rey blow dries her hair, Kylo changes the sheets on his bed. When she comes out of the guest room wearing plaid flannel two piece pajamas, he looks her over and Rey laughs.

“Did you think I’d be out on tour with a bag full of sexy lingerie?”

“No, but I definitely wasn’t expecting Ward Cleaver’s pajamas. I like them, though.”

“Oh?”
“Yeah, because I know you aren’t wearing anything underneath.”

“Like you have room to talk, wearing sweats from high school gym class.”

“Get in here,” he says as he climbs into the bed. She follows and he pulls the covers over both of them. They lie on their sides, facing each other.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been more comfortable in my life,” she yawns.

“Yeah?”

“I’m clean, and my hair smells good, and you smell good, and my stomach is full and I don’t have to worry about paying my rent and this bed is so comfortable and it’s raining outside and I’m inside. And you’re inside with me. And I’ve had like six orgasms in the past twenty-four hours.”

“That is…” he starts. “I’m…really comfortable, too.”

Rey smiles and brushes the tip of her braid over his nose and mouth. “I have a very important question for you.”

“Go for it.”

“Are you ever going to tell me what physical feature you associated with me to remember my name?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Yes you do. That’s the whole point of the whole thing. To remember.”

“Okay,” he says, burying his face in the pillow. “Rey with the mermaid hair.”

“What was that?”

He turns his face back to her. “Rey with the mermaid hair,” he enunciates.

“Really? My hair was up the second time you saw me.”

“Maybe you made an impression beyond your hair.” He rolls over to his back. “Now I have a question for you.”

“Okay.”

“Did you have the hots for me when I was in Dagobah?”

“No!” she laughs.

“What?”

“No. I was a kid and you weren’t my type. At all.”

“Did you have the hots for any of us?”

“One of you.”

“Which one?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out.” She gets up on her knees, sitting back on her feet. “I
“I have another question for you.”

“Okay.”

“What did you mean last night, when you said you don’t just do this with anyone attractive? Like, you just aren’t into casual sex?”

“I guess, though it’s not like I ever made a conscious decision, or that it’s hard to avoid.”

“You’re a rock star. How could it be easy to avoid?”

“I just rarely meet anyone that I’m attracted to that way.”

“So you have really high standards?”

“No, I know when someone’s pretty, and I find all kinds of people beautiful. I just don’t want to fuck them. And I’ve never wanted to have sex with someone I didn’t know pretty well.”

“Oh.”

He takes her hand and tugs so that she lays down, head on his chest. “I don’t judge people who do. I know I’m the weirdo.”

“So you’ve never just seen a hot person and wanted to have sex with them before knowing their name?”

“Never.”

“Not even when you were a teenager?”

“No. Honestly, my ex-girlfriend was the first and only, before you.

“Should I be flattered?”

“Obviously,” he says, kissing her on the top of the head. He listens to the rain, her breathing, the soft scratch of his callouses catching on the fabric of her pajama shirt as he runs his hand up and down her back. “I have another question for you.”

“Okay.”

“Why don’t you hate me?”

She looks at him, resting her chin on his chest, and for a second she looks fearful, before settling into sadness.

“Why would I hate you?”

“You haven’t told me a whole lot about your life, but I know you didn’t really have a family. You didn’t have a choice. I pushed mine away. On purpose.”

“I don’t hate you for that. I don’t understand it and I think it makes you a royal asshole but I want to understand it.” She shrugs and lays her head back down on his chest.

“Maybe someday I can figure out a way to help you understand.”

“I’d rather you figure out a way back to them,” she says. “I’m in a bit of an awkward position right
“You wouldn’t be in that position if you’d signed with First Order.”

“What makes you think I was going to sign with First Order?”

Kylo’s hand stills on her back. Shit.

“Well, Finn Storm left First Order and signed you immediately. It’s pretty obvious he intended to sign you before he decided to leave. Right?”

“I guess so. Leaving worked out for him, though. He got a promotion. I’m happy for him even if we probably won’t work together after this record.”

“Well, I hope he shows more loyalty to Resistance than he did First Order.”

“Oh come on,” she says, looking at him again. “He had good reasons for leaving. And it’s not like you’re totally happy there.”

“Yeah but if we were on the same label it’d be easier for us to collaborate.”

“You’d want to collaborate with me? Musically?”

“Why not? I don’t know, it’d be cool but when there’s two labels involved, you can’t even work on anything until they battle through all the legal shit and by the time they’re done, your enthusiasm for the project is all gone.”

“I mean, we can always just write together, secretly.”

“Hmm,” he says. “We’ll see.”

“Okay, one last question,” she says, settling back into his chest.

“Sure.”

“What exactly is on your tour rider?”

“Basically what you saw on my table backstage.”

“I want you to tell me, though. I want ideas, if I’m going to get one someday. Though I’d also put in there that my leftovers have to be donated to charity.”

“Okay let’s see. There’s the vegan cheese. Don’t make that face.”

“You can’t see my face.”

“I can feel you grimacing.”

“It was gross.”

“Anyway, whatever fruit is in season. But also bananas and oranges. Um, cashews, pistachios, almonds. Chocolate soy milk.”

“You know what I’d want? At a wedding once they had these mini quiches, and I ate so many and they were the best. I’d want those, as many as I could eat.”

“So, a table full of mini quiches.”
“And cheese. Real cheese. And croissants. And apple juice.”

He nudges her and she looks up at him again. “This is turning you on, isn’t it?”

“Maybe a little.”

“You’re never going to be hungry again, you know.”

She stares at him, eyes going shiny. “You can’t promise that,” she whispers.

“I can be pretty damned sure of it.”

“I can’t be that sure of anything.”

Cupping the back of her neck with his hand, he urges her toward him and kisses her, because he has no other language for everything he’s feeling. She ignites like a bonfire, and for the rest of the morning and into the later afternoon he’s lost, bathing in her glow.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Labour of Love" by Frente!

The album they listen to is Let's Stay Together.
My favorite song on it is "How Do You Mend a Broken Heart." You should also check out his cover of "My Girl" and any and all of his Beatles covers.
It’s easy to lose track of time when the shades are drawn tight and two people are locked in together with nothing to do but explore each other. Time is marked by brief periods of sleep and the occasional need to eat. When Rey wakes up to Kylo pacing the apartment, talking on the phone, she’s only half sure at first that it’s morning.

His voice is low, but there’s an edge to his voice she hasn’t witnessed since their second date, in the video store. She gets out of bed and goes to the fridge, wearing only her pajama top. The leftover pizza from last night looks amazing but so does the Thai from the day before, so she decides on a little of both.

“Hey,” Kylo says to her, holding his hand over the phone. “I’ll get you something at the deli. I’m going down for cigarettes anyway.”

“I’m fine with leftovers.”

“Suit yourself,” he says and goes back to his phone call. “I don’t know why you have to come. I’ve been on the show like three times before. I know the drill.” He listens for a few seconds, then runs his hands through his hair. “What the hell do you think I’m going to say? That asshole won’t even be there today.”

Rey makes as little noise as possible heating her food. Kylo is standing by the window, pulling the shade up and down as he listens. In any other circumstance, Rey would enjoy watching his muscles move, and the lines of his body as he jerks on the cord, but he’s making her too nervous to appreciate it.

“Okay, whatever,” he says. “If you’re going to babysit me at least do me the favor of not actually talking to me.” He tosses the phone onto a chair, stalks to his closet and puts on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt.

“I’ll be back,” he says as he walks past. At the door, he stops, turns around and comes over to her, scooping her off her feet with one arm as he kisses her. “I’ll get you a coconut popsicle.”

“Okay?”

“You’ll thank me.”

When her food is ready, Rey settles at the dining table with her plate and her phone. She’d turned it off before she’d gone on stage two nights ago and hasn’t turned it on since. Not surprisingly, she has several voicemails, but she is surprised that the most urgent one is from Robyn. It’s early in LA, but Robyn’s an early riser, so she gives her a call.

“Rey!” Robyn answers, over the pounding bass of club music. “How are you?”

“I’m good. What did you need?”

“Hold on,” she says. “I’m at the gym. Let me get somewhere quieter. I love this gym but sometimes it’s like working out in a club.” The music disappears and Robyn sighs. “You still there?”
“Yeah.”

“I want to preface this by saying that I’m talking to you as a friend, not as Finn’s assistant or any part of your professional team.”

“If you’re trying not to freak me out it’s not working.”

“Oh, it’s nothing bad. Have you been online at all since Wednesday? Seen a magazine or newspaper?”

“No.”

“Did you know you were being photographed when you went out yesterday?”

“Yes.”

“The photos are huge, Rey. I’m sure Maz will go over all of this with you, but *People* bought the exclusive for the photos of you and Kylo leaving his apartment. It’ll be out on Monday. But there are photos from the diner on Getty. They’re not great but they’ll help build buzz for the *People* photos.”

“Okay. Right now you sound like someone on my team not like a friend…”

“Right. I only needed to provide some context for why I’m worried.”

“Worried? All of this was your idea.”

“It was my idea for you to go out with him a few times. And, like everyone else I was reluctantly on board about the VMAs, but I just need to ask if you’re sure about what you’re doing.”

“What do you think I’m doing?”

“Honestly, Rey, I don’t know, and I feel like I may have gotten you into something bigger than any of us expected. But your music is going to stand on its own. You don’t have to stay with him and you definitely don’t have to sleep with him.”

“What if I wanted to sleep with him?”

Robyn falls silent.

“Hello?” Rey says, afraid the call has dropped.

“I’m here, I’m just processing.” Robyn says. “Okay. I actually think this makes me feel better about things. It’s a weird way to start a relationship but if you like him and he likes you then why not?”

“Well, it’s not officially a relationship yet.”

“Well, as long as you don’t tell him why you agreed to date him in the first place you should be fine.”

“Right,” Rey says. “Right.”

“You should talk to Maz. We may need to send a team out for the VMAs.”

“A team?”
“Nothing big. Just a stylist, makeup artist and a label publicist. Wait, are you going with him to TRL today?”

“That’s the plan.”

“I’m going to make a couple of calls and have something sent over for you to wear.”

“I’m not going to be on camera.”

“The place is going to be swarming with fans and paps, Rey. Take extra care with your makeup.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll update Maz and Finn. Don’t answer any questions unless they’re about your career. I’m sure Maz will call you if she thinks differently or has anything else to add.”

“Okay.”

“Take care, Rey.”

“You, too.”

After she disconnects, Rey sits at the table, no longer hungry. She’s still sitting there when Kylo gets back. He tosses a black plastic shopping bag on the table and bends to kiss her. His clothes smell like smoke but his breath is minty.

“What’s wrong?” he says, noticing her untouched food.

“I’m assuming that was your manager on the phone with you earlier?”

“Yeah.”

“Did he tell you we’re going to be in People on Monday?”

“He may have mentioned that,” Kylo says, dropping into the chair next to her. “I got distracted because he’s insisting on coming to TRL today.” He reaches into the black bag and pulls out her popsicle. “Do you want this now?”

Even though she’s still not hungry, she appeases him and unwarps it. It’s creamy and lightly flavored and exactly what she needs, but her stomach is still churning with anxiety.

“I don’t have to go with you this afternoon,” she says.

“You’re right, but it’d be cool if you did. You can network, and get a feel for how things work, so when you go on for the first time it won’t be so scary.”

“When I go on?”

“Yeah. I’ve been in this business for eight years and grew up around it. I’ve seen you play, I know the camera loves you. It’s all there.”

“It’s all there for a lot of people and they don’t make it on TRL.”

“They’re not you. Go with me?”

“I’ll get to meet Carson Daly?”
“Nope,” he says. “He hates me. Anytime me or the Knights are a guest he fucks off and takes a vacation day. Aleida’s hosting today.”

“Seriously? What did you do?”

“I was at Spago doing an interview, like, a pretty serious one, with *The Guardian*, and he comes up to the table and starts trying to chat like we’re friends so I told him to fuck off.”

“Wow. I mean, you were rude as hell but that’s it? He refuses to do the show when you’re on because of that?”

“Well, the journalist didn’t like him either and made him out to be a total tool in the article. Carson wanted to get us banned from the show but MTV said hell no. So now he just takes the day off when we’re on.”

“Shouldn’t you be nice to people like that, though?”

“Why? TRL needs me more than I need TRL. He’s a douche and doesn’t have any power over me.”

“But you didn’t know that when you were an asshole to him.”

“I figured he couldn’t do anything, and I was right. He’s a puppet.”

Rey shakes her head. “Okay, whatever. I just talked to Finn’s assistant and she’s going to have clothes sent over for me, and then for the VMAs she said they’d probably send a whole team.”

“It’ll be crawling with people here anyway so bring whoever.”

“How many people are you going to have?”

“Well, I can’t avoid Hux being here for that one, either. Lorna will be home from vacation so she’ll be here. Also, stylist, makeup artist, hair stylist, publicist, and some magazine is doing a feature so there’ll be a photographer and a journalist. Probably their assistants. That’s the whole reason we’re getting ready here and not at a hotel. They want the loft for backdrop.”

“This is insane.”

“But that popsicle is delicious, right?”

“You just like watching me eat it.”

“Please come with me today. You’ll have fun.”

“It’s just so much easier when we’re here.”

“We can’t hide out all the time.”

“No?”

He shakes his head. “The car will be here at one so we’d better start getting ready.”

“It’s not even ten!”

He leans in to kiss her. “I think we need a really long shower.”
“You don’t want to go on national TV smelling like me?”

He inhales slowly. “I do, but I can’t so you have to go with me.”

She can’t argue with that, so when he stands up and holds out his hand, she takes it and follows him to the shower.

Later, Rey is still in her towel, straddling a half-dressed Kylo on the sofa, when the buzzer rings.

“It’s too early for the car.” Kylo says.

“Could be the clothes Robyn arranged for me?”

“I’ll get it.”

He bounds over to the intercom. “What?”

“Hello, It’s Karé from Stiletto,” says a soft voice with an English accent. “I’ve got some things for Rey Kenobi.”

“I’m Karé,” she says holding out her hand. “I’m your stylist.”

Rey takes her hand and shakes it. “I’m sorry,” she says, gesturing to her towel. “I didn’t know Robyn was sending an entire person! I thought it was just the clothes.”

“Well, it helps to have a couple of options, and I had to do the shopping anyway so I figured you should get the full service. I’m also helping you out for the VMAs, so it gives us a chance to work together before the big show.”

“Wow. Robyn works fast.”

“She does. I got the call from my agency a little after ten.”

During their conversation, Kylo has wandered over to the closet by his bed. Apparently his people trust him to choose his own clothes or, more likely, he’d put his foot down about being styled for this. It’s probably old hat for him by now, anyway.

“Shall I show you the things here or…” Karé trails off.

“Oh, um, come into the guest room I guess.”

Karé lines the shopping bags up on the bed and starts pulling things out. Rey doesn’t recognize any of the designer names.

“First,” Karé says, going for a red bag. “I think that for TRL, jeans are definitely in order.” She pulls out a pair of light blue, strategically distressed boot cut jeans.

“I have jeans,” Rey says.
“Darling, don’t worry. I dropped Kylo’s name and they comped them. Same with most of this lot. And we can send back anything I charged that you don’t want to keep.”

“Wait, you dropped Kylo’s name?” Rey whispers.

“Of course. I told them these were for his new girlfriend and that you’d definitely be photographed in them. They fell all over themselves.”

“But you don’t work for Kylo.”

Karé has been holding up the jeans to get a look at them, and she turns her attention to Rey. “Oh, I’ve forgotten you’re new to this. We all do it. Now, this is a new brand, so they’re foaming at the mouth to be seen on celebrities so the rest of the world can be convinced that it’s perfectly reasonable to pay three hundred dollars for a pair of jeans.”

“Holy fuck,” Rey says, sinking down onto the bed. “And they just gave them to you?”

“They gave them to you.” She throws Rey a sympathetic look. “I know, it’s honestly bloody ridiculous. You finally have some money and then people start throwing things at you for free.”

“Alright,” Rey says. “I’ll try them on.”

“Do you want me to show you my favorite top first?”

“Sure.”

“I went with short shirts and crop tops, partly because Robyn said you have fantastic abs, but also so that we don’t cover up the logo on the jeans. I looked up some photos to supplement Robyn’s description of your style, and it’s a little eclectic but I think I’d say you’re earthy with a bit of an edge. My absolute favorite, and I will fight you if you like any of the others better, is this.” She pulls out a deep forest green cropped sweater, crocheted in an intricate pattern of diamonds and swirls. The sleeves are long and flared slightly at the ends.

“It’s gorgeous,” Rey says.

“And it’s yours, whether you wear it or not, but I think you should wear it.” She holds it up to Rey. “Green definitely suits you. Brings out your eyes.”

Rey glances at the other choices, which are mostly halter tops and t-shirts. Karé knows exactly what she’s doing, giving the illusion of choice, when the sweater is clearly superior.

“Definitely this,” Rey says.

“Fantastic. And I have a black bra to go with it somewhere. Ah. Here you go.”

When Rey comes out of the bathroom, Karé tilts her head and squints before smiling widely. “I think this will do nicely.”

“These jeans are too low to wear any underwear, though,” Rey says.

“It’s fine. They’re yours to keep anyway. Some of the girls are wearing thongs with them and letting the straps peek out but I don’t quite think that’s on brand for you. Now, finishing touches!” She gestures to the bed, where she’s laid out a pair of brown leather wedges, a set of silver butterfly clips, and a Concho belt.
“It’s authentic,” Karé says as Rey examines the belt. “And it’s borrowed, so be careful with it.”

The sound of the silver rounds hitting together sends a wave of homesickness through Rey. They dealt with these a lot in the pawn shop, but mostly the sound reminds her of Ahsoka, who wears one almost daily, and whom Rey hasn’t called or emailed in far too long.

“It’s perfect,” she says, wrapping it around her hips and buckling it.

“Alright, darling, I think I’m finished here. I’ll leave everything that was comped and return the rest. Go easy on any shimmer with your makeup since it’s daytime. I’ll see you Thursday!”

“Thank you. I’m sorry if I was weird or anything. This is all just so…weird.”

Karé shrugs. “If you knew how many times I’ve been called in to style someone for a trip to Food Emporium, you’d lose your faith in humanity. Cheers!”

An enormous full length mirror stands in the guest room, leaning against the wall. Rey does her hair looking in it, five small twists in front, each secured with a butterfly clip, and the rest of her hair flowing free down her back. Kylo walks in as she puts the last one in, and stops cold in the doorway.

“Holy shit. I think I’m going to have to send Karé a thank you note.”

Rey makes eye contact with him in the mirror. “She used your name to get them, you know.”

“Normally that’d piss me off but in this case the ends justify the means.”

“You don’t look so bad yourself.”

That’s the understatement of the century. She’s never seen him put this much effort into his appearance, even for their Nobu date. His black sweater has leather patches at the shoulder, leather bands around his biceps, and stretches snugly across his chest, and his dark grey cargo pants are only one size too big in the waist. But the best part is his hair. It’s parted on the side as usual but he’s used something in it to make the waves more defined, and it’s so shiny. She wants to touch it but if she does get her hands in it he might end up having to restyle it.

They drift toward each other and he places a tiny kiss on her lips so he won’t smudge her lipstick. She hooks her fingers into his belt loops and pulls him toward her. “Your fans are going to lose their shit.”

“Good.”

The buzzer rings again just as he’s sliding his hands underneath her sweater.

“Why are they always so prompt?” he sighs. With a quick kiss on Rey’s forehead, he makes the trek to the door to answer. Rey gathers all of her things and takes a deep breath. The anxiety is almost as bad as the lead up to her first night on tour. She takes a last look in the mirror and yes, she does look pretty damned good. At least there’s that. She grabs her purse and joins Kylo as he heads downstairs.

Until signing her record deal, cable TV had never made it on the list of things that Rey could afford once she moved out on her own, so she’s only seen a handful of episodes of “Total Request Live.” She’d watched it a few times on tour, to see Kylo’s video, and because Jess is a huge Backstreet Boys fan. Everyone had assumed that she liked them ironically, but Rey had witnessed too many meltdowns when they lost the number one spot to ‘NSync. And that happened almost
Jess’s love was real. Kylo’s video had gotten lost in that fracas and had only hit number one again after both boyband videos were retired. Today’s appearance coincides with the expected retirement of “Ashes of My Enemies,” from the countdown in the next few days.

Instead of a Town Car, they’re driven to MTV Studios in an Escalade with windows tinted so dark they’re practically opaque. The crowd is huge but not so bad that traffic is shut down in the Square, which, according to Jess, happened with the Backstreet boys twice. The police barriers are far enough away from the entrance that they’re able to walk into the building, escorted by two security guards, without any fan issues, though for some reason the paparazzi haven’t been ordered to stand inside the barriers. It’s hard for Rey to wrap her head around the idea that grown men with cameras capable of taking photos from hundreds of feet away are seen as less of a threat than teenage fans.

One of the men asks Kylo how good a fuck Rey is and Kylo stops in his tracks. Luckily, both security guards recognize how the situation might deteriorate, and push Kylo through the doors.

“Are you okay?” he asks once they’re inside.

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

They take the escalators to the mezzanine level and the guards lead them to the studio, where Rey is given an access badge. The first part they see isn’t much different than the backstage areas at the nicer places she’d played on tour. There’s a series of dressing rooms, and a green room, where Rey is told to stay while Kylo is in makeup. An intern named Matt joins them and asks Rey if she’d like anything to drink.

“What do you have?”

“Almost anything. We get a lot of different requests.”

“Snapple lemonade?” Rey asks, because it’s the most random thing she can think of.

“Oh course!” the intern says.

“Thank you!” she says to his retreating back.

“How’d a guy like Kylo Ren end up with such a nice girl?”

Rey turns around and finds Kid Greedo sitting on a sofa reading Us. On the opposite sofa, a man who appears to be a bodyguard sits playing Tetris on a Gameboy.

Rey takes a moment to collect herself. “Who says I’m nice?” she replies, straightening.

“That’s all it takes?”

“I saw someone slap an intern once for not giving them a straw. How’s it goin’?” he holds out his hand. “I’m Greedo.”

“I know,” Rey says, shaking his hand. He’s decked out in an oversized Dodgers jersey, basketball shorts, and Nike socks pulled up almost to the hem of the shorts. His blonde hair is in corn rows under his baseball cap. Rey isn’t a huge fan of his music, a mix of southern rock and rap, but he seems nice enough so after the intern brings her Snapple she settles at the other end of the sofa to
chat with him.

Rey tries not to freak out, sitting here chatting with Kid Greedo about the pawn industry and the spas in Truth or Consequences. She’s heard that gravelly voice so often on the radio or on television and now he’s right here in front of her.

When Kylo comes back, they’ve switched to talking about the pros and cons of different hotel chains. Kylo nods to Greedo and leans against the doorjamb.

“So, Solo,” Greedo says. “You more of a Ritz or Four Seasons kind of guy.”

“Four Seasons has better robes,” he says. “I’m going to sound check, Rey, you want to come?”

“Sure. It was nice meeting you, Greedo.”

“You, too, Rey. Looking forward to that album, baby girl! Later, Solo. Better keep an eye on that one.”

“What’s he doing here?” Kylo demands as the intern leads them down a long hallway.

“He said he’s got an interview with Kurt Loder later.”

“Delightful,” Kylo says.

“It got kind of chilly in there when you walked in. And why does he call you Solo?”

“We went to high school together. He’s a douchebag. He thought it was hilarious because I was single all through school.” Kylo says.

“What? You went to high school together?”

“You didn’t know he grew up in Brentwood?”

“No! He’s always talking about trailers and moonshine in his songs.”

“Yeah, his dad was in A&R at Empire, though mostly he just poached artists from other labels. But yeah, fuckin’ Greedo, he was an ass in high school and the only trailer he’s ever seen the inside of was on a video set. I’m not interested in pretending we’re friends now.”

“Oh. He was nice to me.”

“Of course he was nice to you, Rey,” Kylo sighs. Before she can ask what he means by that, the intern ushers them to the left and into the studio.

It’s smaller than it looks on television, which is odd since you never see all of it on the show. Everything is sleek and shiny and reminds Rey of a space ship, especially with the floor to ceiling windows looking out on Times Square.

Aleida Calrissian is near the windows going over something with a producer. She spots Kylo and waves them over.

Aleida is a veejay who started filling in on TRL occasionally over the summer. She’s also the daughter of legendary producer Lando Calrissian, and one of the most beautiful people Rey has ever seen, with her long wavy hair and deep umber skin, so Rey is briefly speechless when she greets them.
“Hey, Kylo, how’s it been?” Aleida says, giving him a kiss on the cheek.

“The usual,” he says. “This is Rey, my…um…date…friend.”

“Hi!” Aleida says. “Our producer Lila is just going to steal Kylo for a moment to go over the show specs, then he’ll be good to go for a quick sound check.”

Lila leads Kylo away. He looks over his shoulder at Rey as he goes.

“Wow,” Aleida says.

“What?”

“Are you sure ‘date friend’ is the right term? I haven’t seen two people look at each other like that since my sister got married.”

Rey’s cheeks burn and she looks down. “It’s, um. It’s new and…can we talk about something else?”

“Okay,” Aleida says with mock resignation and hooks her arm through Rey’s. “Usually guests of artists stand back here, behind the audience. There’ll be staff and crew milling about, too. As long as you stay inside the tape you won’t be in anyone’s way. Kylo’s basically cohosting the countdown with me. I’ll introduce him at the top of the show. He’s been at number one all week and usually performers end up being number one when they’re on because their fans are more enthusiastic. Either way, he’ll perform the song at the end of the show.”

Finished with his conversation with Lila, Kylo bounds over and takes Rey’s hand. “Come here,” he says, pulling her toward the windows.

“They’ll be able to see us, right?” Rey says as they get closer.

“Yeah that’s the point.”

“I don’t think they want to see me.”

“But I want you to see the view.”

Below, the crowd on the sidewalk has doubled and police have set up a barricade across the street to contain fans who’d showed up late. When the fans in front of the building spot Kylo, they start screaming and waving their signs. Kylo waves at them and they cheer again. Rey is grateful that the windows are mostly sound proof. Then, a couple of the girls spot Rey and point at her. The girls around them look up. A couple of them smile and wave at her but one of them glares at Rey and flips her off.

Kylo is busy waving to some other fans and doesn’t notice.

“Um, I need to go to the restroom.”

He turns to her and smiles. “Come back for sound check?”

“I think I’ll wait for the real thing.”

“Meet you in the green room then,” he says, kissing her cheek.

Rey finds the restroom and hides in a stall, sitting on the toilet willing herself not to cry, at least for the sake of her makeup.
This is honestly what she deserves, right? Getting flipped off by a jealous fan should be the least she should worry about in terms of karmic retribution.

But there’s also a part of her that wants to be happy with Kylo and is angry that they won’t leave her alone.

While she’s in the stall, two women come in, talking. They stand at the mirror to check their makeup and hair. Rey can just make them out through the crack in the stall door.

“How was it today, with Kylo Ren?”

“A little better than usual but Christ I’ve put makeup on women who complain less than him. He looks great, though. His skin is like butter. I’d tap it, but only if I could put a gag in his mouth.”

“The girl he came with looks sweet. I’d love to get my hands on that face. Did you see those cheekbones? And that hair?”

“Yeah she’s gorgeous. Poor thing. Hopefully it’s just a fling. Ha! I’m a poet and didn’t know it!”

The women leave and Rey eases out of the stall to wash her hands. It’s odd that they didn’t check under the stalls before blatantly talking shit about people. Did what the first one said mean that Kylo was rude to her when she did his makeup? Should she ask him about it? Definitely not before the show, but maybe later.

Kylo is the only person in the green room when Rey walks in, and even though they’re alone, she hesitates. They’ve been together in the most intimate ways possible for almost forty-eight hours, and she has no clue how to navigate his body now with other people around. If they were at his loft, she would likely climb into his lap and talk to him while straddling him, or at least sit next to him with her head on his shoulder. But even that seems too much when people are walking by every couple of minutes.

He pats the seat beside him and she sits down. As she’s opening her mouth to speak, a tall redheaded man in a blue suit walks in. Kylo groans.

“I was just beginning to hope you’d stood me up,” Kylo says. “Rey, this is Hux, my manager. Hux, this is Rey.”

“I gathered,” Hux says, glancing over Rey in a way that makes her feel as though he’s summed her up and found her lacking. His accent is not as pleasing as Karé’s. He turns his attention back to Kylo. “They aren’t going to have you playing any stupid games, are they?”

“Not unless they spring it on me last second.”

“Q&A?”

“Before my performance if there’s time. Why aren’t you bothering a producer about this?”

“You’re right, you’re just the dancing monkey. So nice to finally meet you, Rey.” He gives her a thin smile and strides out the door.

“Holy shit,” Rey says.

“Yeah he’s an ass.”

“Then why does he still work for you?”
“Are you an expert on music management now?”

“No, I—“

Matt the intern pokes his head in the door and gives them a ten-minute warning for the top of the show.

“Thank you,” Rey says.

Kylo glares at the monitor, watching the audience filter into the studio. Rey’s stomach drops. Even though none of the girls from outside will be in the audience, it’s likely that there will be more than one audience member who shares the feelings of the girl who flipped her off. She looks over at Kylo again and gets an odd sensation of zooming outside of her body, and the realization that no matter how well she knows his body, he’s still virtually a stranger. But then he puts his arm around her and pulls her close, and as she rests her head on his shoulder the sensation disappears. They sit like that, silently, until the Lila and Matt come to get them.

Near the end of the hallway, Lila stops Kylo, as this is where they’ll start his on air entrance. One of the makeup artists descends, doing last minute touchups, and before Rey or Kylo can say anything, Matt leads Rey into the studio to the area Aleida had shown her earlier. The audience has its back to the entrance, and they’re all focused on another producer who’s vamping and giving last minute instructions, so Rey is able to sneak in unobserved. Hux is already there, arms folded, looking into a monitor.

The producer introduces Aleida, who hits her mark and chats with the audience until Lila signals her. Aleida smiles and holds up her mic as Lila shouts, “We’re live in five, four, three…” She holds up two fingers, then points to Aleida as the crowd cheers.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Video Killed the Radio Star" by the Buggles
On the West Coast, Total Request Live is never live, since it’d be pointless to air a show that appeals to teenagers when kids are still at school. When Finn has had an artist on the countdown, he usually relies on Robyn to feed him information from the Internet rather than wait the three hours to watch.

Today, however, despite the recap Robyn sent from a prominent message board, he wants to see for himself. And of course he has to invite Poe over, since Rey is a Resistance artist.

Poe accepts a glass of iced tea from Finn and they settle in on the sofa. At least, if he has to watch the show, Aleida Calrissian is hosting instead of Carson Daly. He’s met her a few times at industry events and she’s always charming and real. She opens the show with a recap of yesterday’s top three and cuts to a shot of Kylo Ren in the TRL photo booth, mugging seriously for the camera as Aleida reminds viewers that he’s today’s special guest.

They cut to commercial right away, promising Kylo after the break.

“I must be getting old, because this show drives me nuts,” Poe says.

“You’re not the only one. I think the cutoff for not finding it ridiculous is about twenty-five.”

“Can you imagine being a guest? At the age you are now, in a studio full of screaming fans.”

“Yeah, but I guess it’s no different than performing, really. Probably a hell of a lot better than doing a red carpet.” Another ad plays for the VMAs and Finn shakes his head. “I can’t shake this feeling about Rey going to the VMAs. Maybe it’s too much, too soon.”

“She’s going to be fine. Watch, she’ll probably upstage him completely.”

“I don’t know,” Finn says. “I think we’re all forgetting how green she is.”

“She’s got to get her feet wet sometime.”

The show comes back on, the camera panning across the cheering crowd before settling on Aleida.

“Welcome back! Alright, alright, calm down.” She smiles and waits for the audience to settle. “You know our guest from a little band called The Knights of Ren.” She pauses for more cheers. “But this summer, he’s been on the countdown on his own with his hit single “Ashes of My Enemies,” from the Huttslayer soundtrack. Give it up for Kylo Ren!”

The camera cuts to Kylo Ren in the hallway and follows him into the studio, where the fans go nuts.

“He looks good,” Poe says.

“Yeah,” Finn admits. Kylo Ren’s appeal had been discussed frequently, both informally and formally at First Order. Straight men were usually the ones that said they “Didn’t get it.” And it is kind of a mystery. He’s well-built but gangly and awkward at the same time. One minute his face
is gorgeous and the next it doesn’t make sense, as though someone had put his parents’ features into one of those flip books where you can make different faces. In person, he’s usually dour, and often rude, even hostile, though Finn has heard he’s polite and accommodating to his fans.

But, there’s a thing that’s unquantifiable, and that a good A&R person can recognize in the oddest of places. Kylo Ren doesn’t come off well in print interviews, but when he’s on stage, or on screen—basically any time he’s performing—he sparkles.

It’s a silly word but it’s the only one that Finn thinks comes close to being adequate. Rey sparkles on stage, too. Every act he’s ever signed has.

Kylo kisses Aleida on the cheek, then clasps his hands together and does a little thankful bow to the audience.

Poe shakes his head. “I don’t know how, but he’s got it.”

“Genetics,” Finn snorts.

Aleida and Kylo do a little small talk then get into the number ten video. On air, Kylo’s aloofness comes off as bashfulness. His reticence as thoughtfulness. He does come across as slightly pretentious but it’s the kind of thing that fans eat up, because it makes them seem discerning.

They go straight to commercial again after the number ten video and Finn groans.

“Finn, you know what happens; Robyn told you.”

“I need to see and hear with my own eyes and ears. Do you want a refill?”

“Sure.”

The countdown is back on when Finn returns, bringing the whole pitcher with him. He sits down a tiny bit closer to Poe. This is Poe’s first time at Finn’s new place so he doesn’t want to give the impression that he’s going to just jump on him now that his transition to TwinStar is official. Poe smiles at him as he sits down, eyes glancing over Finn’s body.

“Did you catch that movie at all? I think they sold more soundtracks than movie tickets.”

“Kylo’s fans are the type who’ll buy the single and the full soundtrack. You wouldn’t believe how often we had to deal with fans trying to sneak into the office, pretending to be interns or whatever. And somehow they always knew when Ren was in the building.”

“It’s crazy,” Poe says as the camera cuts to the audience. “Those girls could be boyband fans.”

“A lot of them are, just secretly. They want to be edgy but haven’t dived fully into metal or punk. A lot of them are pop punk fans, too.”

“So the Knights are a gateway drug?”

“Yeah,” Finn laughs.

“Honestly I’ve tried not to pay too much attention to them. Usually I’d be out looking for bands with a similar sound but— “

“The General.”

“Bingo.”
The rest of the countdown drags on in order to accommodate as many commercial breaks as possible. Finally, before the number one spot is announced, they pause for a Q&A with Ren. It’s all basic, with questions about the Knights album and what product Kylo uses in his hair, until a girl who couldn’t have been more than thirteen gets the mic.

“Hi!” she says.

“Hello,” Kylo says. The girl blushes and giggles but collects herself quickly.

“Okay so I’m probably not supposed to but I’m just going to ask what everyone wants to ask. Is Rey Kenobi your girlfriend?”

To her credit, Aleida only looks panicked for a second when the camera cuts back to Kylo and her. Kylo, however, is not only blushing but looks like he wants to jump out the windows behind him.

“Now, girls, we said no personal questions!” Aleida chides. The girl shrugs.

“No it’s okay,” Kylo says. “Um, it’s…I guess all I can say is that I’d like her to be.”

And then he gives a sort of crooked smile and looks to the back of the studio. The camera follows his gaze, catching the heads of all the fans turning in unison to look at Rey in the corner. Finn sees the exact moment when she looks at the monitor and realizes she’s on camera. Her mouth drops open for a second, but she straightens, looks back at Kylo, tosses her hair over her shoulder, and grins. It’s a moment of pure magic, and at the moment, Finn doesn’t care if it’s real or not, because any of Kylo’s fans who were on the fence about her just fell in love. The ones who hate her probably exploded.

“Holy shit,” Poe says. “Now I know why you wanted to see it for yourself.”

It’s not over yet, though. Aleida obviously senses that she’s got a great moment on her hands, so she makes her way back to Rey with the mic.

“I know you didn’t expect to be on camera today but you can’t leave our boy hanging,” she says, holding the mic out to Rey.

“Oh, I mean, of course,” she says, not taking her eyes off of Kylo. “Sure. Yes.”

The audience lets out a huge “Awwwwww!” punctuated by a few squeals and shrieks.

“That’s a TRL exclusive, folks! But my producer is telling me to wrap it up,” Aleida says as she goes back to the front of the studio. “Coming up Monday we’ve got Silverchair as we start our countdown to 9-9-99 and the VMAs! It’s no surprise what our number one video is today. And here’s Kylo Ren to perform it live.”

They cut to Kylo on the small stage, just catching a tech darting away after adjusting his mic. Kylo starts strumming, skipping most of the intro, even though it showcases his skill. When he sings, he mostly stares into the middle distance, or closes his eyes. But when he gets to the bridge, he opens his eyes and fixes them on what Finn can only assume is Rey.

“There’s nothing I can ever do to get us back to fine. If you want your pound of flesh, then you’d better get in line. I’ll kneel before you weightless, helpless, till you give the sign. Marked with the ashes of enemies that were never mine.”

He looks away for the remaining choruses, and as he strums the final chords the camera pans back around to his audience and their applause. As the screen fades, Finn mutes the television.
“He’s in love with her,” Finn says.

“You think?” Poe laughs. “Looks like our girl’s got it bad, too.”

“If she’s not faking it.”

“Oh, that was real. She may have put it on a little for the camera but she’s head over heels.”

“Jesus, how did this happen?”

“I don’t know, two attractive, charismatic people thrown together by fate and a little media manipulation? Perfect formula for true love.”

“I honestly don’t know what’s worse, if she’s acting or if she’s not.”

“It’s definitely worse if she’s acting, Finn. As long as he doesn’t find out why she went out with him the first couple of times there’s no harm. And hey, she’s twenty years old, it’s not like she’s going to marry the guy. Let it run its course.”

“You think it’ll distract her in the studio?”

“Nah, she’ll be fine. That was totally out of the blue though, wasn’t it? I want a still shot of his face when that girl asked that question. I’ll hang it in my office.”

“Yeah, it was out of the blue, wasn’t it? They were technically single, and now they’re a couple. Just like that.”

“Just like that,” Poe says.

Somehow, the two have moved closer together during this conversation. Poe’s eyelashes are curly, just at the ends.

Finn takes a deep breath and closes the distance between them. It’s a quick kiss, a test. Poe smiles as Finn pulls back.

“This wasn’t a ruse, you know,” Finn says.

“It wasn’t? I’m disappointed.”

“I mean, it can be,” Finn says.

Poe laughs and puts his hand on the side of Finn’s neck pulling him in. This one is slow, Poe’s stubble scraping against Finn’s face in an oddly pleasing way, his hand splayed on Poe’s chest, and the long wait is worth it.

Just like that.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "As Long as You Love Me" by the Backstreet Boys
All She Keeps Inside Isn't On the Label

Between signing for a few fans whose dads were Viacom execs, and chatting with Aleida for a socially acceptable amount of time, Kylo doesn’t make it backstage for half an hour after the show ends. Hux waits it out and finds him while he’s washing off his makeup, waltzing in like a Grammy winner in the press room.

“Bravo,” he says. “Even if you break up with her in a week, I think that performance earned you at least a year of straight cred,” he says as he walks in.

“Will you shut the fuck up?” Kylo whispers. “The fucking door is open.”

“She’s already downstairs in the car.”

“There are other people around.”

“Whatever,” he says. He tilts his head and squints at Kylo. “You don’t actually like her, do you?”

Kylo says nothing and continues drying his face off.

“I suppose she cleans up nicely, and she’s photogenic. Just pray she never finds out why you really asked her out.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Don’t be paranoid. Anyway, we need to chat about album things now that we’ve officially put this single to bed.”

“You sound bitter for someone who made a killing off of that single.”

“I’ll make even more off a Knights album and so will you.”

“I’m on vacation this week, Hux.”

“You’re working now. Most people don’t go on television while they’re on vacation.”

“I’m not on television anymore.” Kylo pats him on the back as he walks out. “You can talk at me on Thursday.”

“This is all for your own good, you know.”

“It’s for your own good.”

“Sometimes those things do intersect.”

Kylo continues walking. Downstairs, the fans on the sidewalk have mostly cleared, hustled along by the police. A few call his name as he’s led to the car but he’s at his limit for fan interaction for the day.

Rey is in the car, sitting behind the driver. She looks over at him when he gets in, then back out the window. Her bag is sitting on the seat next to her. On the way over, it had been in the floor
and she’d sat beside him, head on his shoulder. The car pulls away from the curb and she stays where she is.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, after several minutes of silence.

“I don’t want to talk about it right now,” she says, jerking her head toward the driver.

“Okay.” He reaches over and puts his hand on her thigh but she moves it away.

“Do you want to get something to eat? It’s early but— “

“No.”

“The driver has an NDA.”

“I want to talk about it in private,” she insists.

Kylo leans back against the seat, slouching down and wedging his knees against the front seat. They’ve gone three blocks in ten minutes. At this rate, it’ll take at least another half hour to get home. He sits back up.

“Come on, let’s take the subway.”

“What?”

“Hey,” he says to the driver. “Take my guitar to my house. We’ll meet you there,”

“Yes, sir,” the driver says, pulling over to the nearest curb. “Port Authority’s the closest stop.”

“I know,” Kylo says. “I’ll get the door.” He opens his door and gets out, holding his hand out to Rey. She accepts it as she slides across the seat.

She keeps ahold of his hand as they walk toward the station, shocked out of pouting by her first real look at the theatre district, oblivious to the people who recognize the two of them.

“If you think this is bad,” he says as he navigates through the crowd. “You should see it in a couple of hours.”

She doesn’t let go until they’re inside the station and he swipes his card, letting her go through the turnstile before swiping for himself. He points toward their platform and she walks closely beside him.

The floor starts to rumble and he takes her hand again. “Our train is coming,” he says, pulling her along. The train has just stopped when they get to their platform and Kylo leads her into a tightly packed car. They’re forced to stand, pressed up against each other with her bag wedged between them. He keeps one arm around her and holds the bar with his other. Her sweater is hiked up high from holding the bar so there’s nothing but bare skin underneath his hand on her back. She won’t look at him, but her eyes take in everything around them. The car is mostly full of commuters, too absorbed in their own business to pay them any mind. Her hair smells like his shampoo.

The car remains packed the entire trip downtown, though they get shuffled around as people get on and off. He starts edging them toward the door as their stop approaches and she exhales audibly as they pour out onto the platform. After getting her bearings, she looks around, closes her eyes for a moment, then starts toward the stairs. At ground level, she pauses to look around again and then heads toward the correct exit. Kylo follows her up to the street, somewhat in awe, as she walks the
three blocks to his building and waits for him to catch up.

“Living in the desert gives you a great sense of direction and eye for landmarks,” she says. “It’s just a grid, right?”

Kylo nods and unlocks the door.

Upstairs, she kicks off her shoes and makes a beeline for the guest bedroom. He’s changing his shirt when she comes out dressed in a tank top and cargo pants, hair brushed out, face scrubbed. She comes and stands on the other side of the bed.

“What the fuck was that?” she asks.

“What was what?”

“Asking me to be your girlfriend on national television?”

“I was put on the spot. What was I supposed to say?”

“Oh, you’re asking me for advice now?”

“Yes. I’m dying to know what you think I should have said.”

“Jesus Christ, you’ve been doing this for eight years. Even I know that you say ‘No comment!’”

“Is it that big a deal? You said yes.”

“You’d rather I rejected you. On television.”

“No but— “

“You said *yesterday* that you weren’t going to put any pressure on me and now I’m your official girlfriend because some snot nosed kid couldn’t keep her nose out of your business.”

“You don’t want to be exclusive?” he says.

“Aaaaaah!” She throws her hands in the air and stalks to the kitchen, where she jerks open the refrigerator door.

“No, really,” he says, throwing his shirt down and following her. “What, are you going to go back to LA and start dating around?”

“Maybe,” she says. She slams the refrigerator shut without taking anything out and brushes past him.

“Why would you do that?”

She stops and faces him. “Why not?”

“Because it doesn’t make any sense.”

“Why? Do you think you own me now because you put your dick in me?”

“Jesus Christ, Rey!”
“What? It’s how you’re acting. We barely know each other and you think it’s a given I’m supposed
to be your girlfriend just because you were decent and bought me breakfast after you fucked me.”

“Rey, that’s not what— “

“It’s exactly what you’re doing. It’s how it feels. And if I want to date the entire UCLA football
team when I get home, I will.”

“But you won’t.”

“Says who?”

They stare at each other, Rey backed up against the counter, breathing hard. Kylo walks toward
her, and when he’s close enough that the fabric of her tank top is grazing his bare chest, he leans
into her ear.

“I’ll retract it,” he whispers. “I’ll call my publicist right now and tell her to issue a statement. If
that’s what you really want.”

“No,” she says.

“No, what?”

‘No I don’t want that.”

“What do you want?”

“I want you to stop trying to distract me.”

He steps back, hands in the air, and leans against the island with his arms folded. “What else do
you want?”

She shrugs and looks down. There’s a loose thread at the hem of her shirt and she starts pulling at
it. It keeps unravelling instead of breaking so she turns around and starts looking through drawers,
yanking them out and slamming them shut.

“Don’t you have any scissors? Or a knife?”

He steps toward her again, taking her by the shoulders and turning her around. Taking the thread,
he wraps one end around his finger and holds the other, then snaps the thread.

“Here,” he says, holding it up. She snatches it from him. “The scissors are in the knife block,” he
says, nodding toward it. “So are the knives.”

“You’re an asshole.”

“Yes.”

“Why do you want to be with me?”

“What?”

“Nobody’s ever wanted me.” The tears which have been brimming in her eyes the finally start to
fall. “Why do you want me? What’s wrong with you?”

This wounds him. Not his pride; he knows he’s a mess. He aches for her. That she could ever feel
unworthy. That she could ever think that only someone damaged could care about her.

He cups her face in his hands and stoops to look in her eyes. “You’re incredible. And so brave. And kind.”

“No, I’m not kind at all.” She shakes her head. “Kylo—“

The buzzer rings.

“Shit. It’s the driver with my guitar. I’ll be right back.” He kisses her on the forehead and runs down to get the door. It’s started to rain again, so he tips the driver extra. On the landing, he stops with his hand on the doorknob, his guilt niggling at him again to let her go. To say that it’s fine to date other people. Let her find someone who isn’t a human disaster.

Even entertaining the idea sends him reeling. He takes a deep breath and opens the door.

Rey is sitting on the sofa going through the takeout menus.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey yourself.”

“Are you…”

“I’m fine. I’m tired. Today was crazy.” She holds up two menus. “Take your pick. It’s my treat tonight.”

For once he doesn’t insist, even though it still seems ridiculous when he has so much more money than her. He takes the Indian menu and drops to his knees in front of her.

“I really am sorry. I should have told that little girl to shove the microphone up her ass.”

Rey looks at him, then down. When she looks up her eyes are shiny again. “When I was growing up I never felt like my life was mine. I never felt like anything I had was really mind. And I never felt like I was in control of anything. And today I felt like I wasn’t in control.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t really want to date the UCLA football team.”

“No?”

“Yeah I prefer the Quizbowl team.”

“I once got five whole pie slices in a game of Trivial Pursuit before I flipped the board off the table.”

“Oh?”

“No, it was three.”

This gets her to laugh and he tugs her toward him and when their lips meet, hers are salty.

“You’re not hungry right this second?” he asks.

“No,” she says, putting her arms around him. “It can definitely wait.”
Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Shimmer" by Fuel.
The rain continues through the weekend, light mists that develops into downpours with no warning. They use it as an excuse to stay in. They don’t talk about what happened on TRL, and after coming so close to spilling everything to Kylo, Rey decides to put it behind her. There’s no point in ever telling him.

On Monday, a messenger drops off a copy of People. They aren’t the main story on the cover, but there’s a little photo of them in the corner with the headline “Knight Finds His Princess?” Rey groans when she sees it.

Kylo reads it over her shoulder. “Should I start calling you Princess?”

“Not if you ever want to touch my breasts again.”

Inside is a two-page spread of photos, starting with their first appearances together. The ones from last week are the most prominent.

“I look like I fell out of a dumpster,” Rey says. They both do. Kylo’s hat didn’t do nearly enough to hide her bed head and his shirt is more wrinkled than she remembered it being. Kylo doesn’t look much better. It’s obvious they’d been up most of the night and the captions imply as much, also noting that they’d skipped the tour after party.

But there’s also something sweet about the photos. The way they’re standing together, leaning into each other, as he locks the door. The way he takes her hand. In a weird way, it’s nice to have them, it just sucks that millions of other people get to see them, too.

Since the magazine went to print before TRL, there’s no mention of them being officially together, only a statement that neither of their spokespeople had commented.

“I didn’t even know I had a spokesperson,” Rey says.

“They probably called your manager or the label,” he says. “You should get your own publicist as soon as you can, though.”

“I’ll get on that as soon as I pay the label back.”

“You wanna see what they’re saying online?”

“Ugh, no. I’m going to take a shower.”

“I’ll check it out and give you the highlights.”

When she gets out of the shower, he’s at the dining table with his PowerBook. She goes over to him, still in her towel, and sits on his knee.

“So?”

“This is the best one so far. In this thread, these girls are arguing about whether or not you really slept over or if you just met me there and we went to breakfast. And then others are saying of course you slept over but are saying there’s no chance we had sex. And then this kid, she’s like,
fifteen, comes in with this.” He turns the screen so that Rey can see more easily.

Some of y’all are like in your twenties and shit and you’re refusing to believe what’s in front of your eyes!! You don’t have to like Rey or anything but how stupid do you look trying to say that those aren’t pictures of two people who were up all night fucking?? We know that’s Kylo’s shirt. We’ve seen him in it. He was wearing it in that photo of him watching her play the NIGHT BEFORE!!! You know, the one where he’s looking at her like she invented Pop Tarts or something? Her hair looks like shit. His hair looks like shit. But they’re grinning like idiots and it’s like eight in the morning. We know Kylo sleeps til noon when he can. Why the hell would he get up at eight to meet someone for breakfast?? And if he was going to get up at the ass crack of dawn to meet someone then that’s actually proof that he’s really into her! Y’all are so fucking delusional I swear to god. They fucked okay? And then the next day they went on TRL and made it all official and you need to deal with this shit because it’s embarrassing to see adults acting like this. Hate me all you want it’s the truth!!!

“Holy shit,” Rey says. “It’s weird. She’s talking about things that are none of her business but I think she’s my hero. What else is there?”

“Some people who were at TRL arguing about whether your hair is real or extensions. Some fights about whether you’re pretty or not. Someone else trying to start some conspiracy theory about my mother hiring you to lure me back to my family. And a bunch of people begging the moderators to ban topics about you from the board altogether because it’s supposed to be about the music. Oh and my favorite, a side by side of us and a photo of me and Kat from ‘93 that’s supposed to prove somehow that I hate you. Do you need to check your email?”

“Yes but I don’t want to.”

“What do you want to do,” he asks, kissing her shoulder and working his way to her neck.

“Central Park.”

“It’s raining,” he says, running his finger down her arm.

“Museum of Natural History?”

He starts kissing her other shoulder. “Too crowded.”

“Um, listen to music and play our guitars?”

“Better.”

Rey bats his hands away as he reaches around to undo her towel. “I should check my email. Go take a shower.”

An hour later, they’re lying on his sofa, listening to Thelonious Monk and Dizzy Gillespie, Kylo’s body draped half over Rey’s with his head on her stomach. He’s heavy, but it’s a pressure she can live with, especially when it means she gets to rake her fingers through his clean hair.

“We really should leave the house sometime,” she says.

“Housekeepers are coming tomorrow, so we have to leave then.”

She looks closely at his hair as she threads her hands through it. “You also need to get your roots done.” Expecting him to grouch or deny that he dyes his hair black, Rey is surprised when he agrees with her.
“Someone’s coming over Thursday morning to do it.”

She focuses her attention on the hair at his nape, which is even softer than the rest, and he practically purrs with delight.

“Karé emailed me and told me to think about getting a Brazilian wax before Thursday. I told her that if she picked out anything that would require that, to not even think about bringing it.”

“Good girl.”

“You’re not into that?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. I used to look at a lot of 70s Playboys when I was trying to figure shit out so it’s not like I’m afraid of hair.”

“Well I don’t think I’ve got a full 70s bush.”

“You don’t. You have the perfect amount of bush.”

Rey’s face gets hot. It’s one thing for him to appreciate her in the heat of the moment but another to casually discuss her body hair. “Can we talk about something else?”

“Sure.”

“Finn emailed me with more details about recording my album.”

“Hmmm.”

“I have to go to Wyoming to do it. Luke won’t come to LA.”

“Figures.”

“They think it’ll only take about two weeks though.”

“Probably.”

“They’re renting the band a house.”

“I can’t go to Wyoming with you, Rey.”

“Oh.”

“It’s not just about Skywalker. I’ve got to start work on an album, too.”

“Hmm, we’re going to have albums out around the same time.”

“Our’ll be a bit later than yours. They’re thinking May.”

“February for me, now. We’ll probably be on tour at the same time. If I get to tour.”

“You can always open for us.”

Rey laughs. “I can think of at least a dozen reasons why that wouldn’t fly.”

“Yeah. Not a good musical fit. And my fans hate you enough already.”
“Well, yeah and I just don’t want anyone to say my success is because of you.” It is, in fact, something that’s bothered her more and more lately.

“Well you’re sleeping with a product of nepotism.”

“Do you really think that?”

“Rey, I wouldn’t have half the success I have if it weren’t for my family.”

“But you’re so talented.”

“Maybe, but If you haven’t noticed, my band sucks.”

“Yes, but not because of you.” She tugs on his hair to get him to look at her. “And I know you hate to hear it but Dagobah was good. Really fucking good. Your name got you in the room but it didn’t keep you there.”

He lays his head on her tummy again, and is quiet for so long she thinks he’s drifted off. But then he slides one hand along her side and grabs onto her shirt. He doesn’t try to take it off, but rubs the fabric between his thumb and forefinger.

“Rey, about Dagobah.”

“What?”

When he looks up at her, he looks like he did when they said goodbye before tour, as if he’s memorizing her. He lays his head back down on her chest and takes an enormous breath. “I didn’t write ‘City in the Sky.’”

For a second, she thinks she’s misheard him, because the words that came out of his mouth don’t make any sense.

“You mean; you didn’t write it…alone?” she whispers. Her hand is still in his hair and she doesn’t know what to do with it. If she takes it away he might think she’s disgusted by him but keeping it there feels weird.

Kylo burrows his face into her tummy and grips the other side of her shirt as well. Finally, he gets up and sits back on his knees. She sits up, too, scooting to the opposite end of the sofa from him.

“I got a bunch of my grandfather’s stuff when I was in high school. And there was a notebook with a bunch of songs, some of them finished, some of them not, and I’d work on them in my spare time and then one day someone heard me playing ‘City’ and they loved it in a way they’d never loved any of my other shit and I was a jackass and let them think I wrote it, and then the album took off and my whole career is built on a lie.”

There’s nothing about him that looks twenty-six in this moment. Even his size is diminished as he looks down at his hands, hair curtaining his face. What he did was terrible, and as a writer she should be horrified. But all she can muster up is a well of sadness for him. What was it like for him, growing up with so much expectation? Rey has never had anywhere to go but up.

“You were a kid,” she says. It’s not all she wants to say, but it’s the only thing that surfaces from everything roiling around inside.

Kylo looks up but doesn’t look fully at her. “But I’m not anymore. And I wasn’t much younger than you are now. Would you have done something like that?”
Lie to get ahead in her career? She almost laughs. Would telling him, right now, exactly what she’s capable of make him feel better? Not likely.

“I don’t know, if I’d do exactly…that thing. But, that doesn’t mean anything. We’re different people, and I don’t have the weight of a legacy on my shoulders.”

He looks at her directly, dark eyes scanning her face. He must have found what he needed there, because he nods. Rey shuffles over to him and sits with her knees touching his. She takes his hands and turns them over, running her fingers along the callouses.

“Do you know why ‘City in the Sky’ was better than what you’d written before?”

“Because I’m a hack.”

“No. Because you were like, eighteen years old and hadn’t lived half the things your grandfather had by eighteen, much less whenever he wrote that song. But you know what?” She doesn’t wait for him to answer, because it’ll only be more self-deprecation. “’Ashes’ is better than ‘City in the Sky.’ It’s the best thing you’ve ever written. There are songs on the second Dagobah EP that you wrote that are better than ‘City in the Sky.’”

“Do you really believe that?”

She looks him in the eyes. “I know it.” She picks up his left hand and kisses it. “Do you ever think, that maybe if you came clean you’d feel better?”

“It’s too late.”

“Kylo, no offense, but I’m pretty sure you could murder someone and your fans would forgive you.”

“It’s pointless. It wouldn’t make any difference. It wouldn’t change the fact that I did it.”

There’s no way she can refute that, because she understands all too well. “Thank you for telling me.”

“Thank you for not hating me.”

She rises onto her knees and takes his face in her hands, kissing him on the mouth. “You’d have to do a lot worse for that to happen.” Standing up, she reaches out her hand. “Now come on. We’re too young and pretty to stay in and mope.”

“Where are we going?” he asks as he takes her hand.

“You’re the expert,” she says. “You tell me.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Hurt" by Nine Inch Nails. I greatly prefer Johnny Cash's version.
The weather breaks the morning of the VMAs, and the sky is the sort of blue you only see in New York when summer is finally losing its grip. Kylo cranks open a window and gazes out while smoking a cigarette. Rey is asleep still, in the guest room. Since Lorna has a key to the loft, neither of them wanted to risk being walked in on, so the guest room made sense.

Hux and Lorna arrive right after Kylo finishes shaving. Lorna accepts his kiss on the cheek and sets a to-go tray of coffee on the counter.

“There’s one for Rey, too,” she says, indicating the fourth cup.

“She’s still asleep.”

“Well,” Hux says. “I hope she doesn’t expect everyone to be quiet so she can laze around.”

“That’s the last thing she’d expect.” He looks at his watch. “She told me to wake her up right about now.”

“And you’re just jumping right to it, aren’t you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Kylo says.

“Gentlemen,” Lorna says, stepping between them. “We’ve got too much to do today to start this shit. Get fucking caffeinated.” She takes a coffee from the tray and hands it to Hux, then takes one for herself. “Kylo, go smoke a cigarette. Downstairs.” She turns her back on him to talk to Hux about the itinerary.

Instead of heading downstairs, Kylo goes to the guest room, pulling the garage door up just enough to duck inside.

She’s sprawled out across the bed on her back, covers half off, one arm thrown over her eyes. When he looks at her, his heart does that half panicky squeeze it’s been doing every time the weight of what he had revealed to her settles again. And every time, she looks at him and smiles, or rubs his arm, or touches his hand, and the pressure lifts.

After she dragged him out of the house that night, they ended up going to see *American Pie* at a second run theatre. Kylo hadn’t seen it yet, but Rey had seen it with her band while she was out on tour. During the movie, she leaned her head on his shoulder and fed him popcorn and while whispering in his ear when her favorite parts were coming up. He hadn’t found the movie as funny as Rey, but he chalked it up to her being closer in age to the characters.

On the walk back to his loft they got caught in a rain storm. He gave her his jacket to hold over her head, and once they were home, she dried his hair with a towel, made him soy hot chocolate and took him to bed. Up until then, their lovemaking had been a clumsy collision of bodies desperate to explore each other. But that night they took their time, her hair caressing his body as she worked her way down it, kissing him, nipping at him, tracing the lines of his abdomen with her fingers and tongue, stroking his chest. She paid special attention to his neck and ears, and when she finally slid down on to his cock, he could only manage one coherent thought.
What did I do to deserve this?

And as they’d run around the city over the last two days, that question had resounded in his mind, working its way to a crescendo every time she said his name.

“Rey?” he whispers. She groans and rolls over, pulling the covers over her head. “I’ve got coffee.” He sets the tray down on the bedside table and crawls onto the bed, hovering over her on his hands and knees. “Rey. Get up. You said to get you up at ten.”

“I don’t even remember why.”

“Because you have to wash your hair and shave and whatever.”

“That doesn’t take that long.”

“And because there’s going to be catered food to feed all the people today and it’s arriving any second.”

This gets her to peek out from under the blanket. “What kind of food?”

“I don’t know; Lorna ordered it. But if you don’t like any of it I’ll send her out for something for you.”

“Oh God, don’t do that.”

“I’ll do it right now if you don’t get up.”

“Fine,” she groans and pushes him off of her. Getting up, she wraps the sheet around her naked body and shuffles toward him. Even bleary eyed, with creases in her cheeks from the blankets, she’s beautiful. He tries to kiss her but she ducks away and goes into the bathroom, dropping the sheet along the way. He follows her to the door and leans against the jamb as she ties her hair up on top of her head and steps into the shower. The frosted glass of the shower door makes her look like a censored image on television. However, her movements as she washes herself are far less titillating than your average dirty movie.

“Why are you so grumpy this morning?” he asks over the rush of the shower.

“I don’t know. How do you feel after not eating any salt or carbs or sugar for two days?”

“It doesn’t bother me anymore. It’s like getting ready for a marathon or whatever.”

“Is it really going to make a difference? I don’t think my face is going to puff up if I eat an order of fries.”

“I’ll get you all the fries you want after the show.”

“I’m holding you to that.” She hums one of her songs as she props her leg up on the soap dish and starts shaving it. He’s about to leave when she pipes up again.

“Why is it going to take them five hours to get me ready?”

“Um, let’s see. Spray tan, eyebrows and whatever else needs waxed, nails, hair, full makeup and wardrobe alterations. You haven’t actually chosen anything to wear so they probably added extra time for that.”

“Karé sent me some photos and I said they were fine. Wonderful. She’s great at her job. What are
you wearing?”

“That’s a surprise.”

“Does Karé know?”

“Of course she does, so she can make your outfit complement mine.”

Rey turns off the water and opens the door, reaching for a towel. “This is crazy. Why do I need a spray tan?”

“The lights are bright and it’s not like a photoshoot where they can color correct later. It’s so you won’t look pasty.”

“Why aren’t you getting one?”

“Pasty is my thing,” he says, taking her by the shoulders. “I don’t think they’re going to make you look like an Oompa Loompa. Just think of it as part of your makeup.”

The buzzer rings as he kisses her on the forehead.

“That’s either the food or my hairstylist. Come out when you’re ready.”

Turns out it’s the food, and the hairstylist, and the journalist and photographer from Esquire, each with an assistant in tow, as he’d predicted. Hands are shaken and cheeks are kissed and he’s taken to the master bathroom, where the hairstylist’s assistant lays black plastic over every possible surface.

“I really wish you’d just come in for this, Kylo,” Tiffany says as she inspects his hair. “It’s not dignified, doing this in your bathroom.”

“My bathroom costs more than your entire shop. And you know why I won’t come out there to get this done.”

“Elvis was a natural blonde, you know. So’s that cute Australian boy from that one movie, with the bitchy girl? You’re just darkening yours up a bit. It’s not that big a deal.”

“Yes but not everyone knew that Elvis dyed his hair.”

“Everyone knew; they didn’t give a shit. Besides, I have private rooms in my salon, both here and out in LA.”

“If I promise to get my roots done in the salon next time will you promise to shut up until you’re finished with my hair?”

Tiffany sighs, looks over his head at her assistant, then back at him.

“Whatever you say, Mr. Ren.”

A parade of people enters and exits the loft the remainder of the morning, culminating in the arrival of Karé’s entire crew at noon. Besides Karé, there’s an assistant carrying a stack of garment bags, a makeup artist with a wheeled train case, a hair stylist, manicurist, and a woman with an air compressor and a shoulder bag who must be the spray tanner.
He directs them to the guest room, where Rey has retreated with his Discman and a plate of fruit, saying she didn’t want to be in the way. When he told her she wasn’t in the way, she told him she wanted some quiet. It was just as well, since he didn’t want to risk her spending too much time in Hux’s vicinity. There’s no telling what he might “accidentally” let slip.

The *Esquire* journalist, Pietro, who’s been speaking with him off and on all morning, settles beside Kylo while a manicurist works on his nails.

“This is your first time taking a date to an awards show since you and Katya Rodionova broke up.”

“Yeah,” he says.

“Is there a lot of pressure?”

“What do you mean, pressure?” Kylo asks, alarmed.

“Um, just to impress her, make sure everything goes smoothly. She’s not as experienced in all of this as Ms. Rodionova was.”

Kylo shrugs. “It’s chill, I guess. I’m not nominated or presenting so it’ll be a little more low-key.”

Kylo looks over his shoulder at Hux. “Off the record?” he whispers to the journalist.

“Sure.”

“The only reason I’m going this year is so I can take her.”

“Oh man, you’ve gotta let me put that in there,” the journalist says.

“Absolutely not.”

“Alright. Now, back on the record, ‘Ashes of My Enemies’ is a fantastic video. For real. Some really great stuff. But it didn’t make the cutoff for nominations this year. What do you think its chances are next year?”

“There’ll be another Knights album out by then.”

“Well, what if they’re both nominated?”

He wants to tell him that he’d want the solo video to win. That he would relish the look on his bandmates’ faces as he collected the award alone. Instead, he smiles. “My goal is to never stop trying to top the last thing I did, so I’m sure that the next video the Knights put out will be clearly superior to ‘Ashes.’”

During their conversation, Kylo’s own stylist has finally arrived. She air kisses him on the cheek and shoos him toward his bed, where her assistant is already setting up screens.

“I hope you did what I instructed,” she says. “This ensemble is unforgiving and I’ll be thoroughly disappointed if we have to use a backup.”

“Of course, Bazine. I am totally free of superfluous body hair and superfluous fluids.”

“Good.” She touches his face. “Your skin looks incredible. Did you finally manage to quit smoking?”

“No, I’m just having a lot of sex.”
“Oooh yes. I can’t blame you. I had no idea they grew them like that in Nebraska.”

“New Mexico.”

Bazine shrugs. “I cannot wait to see her. I’ve been on the phone with that Karé quite a bit. I’m thinking about poaching her. She’s truly gifted and she’s wasted at Stiletto if you ask me.”

“Rey can’t be that hard to dress, though.”

“Certainly not, but you’d be surprised how many people manage to fuck it up. You give them caviar and they make tuna salad out of it. Speaking of fuck ups…” She whirls around and shouts, “Pru! What’s taking so long?”

The harried assistant comes running from the front of the loft. “I’m sorry! I left the shoes in the car and he had to park four blocks away. I got him on the phone, though and he’s on his way back!”

“Unbelievable. At least it wasn’t the trousers. Let’s get started.”

The pants are an ordeal to get on, and the texture of waxed denim makes his skin crawl, when he touches it, but as he looks in the mirror he figures it’s worth it. The photographer from Esquire thinks so, too, getting several shots of him posing shirtless in front of the mirror.

Everyone fawns over him, complimenting his body and his hair. It makes him feel like he’s at a dog show, and he’s both the show dog, and the show dog’s handler.

His shirt looks easier to put on but Kylo says he wants to wait until his makeup is done. Bazine shoos him away from the food table and the makeup artist grabs him, insisting he put the shirt on before he gets started.

“I’m not ruining a seven-hundred-dollar shirt with a foundation stain,” he says. “Bazine would have me murdered, but she’d wait and do it in my sleep or something. She’s patient like that. That little assistant? She thinks she’s off the hook for leaving your boots in the car but just wait. Bazine will call her in the middle of the night next Wednesday, while she’s out at some sad club with her sad friends, and tell her she’s fired.”

The photographer hovers a few feet away while Than finishes Kylo’s makeup. Kylo has worked with Than before, on most of his videos since signing with First Order. He knows Kylo’s face and won’t make him look like an idiot. The only evidence he’s wearing makeup will be the eyeliner.

Than prattles on about who he’s excited to see perform tonight and some rumors about Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake secretly dating, but Kylo tunes it out. When Than tells him he’s finished, he takes a quick look in the hand mirror and stands up, pulling the protective napkins out of his collar and handing them off to Than’s assistant.

A hush falls over the room and he turns around. Rey has come out of the guest room. Karé is still fiddling with her clothes, but for the most part, she’s ready.

Kylo always thought it was bullshit when people say they’ve felt like their lover was the only other person in a crowded room. But as he looks at her, all of these ridiculous people fade into the background. She is always beautiful, but right now she’s so radiant he doesn’t know where to look.

She looks equally stunned when she sees him.
“Holy shit,” they say at the same time, as the photographer snaps a photo.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is from "Goody Two Shoes" by Adam Ant
Will We Have Rainbows Day After Day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Rey first met Karé Kun, she came away understanding a little of what it must be like to have a big sister-- if you had the kind of big sister who brings over hundreds of dollars’ worth of free clothes and loves to do makeovers. But the Karé that showed up at Kylo’s loft with a full entourage the day of the VMAs was a different beast than the one that dressed Rey for TRL.

This Karé is more like a military commander, with an array of beauty technicians as her dedicated troops, so well organized that at one point Rey had three working on her simultaneously.

For all the fuss, the final look is simple. A matte silk slip dress, ankle length and the exact color of the turquoise that’s so ubiquitous in Rey’s home state. The dress skims her body, a side slit allowing her to move freely and showcasing her right leg up to mid-thigh. Her only accessory is a black velvet ribbon choker with a silver star pendant, and her hair has been wrangled into three buns which cascade down the back of her head.

The hours of plucking and prodding and exfoliating are all worth it when she sees the look on Kylo’s face. His mouth actually falls open as he looks her up and down.

And when she gets a good look at Kylo she is star struck, for the first time since she’s known him. She thought she’d seen him in every state of dress and undress imaginable, but this is another level. She doesn’t even know where to look, his body is so perfectly showcased.

Skin-tight black bondage pants show off the length of his legs and the beautiful shape of his thighs. His arms look incredible in the body hugging shirt, which is sheer, except for the cuffs and the high neck, and worn over a black tank. She cannot look at his chest in that tank for very long without wanting to get her hands underneath it, so she settles on his face.

He’s wearing black eyeliner.

“Holy shit,” she says, at the same time as Kylo. She vaguely hears a camera shutter click.

She walks over to him. “You look like you stepped out of a music video,” she says when she reaches him.

“That’s the plan.” He leans over and whispers in her ear. “You look like my favorite daydream.”

She pulls back and looks up at him, but right as she’s about to speak, Hux clears his throat.

“Okay, kids. You’ll have plenty of time to paw at each other later. The limo is downstairs with the rest of your band inside and they’ve been waiting long enough they probably have a good buzz going. You’re in the third wave of arrivals. You’ll do some band shots at the start, then the band will go in, followed by Kylo and Rey. They’ll want some of both of you and of Kylo separately. Once that’s done, everyone else will go inside while Kylo does his House of Style interview. Got it?”

“Yeah,” Kylo says, still looking at Rey. She smirks at him and goes up on her toes to kiss him square on the mouth.

“Got it,” she says, and wipes her lipstick off his mouth with her thumb.
“Alright, let’s get moving,” Hux says, ushering them out the door.

“Rey! Wait.” Rey stops and Karé hands her a black leather motor cycle jacket. It’s buttery soft with a modest number of zippers and chains. “This is mine so you have to give it back. I want you to contrast with your date but this ties you together without being too obvious or cheesy. Or at least I hope. We’ll see how people react.”

“Thank you,” Rey says and gives Karé a hug. Despite running around like a whirlwind the last few hours she still smells like cinnamon and her hair is perfect.

“Have fun,” Karé says, squeezing Rey. “There’s nothing like your first red carpet.”

“I don’t know. I think the first one where I’m not someone’s date might come close.”

“You’re probably right. Now go.”

Downstairs, Kylo waits on the sidewalk, a black stretch limo behind him. Hux is waiting next to a town car for Lorna, who stayed behind in the loft to see the rest of the crew out.

Back home, some of the kids would get limos for prom, usually pooling their money and putting the maximum allowed amount of people in the car, but the one time Rey had gone, it had been in her date’s car.

None of the limos she’d seen around Truth or Consequences were this new or shiny.

“You okay?” Kylo asks as Rey hesitates.

“Yeah, just — “

“First time?”

“Yes.”

The driver opens the door and Kylo takes her hand to help her into the car, then ducks inside, sliding into the seat next to her. The car is upholstered in black leather and plush carpeting, with soft golden lighting glinting off the chrome trim.

It also smells like a bar at happy hour and feels almost as crowded.

She recognizes the man sitting to her left, though his round baby face looks about five years younger in person.

“Hi,” he says, holding out his hand. “I’m Mikey.”

“Rey.” His hand is soft but not as sweaty as she figured it would be.

“And this is Derek, Banks, and Moff,” Kylo says, gesturing to the three men on the opposite banquette. He gives Mikey a pointed look and the bassist sighs and moves across the aisle to squeeze in with the others, leaving the entire long seat to Rey and Kylo.

“It’s closer to the bar, anyway,” Mikey says, reaching for a decanter of whiskey.

All four of them look like they’ve had a good head start but they pass the bottle around anyway, sloshing more liquid into their glasses. Moff offers the bottle to Kylo but he shakes his head.

On the outside, Kylo’s posture is almost languid, his arm draped around Rey and his long legs
stretched out across the aisle. But as she leans into him, she can feel how tense he really is, contempt rolling from him as he takes up as much space as possible in the car.

As the car pulls out and heads uptown, Rey quietly observes Kylo and his band. She’s never seen around with anyone that isn’t working for him in some capacity.

With the other four, there’s the usual amount of crude ribbing that guys love to engage in, but otherwise they all truly seem to like each other, and despite their outrageous clothes and hair (there’s enough pomade and gel among them to keep Redken in business) they also all seemed relatively…normal.

“So, Rey,” Banks says. “You’re from New Mexico?”

“Yeah. How did you know that?”

“We all read that People article,” Derek says.

“It was sooo sweet,” Banks chimes in.

“Yeah Kylo,” Mikey says. “Didn’t know you had it in you. Glad you finally got past the talking stage with a girl.”

“Why, Michael? Does it give you hope you’ll get past the staring with your tongue out stage some day?”

Banks and Moff crack up at this, and even Derek cracks a smile. Banks leans across the aisle to high five Kylo, but he’s left hanging.

“Asshole,” Banks mutters as he slumps back.

“So, um, you guys are recording soon?” Rey asks.

“Yeah,” Moff says. “If this fucker ever signs off on a start date.”

As the other guys complain about Kylo’s hesitation, Rey looks at him. He’d recently talked about the recording as though it were a given, but the guys are talking like Kylo is a holdout.

“I still don’t see why Kylo gets to bring a date to this thing and we don’t.”

“Who were you gonna bring, Mikey?” Banks asks.

“Hey man, there’s plenty of chicks who wanna be seen here tonight and are sitting at home.”

“Yeah but they’d have to be seen with you,” Kylo says.

“Fuck all y’all,” Mikey says as the other guys laugh. “Just fuck off.”

He falls silent, nursing his drink and staring at the floor.

“Where are you from, Mikey?” Rey asks.

“Oh just a little place in—“

Kylo jumps in. “If there’s a bright center of the universe, Mikey’s town is where it’s farthest from.”
“Oh, I thought that was my hometown.” Rey says.

“The New Mexico desert at least has beautiful scenery,” Kylo says. “Trust me. We had to go visit everyone’s home town for a big magazine article a couple of years ago and Pigeon Fuck, Tennessee or whatever looks like the asshole of a coal mine.”

Rey stops giving up on drawing Mikey back into the conversation. There’s no point to it if Kylo is going ot keep insulting him.

Ahsoka’s voice pops into her head, from a conversation they had when Rey was fifteen and had a crush on a guy named Teedo in her English class. The guy was an asshole to pretty much everyone, but when he and Rey were paired up for an assignment, he was kind to her. Ahsoka had pulled her aside after one of their study session at the Sacred Song.

“I know it feels good to be the only one he’s nice to, but be careful. That’s never a good thing.”

Teedo had been expelled from school before they finished the project, and Rey never found out if Ahsoka’s warning was correct. He lived way out near the county line and didn’t have a car so after a few phone calls the romance fizzled out. They’d never done anything more than make out behind the gym.

Her relationship with Kylo has largely been formed in private, which is probably normal, except that by this point a lot of couples might have spent more time hanging out with friends.

Not that either of them have many friends. Which could be a problem in and of itself.

She shakes her head. This is not the time to start falling down those kind of mental rabbit holes. It’ll only send her thoughts spiraling into a doomsday scenario. They’re pulling up in front of Lincoln Center and there’s way too much to absorb outside to get stuck inside her head.

The car stops in front of a wide staircase covered in red carpet, but the driver doesn’t open the door right away. When he does open the door, Hux and Lorna are waiting. The guys all get out and Lorna and an assistant begin adjusting everyone’s clothes. The assistant even pulls out a lint roller and starts going to town on the guys, who are all dressed in black. Lorna has Rey turn around so she can inspect her for wrinkles, then tells her to take off her jacket and that she’ll hold it until they get inside.

The whole time, the fans held behind barricades across the street are going crazy.

Lorna and Rey stay to one side as the Knights pose for photos by the limo, then follow them up the steps. The whole band poses for several more minutes at the top of the stairs, then the Knights head toward the building as Kylo stops to pose alone. They’re about halfway up the carpet when Lorna sends Rey to pose with Kylo. He wraps his arm around her immediately, which is a relief not just for the sense of security but because the air has turned chilly now that the sun has lowered behind the tallest buildings.

“Smile and try not to get too confused when fifty people call your name,” Kylo whispers. He’d given her a brief rundown before of how it works, so she tries to emulate him, head panning slowly left to right so they can give as many photographers the illusion of eye contact as possible. They move to the next mark, a small “x” made of tape, and do the same thing again, then on to the next mark. Rey clutches his hand as they walk, bright dots flashing in front of her eyes. She’s so focused on not tripping that the stream of famous faces on the carpet barely registers.
Despite her earlier bravado, the thought of having to do this on her own some day is terrifying.

At the last mark they stop and Kylo does a brief on-camera interview with Tabitha Soren. Rey has no idea what she’s supposed to do while they’re talking, so she just looks at Kylo, hoping she doesn’t look like a lovesick idiot. Tabitha does greet her by name and tells her she’s looking...
forward to the album, and Rey mumbles something resembling a thank you before moving on.

They stop again near a tall platform set up near the entrance to the opera house, with a staircase leading to the top.

“Ms. Romijn-Stamos is ready for you,” Hux says to Kylo. “Please tell me you remember what designer you’re wearing?”

“It’s Tommy Hilfiger, right?” Kylo says.

“He knows it’s McQueen,” Lorna says before Hux’s head explodes. She shoots Kylo a death glare. “I think he even knows Rey is in D&G, if it comes up.”

“Behave,” Hux says. “I’ll make sure Rey gets to her seat.”

Kylo takes Rey’s hand before Hux can lead her away. “No, I don’t want her to have to go in there alone. Lorna can wait with her until I’m finished.”

“Fine, let her stand out here in the cold. I’m taking my seat in the nosebleed section.” Lorna hands him his ticket and he joins the crowd filtering inside.

“This shouldn’t take long,” Kylo tells Rey. “I’m a horrible interview.”

“Okay,” she says. He kisses her on the forehead and bounds up the stairs to the platform. They aren’t standing far enough back to get a look at him once he’s up top. Lorna gives Rey her jacket back and she slips it on gratefully.

“You and Kylo have better seats than the rest of them so it’s probably better you aren’t around when they find that out.”

“They didn’t seat them together?”

“Nope,” Lorna says. “You guys are maybe seven rows back? Wherever the VIPs who aren’t nominees or performers start. The band is way in the back, under the mezzanine so they’re not even really in camera range. They’re already pissed that they didn’t get plus ones this year but I don’t know what they expected.”

“Is he usually given special treatment? I mean, I know he is but like, better treatment than the band?”

“He has his own tour bus, as of the last tour. They used to share two, but now the other four share those two and he’s got his own. We get a lot of interview requests that are for just him, which is not that out of the ordinary. Interviews with more than three people can be chaotic. He gets more free clothing, and from better designers. When they went to shoot those commercials overseas Hux had to turn down a bunch that only wanted Kylo. To be honest I don’t know why I wasn’t told to book two limos tonight, except that they want to quash any breakup rumors. Even Snoke couldn’t influence the seating arrangements, though. Hey, looks like he’s done. That was quicker than I expected.”

Kylo comes down the stairs and takes Rey’s hand. “Thank you, Lorna,” he says. “You coming to the after party?”

“Hell fucking no,” she says. “I’m probably ducking out of the show early. I’ve gotta get you two up and to the airport tomorrow, close the loft, and fly out myself. I’m not doing that hungover with no sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.”
Lorna kisses Rey on the cheek and heads inside.

“You ready?” Kylo asks.

“Sure.”

The wind whips her hair and dress as they walk past the fountain and into the lobby, which is all swirling staircases and more red carpet and chandeliers that resemble supernovas, with baubles and spikes of glass shooting from central spheres. Such an elegant place for such an eclectic group of people, most of whom would never have set foot inside these doors to see an opera.

After she checks her jacket Kylo pulls her into an alcove full of pay phones.

“Hey,” he says.

“Hey yourself.”

“I just wanted like, one minute alone with you.” He loops his fingers around her pinkies and presses his forehead to hers. “You did great out there.”

“Mmm,” she sighs. “I felt like an accessory.”

“Never.” He bounces on his feet and groans. “Would it be bad if we just skipped the show? It’d be like prom. We go for photos and then ditch?”

“Lauryn Hill is performing. And Jay Z. No fucking way.”

“Can we at least skip out on Greedo? He’s opening.”

“I don’t want to miss the opening monologue.”

“Yeah I guess it is your first time. Sure you don’t want to make it really memorable and fuck against the wall here?”

“We’re literally in public. Like, I just saw Lil Kim walk by.”

“I don’t think she’d mind.”

“Maybe not, but I kind of want to follow her into the bathroom. Find out what kind of perfume she wears.”

“Calm down, there, Buffalo Bill. Let’s find our seats. There’ll be plenty of time to mingle.”

He drapes his arm around her as they slip back into the lobby. She catches a glimpse of the two of them in a mirror and there’s a bright, shiny moment where she thinks that maybe this really is where she belongs.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Que Sera Sera" by Doris Day. The cover by Sly and the Family Stone is amazing.

Since I first published this, the Tumblr Purge happened and reyloopen's blog has been
marked explicit, but you can reblog it from my post here.
Last year The Knights of Ren picked up a Best Video statue as well as the Viewer’s Choice Award for the “Darkside Blues” video. A rare occurrence to win both, considering the former is usually based on artistic merit and the latter on the size of an artist’s fan base. Those two things are often mutually exclusive. In 1996 they’d taken home a Best Rock Video award for “Kessel Run.” He’d attended the awards off and on over the years back when he thought it was cool, usually sitting in the back of the upper level with the other plebes from his mother’s label, except for the one year that Dagobah had been nominated for Best Alternative Video.

For Kylo, the VMAs have become like a yearly office party that you don’t want to go to, but you do anyway in case something crazy goes down like Bob from accounting doing a keg stand and trying to fuck an ice sculpture.

This year’s red carpet was especially tedious. More marks to hit. More photographers yelling questions they know he won’t answer and begging him to smile. He always wants to skip it, but again, there’s that nagging question of “What if I miss out?”

When they let Rey join him, she fit herself against him in a way that has become familiar in a frighteningly short amount of time, and some of his tension vanished. She put her arm around him and rubbed little circles on his back, and with his arm around her, his hand resting on her hip barely high enough for propriety, he grazed his thumb along her hip. The noise and chaos fled and he was only aware of the firmness of her body and the smell of her hair and the brightness of her smile.

He’d told the Esquire journalist that he’d only come this year because of Rey, but it’s not completely true. Bringing Rey is what makes the night bearable, but once the other guys in the band decided to go, Kylo was obligated, to avoid giving credence to breakup rumors. They’ve been plagued with breakup rumors from day one and usually don’t bother addressing them, because it means that the band is relevant enough for people to care, but that was before “Ashes of My Enemies.”

Snoke seems to have realized that he made a strategic error when he let Kylo record a solo single.

It’s obvious Snoke wanted to let Kylo taste freedom before sending him off to record with those idiots, but it’s also obvious that Snoke never expected the single to be so successful. It’s a tactical error that gives Kylo an advantage. Despite the contract, he doesn’t actually have to record four more albums with the Knights. They’ll recoup with the next one and maybe Kylo can convince Snoke to let him go solo. For good. Snoke may care about power over people more than money, but he does still care about money.

But right now, there are more important things to think about, like the look on Rey’s face as they take their seats. She grips his hand as she looks around with big eyes. She looks so amazing tonight, in that dress, that all he wants to do is get her out of it as soon as possible. Funny how that works.

“This is unreal. That’s Diana Ross at the end of our row! If I have to pee, I’ll have to squeeze past her.”

“Don’t stare, but I’m pretty sure Bala Tik is heading to the seat next to yours.”
Watching Rey summon the will to keep herself from turning around and gawking is so endearing that he tugs her toward him and kisses her.

“Ach, get a fuckin’ room you two,” Rey’s new neighbor says.

Rey turns around as Bala and the rest of the Guavian Death Gang file into the row. Bala introduces himself to Rey and nods at Kylo.

Kylo would rather not get into conversation with any of them but once Bala sits down he insists on making small talk with Rey. Kylo faces forward, trying to ignore it.

He didn’t run into this problem a lot with Katya. Men (and women) were of course interested in her, because she’s stunning, but she is also intimidating as hell if you don’t know her. They looked on from afar, and the few who had the confidence to talk to her were met with a bored indifference that had them skulking off within minutes. With Kylo, it wasn’t so much that he ever truly seduced her, but that she decided he was interesting enough to expend her energy on.

Rey has a different energy. People want to know her, to figure her out, which he figures is hard on her since she doesn’t let just anyone in. Bala Tik isn’t flirting with Rey. He’s married, and reportedly faithful. But Rey is captivating.

Kylo is drawn back to their conversation when he hears his mother’s name.

“What was that?” he says.

“Bala was just telling me that they almost signed with Resistance?”

“Oh yeah, Han promised he’d sign them but Leia wouldn’t do it.”

“We were playing a festival in Utah. Us and Kanjiklub. Said he’d get us all signed. Too bad Utah doesn’t have verbal contract laws”

“First Order scooped them up. Kanjiklub too.”

“Why wouldn’t Leia take them?” Rey asks.

“Well,” Bala says. “She said she had enough rock bands on the roster at the moment but I think she just wanted to put one over on the old man, let him know who’s boss.”

“No, no. I think I remember this conversation. It was my last Thanksgiving at home and it was a doozy. If I remember correctly, Leia was passing around the candied yams and she said that The Guavian Death Gang sounds like someone put The Smiths through a metal shredder and shit on it. She liked Kanjiklub but couldn’t sign them without you since Han made the offers at the same time.”

“Fuck you, Ren,” Bala growls. “And your mum.”

Kylo figures he would have about thirty seconds before security arrived, if he were to drag Bala out of his chair, throw him down and kick him a few times. He moves to stand but Rey puts her hand on his thigh and squeezes it. He looks at her and she widens her eyes and all the fight goes out of him because he wants to kiss her again.

He doesn’t kiss her. But he puts his hand on top of hers and settles for giving Bala Tik a long, baleful look. Bala curses again and trades places with his drummer, four seats down from Rey.
Good.

When the lights go down, Rey sits up straight, looking around as the light show for the opening number starts.

Suppressing a groan, Kylo slumps in his seat as a full choir enters from the lobby and makes its way down the aisles to the stage, singing the chorus of Kid Greedo’s “Mos Eisley Rodeo,” gospel style. When the two halves of the choir meet on stage, Greedo rises from the floor on a platform and spends a full thirty seconds soaking in the crowd’s adoration before he starts his rap.

As annoying as it is to watch, Kylo understands it. Playing on this stage is insane. Not only do you have the energy of the live audience to feed off of, but also the knowledge of millions of people watching from home. The first time they played an awards show he got a boner in the middle of their number. That performance, they were dressed in cassocks and for the first time, he was grateful for their ridiculous stage costumes.

Despite his disgust at Greedo’s theatrics, he looks on everything with a longing that only serves to worsen his mood.

When it’s finally over, they go to commercial and people immediately turn around in their seats and even jump out of them to start having conversations. The networking that’s done in five minute intervals during these things is incredible. The guy in front of him turns around and it turns out to be Terex, a producer with videos for three songs up for awards tonight.

Kylo shakes his hand and lets him pitch him on an idea. He’s mostly a pop and hip hop producer but he started out producing rock albums.

“Sounds like we should talk some more,” Kylo says. “But ultimately it’s up to Phasma. And Snoke.”

“I’ll be back in LA on Monday. I’ll have my girl set something up.”

“Sounds good.”

Rey grabs his arm as Terex turns back around. “Oh my God, are you kidding me? How are you so calm?”

Kylo shrugs. “I’m used to it. But hey, if anyone pitches anything to you, tell them to talk to your manager or A&R, depending on what it is. Don’t agree to anything.”

“Okay.”

“But, there’s a good chance you’ll find your first video director here.”

The thought of working with Terex intrigues him, but he can’t get too excited. He would want Terex to produce the whole album, and Phasma wants them to use multiple producers this time around. Her logic is that it’ll push more singles, since producers are stars these days, too. But he’s also heard some of the growing panic over digital file sharing, and wants an album that’s more than a few good singles and a bunch of filler. Ultimately, though, he doesn’t care as long as their next album makes enough money to buy him some leverage.

They get the on-air warning as the lights go down again. When their host enters, Kylo sits up, squares his shoulders and tries to ignore the sinking feeling in his stomach.

This is where it gets tricky. On the one hand, being poked fun at in an opening monologue is
great because it means you’re relevant enough to be mentioned, but it still stings a little, and you have to smile and laugh it off like you’re in on the joke, because the camera will cut to you. Even if you already have a reputation for being a dickhead it’s best to go along with it, no matter what they say. Kylo has no personal beef with Chris Rock. He’s never even met him. But no one is safe in the monologue.

It happens about halfway in. Rock has the audience warmed up and in the palm of his hand when he starts talking about boy bands.

“And boybands! Look at all the boybands in the audience tonight. We’ve got Backstreet Boys, ‘N Sync, The Knights of Ren…” He holds for the laughter and Kylo smiles like he’s supposed to. Irritating, but not too bad.

“You know,” Rock goes on. “Boybands are interesting, because you’ve got your types in every band. The same types in every band. The cute one, the bad boy, the heartthrob, and the funny looking one. Now most of the time, they keep the funny looking one in the background, but in the Knights of Ren they’ve got him front and center. Not hard to guess whose idea those masks were!”

It’s harder to smile this time but he manages, and when Rock finally moves on, Kylo takes a deep breath.

Rey takes his hand between both of hers. “It wasn’t even a funny joke,” she whispers to him. “And I like your face.”

He sits through the rest of the show stony faced and distracted, only paying attention to what’s on stage when Rey reacts to something. He buts a good face on during the commercial breaks and introduces Rey to everyone who comes to talk to him. They each slip about a dozen business cards into her purse.

When it’s over, he ushers her to the courtyard, where everyone is milling around, waiting for cars.

“Hey man, how were the good seats?” Mikey says as the other Knights join them.

“They were good.”

“Too bad you got slammed like that.”

“He referred to the entire band as a boyband.”

“Yeah but you were the one he called funny looking.”

“Sorry I stole your thunder.”

“Fuck off, Ren. So who all’s going to the after party?”

Derek and Banks beg off, and decide to sneak around the corner to get a cab instead of waiting for the limo.

Kylo turns to Rey, who is still looking around like she’s in a dream, frantically hoarding details in case she wakes up. “Do you want to go?”

“Of course!”

They climb into the limo again for the five block drive to Coma, the club that’s hosting the official after party. From there, later in the night, guests will splinter off to different apartments and suites.
He gets pressured every year to have a party at his loft, but he’s always refused. He doesn’t like enough people for it to be worth it, and people always treat his home like it’s a museum.

Moff makes the driver circle around the block for fifteen minutes before they can get out, so they don’t arrive too early. The club is crowded but not packed when they arrive, and there aren’t very many people who are stumbling drunk yet. Kylo has to hand it to Moff. About club life, he’s an expert. All those years spinning records at clubs before signing with the Knights paid off.

At the door, Moff and Mikey stop to sign a few autographs, but Kylo rushes in, holding Rey’s hand and ignoring the shouts from fans and photographers lined up on either side of the awning.

When they get into the main room after checking Rey’s jacket and going through the rigamarole of getting wrist bands, Rey stops cold in the entrance. “Holy shit,” she breathes.

The club is a former ballroom, round with a domed ceiling, and decked out in what could only be called neo-Victorian. All of the original gold leaf molding and friezes are in place, with purple lights illuminating the columns. Most of the furniture looks like it came from a Victorian estate, all tufted with spindly legs, but upholstered in purple and gold paisley. There are two levels, with the upper galleries reserved for VIP. Which on a night like this means people like Madonna and Janet Jackson.

Taybin Ralorsa finds them immediately and takes Rey’s hand

“I’m going to steal her for just a minute,” she says. “I’ve got some people she needs to meet.”

He manages a kiss on her cheek before she’s swept into the crowd. Mikey and Moff chase after a couple of Britney Spears’ dancers and Kylo gets stuck talking to an exec from an indie label he’s never even heard of.

When Rey circles back around with Taybin, Kylo takes her hand. “Do you want anything to drink?” he yells into her ear over a remix of a Mandy Moore song.

“Just a Coke,” she says. “But tell them to put a lime in it so I don’t have to listen to people asking me why I’m not drinking all night. We’re gonna go sit down over there.”

“Okay.” He kisses her on the cheek but she’s already talking to Taybin.

The crowd is dense near the bar, a huge circle in the center of the room, and it takes forever. It’s not easy getting special treatment in a room full of VIPs. There is a hierarchy, though, and at least he gets served before the dude from Smashmouth.

“Coke with lime and a club soda with lime.”

He’s not going to drink it, because pissing is not an easy task in these pants, but Rey had a point about at least appearing to indulge. The bartender slides the drinks across the bar. He grabs them and starts to go, but turns around.

“Hey, I’m sorry, I’ll add a Dos Equis and a Heineken.” That should be right. He’s spent enough time with these guys he should at least know their drinks.

“No problem.”

As he’s walking back over with the drinks, he spots Kid Greedo talking to Rey, sitting close to her on a setee. She’s laughing, but when Greedo leans in to say something in her ear, and the smile drops off her face.
Kylo absently shoves all the drinks at Moff and Mikey and stalks over to Greedo, looming over him.

“What the fuck did you say to her?”

Rey stands up and touches his arm. “Kylo I’ve got it handled don’t worry about it.”

“No, what the fuck did he say to you?”

Greedo hands his drink off to one of his bodyguards and stands up, facing off with Kylo. “I asked her if you fuck her with your mask on.”

There’s a moment when the rational part of Kylo’s brain warns him that what he wants to do is a bad idea. That moment seems to stretch into a much longer moment, as he contemplates all the ways he could hurt this asshole. But all of that occurs in the space between beats and before his brain can catch up to his body he’s punching Kid Greedo in the face.

Greedo crumples, blood gushing out of his nose as one of the body guards attends to Greedo, holding him back, and the other squares up to Kylo.

“You got your shot in,” the guard says. He’s got at least two inches and forty pounds on Kylo. “You’re not getting another one. We’d let him fight to save face, but he’s little and stupid and you’d kick his ass.”

Mikey takes Kylo by the arms and walks him away, but Kylo shakes him off and takes Rey’s hand, pulling her toward the exit.

“What are you doing?”

“We’re leaving.”

“I don’t want to leave yet.”

He drops her hand. “Fine. I’ll take the subway. You can have the limo. I’ll see you later.”

He starts to walk off and she grabs his hand. “Kylo, no.”

He looks around. The coat check room is the only option for privacy other than the bathroom, which is on the other side of the club. He tells the coat check attendant to go have a smoke break, pulls Rey inside and draws the curtain across the front opening. Still, he keeps his voice as low as possible. “You don’t want to leave. I don’t want to stay. I’m fine taking the train.”

“This is my first time at one of these things and I don’t want to leave just because you’re acting like a jealous child. And I definitely don’t want to give those assholes out there a perfect shot of you dragging me away like a fucking caveman.”

“That was not about jealousy. That was about—“

“Oh yeah, protecting me? It had nothing to do with the fact that he has a Grammy and you don’t? That he got to open the show? That he was talking to me in the first place?”

“It’s a Best New Artist Grammy.”

“Oh my God! Like you wouldn’t put it on display in the middle of your living room if you had one!”
“Whatever. If you want to stay, fucking stay. Party with Moff and Mikey and whoever the fuck else.”

He turns to leave but she yanks him back.

“So you want to leave separately? There’s no way the press isn’t going to find out about you punching Kid Greedo in the nose and if either of us leave right now it’s just some stupid fight over a girl, and I’m the girl and it’ll automatically be my fault and I don’t want that. I don’t know why you didn’t listen to me to begin with. I’ve had guys say worse things to me. I could have handled it.”

“Because you shouldn’t have to handle it.”

“Why? Because it’ll make you look bad?”

“No, because you just shouldn’t. I don’t know why you wanted to talk to him anyway.”

“I didn’t, but I didn’t want to be rude. I can’t afford to be rude. But I’m not going to talk to him anymore and it’s not because you don’t want me to but because he said something gross to me. Okay?”

“Okay.”

They stand there amongst the coats, staring at each other. The adrenaline has worn off enough that his hand is starting to ache. Rey’s cheeks are flushed and her hair is falling out of its arrangement and he feels like an ass for ruining her night. He takes a step toward her and she backs against the wall. As he’s leaning in, there’s a knock on the door.

“Y’all can’t be fuckin’ in there. I need to get back to work. There’s more guests coming in.”

Kylo opens the door and smiles at the attendant. “Sorry about that. No fucking, just a little discussion.” He reaches into one of the zipper pockets on the side of his pants and pulls out a hundred. “Sorry for the inconvenience.”

Rey smiles meekly at the attendant as they slip out of the room.

“Do you still want to stay?”

“Not really. These shoes suck. But how do we get our car?” There’s a few dozen of them out there.”

“I don’t know; the valets figure it out. All I have to do is tell the bouncer to tell the valets to find it.”

“What about Moff and Mikey?”

“I’ll send it back for them, or they’ll grab cabs, or go home with someone. I don’t care.”

“Why are you so mean to them?”

“I’m absolutely not getting into that right now.”

He looks down at her, expecting her to be angry, but her eyes are sad and brimming. “Look, Rey, it’s complicated and there’s been enough drama tonight.”

“None of it is my fault.”
“I know, Rey. Christ.” He goes to talk to the bouncer while Rey retrieves her jacket.

“Yo!” Moff says. “There y’all are. Greedo’s goons took him out the back. I don’t know how many people saw. The big dude said Greedo’s probably not going to press charges but who knows. When that motherfucker wakes up with two black eyes tomorrow he may change his mind.”

“Whatever,” Kylo says. He won’t see the inside of a jail or a courtroom so it doesn’t matter. Something for his lawyers and publicist to figure out.

A valet pokes his head through the door. “Mr. Ren, your car is here.”

“I’ll send it back for you,” Kylo says to Moff. “And, um, thanks.”

“No problem, man.”

Rey’s hand slides into Kylo’s. He takes a deep breath, puts on his most neutral expression.

“Ready?”

“Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Bawitdaba" by Kid Rock.
More than once in high school, Rey had been the topic of the week’s gossip. Sometimes the talk was based on facts (a drunk blowjob under the bleachers at a football game) and sometimes not (hooking up with five baseball players on the team bus.) Subsequently, she had developed a sort of thousand-yard stare for walking down the halls, looking straight ahead, creating a kind of tunnel vision and playing music in her head.

Turns out, this technique works as well for navigating a walkway with paparazzi on one side and screaming fans on the other as it did for walking down a hostile hallway.

Fortunately, there’s also a large group of people coming in while Rey and Kylo exit. Rey can’t even see who it is through their dense entourage, but the mob is more interested in whoever it is than Rey and Kylo, so they manage to tumble into the limo with no incident. She sits, blinking the spots from her eyes, on the opposite banquette from Kylo, who has his hand over his eyes. With a sigh, she slides her shoes off. The balls of her feet are in agony.

The limo seems huge and cold with only the two of them inside, and things are still…weird.

Not twenty minutes ago, Kylo lost control and punched another person in the face. But as pissed off as Rey is at him for doing it, she admits—to herself—that she’s a little bit flattered that he did it. Deep down she does feel good about it, that he would defend her like that.

And it scares her.

For several minutes, as the limo negotiates its way into traffic, their only interaction is to make eye contact and then instantly look away.

As they finally merge onto the road, Kylo reaches over and touches a button. The driver’s voice comes through the speaker underneath the partition. “Yes, Mr. Ren?”

“Take FDR Drive back downtown.”

“Yes sir.”

“Why did you tell him to do that?” She’d been fantasizing about which t-shirt she would put on when they get home, and how good it will feel to brush her hair.

“It’s your last night in the city. The view isn’t as nice as the California coast, but it’s pretty spectacular, especially at night.”

“Oh.” She looks out the window but they’re still making their way through Central Park, nothing to see but stone walls and trees. “How’s your hand?” she asks, turning to him.

“It’s fine,” he says, flexing it a few times. “Shoulda seen the other guy.”

“I did see the other guy.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Honestly, I’m not the one you should be apologizing to.”
He moves to the seat next to her, eyes sad as he strokes her cheek with the back of his hand.

“I’ll send him a fruit basket,” he says as he leans toward her.

Rey reaches up and switches the flip to open the sun roof. As soon as she can fit through, she stands up. They’re moving at a good pace, gliding past the city with the river on the left. It’s like driving through a post card. As they round a curve, the Midtown skyscrapers soar above with golden windows, some of them lit by colored lights.

She pulls the pins and elastics from her hair and lets it flow free, holding her arms out and looking up at the sky. A couple of cars honk as they drive past. Rey waves at them and they honk again.

Soon enough, Kylo squeezes himself through the sunroof, his body pressing up against hers. “This is totally cliché, you know.”

“I know. But it’s my first time in a limo.”

“Well then, that means I definitely have to kiss you.” He brushes her hair away from her face and leans in again, but the car next to them starts wildly honking their horn. Rey jumps and turns around.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” Kylo says as he sinks down again, onto his knees.

“Hey, come back.”

“I’ve got a better idea.”

“Wha—Oh fuck.”

His right hand has found its way under her dress and is making its way up her thigh. His left is firmly squeezing her ass. He hooks his thumb under the strap of her thong and starts pulling it down.

“Hey,” she says, smacking him on the head. “This may be the craziest night of my life but it’s not getting that crazy.”

“We really shouldn’t let the car go to waste, though.”

He has a point. The car is lush and empty and they have it as long as they want. She ducks back into the car.

“Can he hear us?” she asks, nodding toward the partition.

“Only if we push the button.”

His eyes are dark and heavy and his bottom lip is just right there, all full and shiny. She hasn’t kissed him properly in hours, so she remedies that, sucking his lip between her teeth and nibbling at it. He groans and climbs back onto the seat, pulling her with him.

She doesn’t want to think about any of the bad stuff right now. It’ll all be waiting when they get back to California. Right now she wants to grasp the last vestiges of a good evening and carry them home with her. So she hikes up her dress, a little ungracefully, and straddles him, reaching for the buttons of his shirt.

Kylo leans into her, kissing her collarbone. “You’re the only thing that makes sense right now.”
Rey nods and pushes him back against the seat, opening his shirt and reaching up under his tank top. His skin is soft and hot over his taut belly. She adjusts and reaches down for his zipper.

“Wait. Where’s your zipper?”

The fly on his pants is fake. His pants don’t open in the front.

“They sewed me into them,” he says.

“What?”

“Something about clean lines or whatever. Wanted them as tight as possible and no lumps. So they sewed me into my pants. I’m starting to think it was bullshit and they just want to torture me. I don’t think Bazine’s ever forgiven me for wearing that top hat to the AMAs.”

“How the hell are you supposed to take a piss?”

Kylo shrugs. “I’m not.” He thrusts his hips, ever so slightly. “I can still get you off, though.”

“Dry humping in a limo?” she laughs. “It really is prom night. Without the Boone’s Farm and the humiliation. You know if I had my real purse I’d have my Swiss Army knife and this wouldn’t be an issue.”

“Mmm,” he says as he pushes her dress straps off her shoulders, following the trail of his fingers with kisses. When he’s got both straps down, he looks at her breasts—and frowns.

“What?” She looks down. “Oh!” She forgot about the pasties. The flesh-toned flowers cover her nipples.

“You look like a Barbie doll.”

“No stylist wants their hard work overshadowed by hard nipples,” Rey says. “Or that’s what Karé told me.”

“May I?” he asks.

“Please.”

He keeps his eyes locked on hers as he traces his thumbs around the edges of the pasties. She leans into him as his thumbs graze her nipples. He licks his lips as he begins to peel them off, the slow pull of the adhesive releasing sending shivers down Rey’s spine.

When her nipples are bare, Kylo sticks the pasties to the car seat, after a few attempts to shake them off of his fingers. He stifles Rey’s giggles with a long kiss, one hand behind her head and the other on her breast, rolling her nipple between his fingers.

“Did you have fun tonight?” he asks, before bending to take the same nipple in his mouth. His other hand drifts from her neck to her back, dipping down into her dress and pulling her closer, his dick painfully hard under her.

“Mostly,” she says, and takes his earlobe between her teeth. He shudders and presses her even closer, bucking his hips against her.

“What was your favorite part?”

She rolls against him again, finding the perfect spot, the right amount of pressure, the exact amount
of friction. “Ah,” she sighs in his ear. “This.”

“And this?” he says, slipping his thumb into her panties.

“Fuck, yes.” She’s aching for him to slide his fingers inside her, but he keeps his thumb pressed against her clit as she rocks against him.

It doesn’t take her long to come, and it’s a different sort of climax than she’s had from his mouth or hands or with him inside her. Less intense, but drawn out. As the shockwaves die down, she fists her hand in his hair, somehow still aware enough to not damage his shirt. He groans and bucks against her again, sending another ripple of pleasure through her.

“Are you going to come?” she asks.

“Not a good idea,” he grinds out.

“Okay. Okay. I’m done. I promise.” She starts to get off of him but he holds her in place.

“You’ll get cold,” he says, resting his head against her chest. It’s true. She’s covered in a sheen of sweat and the cool air in the limo is already chilling her skin.

Kylo looks up and out the window. “We’re almost home.”

“How long until we’re home and I can cut these fucking pants off of you?”

“About five minutes.”

“We should probably try to look presentable in case any paps are hanging out.”

Rey slips her straps back onto her shoulders and finger combs her hair. There’s no use trying to get it back into anything resembling its former style. Kylo runs his hands through his own hair and Rey uses a napkin from the bar to wipe her lipstick from his face.

“Mr. Ren?” the driver says through the intercom.

“Yeah?”

“Looks like there’s a few fans on your stoop. Should I send them away?”

Kylo looks at her. “What do you think?”

“They’re your fans.”

“Seriously, it’s up to you.”

Rey peers out the dark window. There are three girls, probably in their late teens. Two of them hold onto each other as they stare at the car, and the other one frantically searches in her backpack.

“They look so excited.”

“How about I go talk to them for a minute. I need a cigarette, anyway. You can wait here until they leave.”

She looks out again. It can’t be that bad, and it seems cowardly to hide from them. And they might think it’s snobby.
“No, I’ll go with you.” She puts her jacket on and checks her makeup in the mirror over the bar. Faded, a little smudged, but okay. She looks over at Kylo. His hair is insane and his shirt is rumpled, but at least he’s not sporting a massive erection anymore.

The girls gasp and stifle squeals when Kylo gets out of the car. She takes his hand and steps out, and the girls sigh.

“Do you want to go on in?” he asks her.

“No, I’m fine.” She smiles at the girls. The smallest one, a freckled brunette, pushes a blonde girl with braces forward.

“Kylo, can you um, can you sign some stuff?” Her voice quivers, and she can barely look at him.

“Yeah, if any of you have a lighter.”

The driver reaches into his jacket pocket but the small girl produces a bright pink, glittery lighter from her pocket first. Kylo takes it and lights a cigarette. A clove.

“Tomorrow’s a school day, isn’t it?” He asks as he signs a CD and a poster.

“We don’t start back until Monday.”

“Your parents know where you are?”

“We’re spending the night at Nikki’s,” the blonde says, pointing to the little one. “And we went to get dinner.” She hands him a CD, still avoiding eye contact. “Um, make that one out to Nayelis.”

Kylo smiles as she spells her name. “How long ago did you leave for dinner?”

“Nine!” says the third girl, her face crimson when everyone looks at her.

“Where’d you eat?” Rey asks her.

“Oh we just grabbed deli sandwiches, but Nikki’s mom thinks we went to Two Boots.”

Kylo nods, at ease with these girls, at least on the surface. It’s not the same role he’s played all evening—that guy’s way more distant and cool—but he’s totally playing a role. Still languid and slightly above it all, but at least somewhat interested in what his fans have to say.

“Can we get pictures with you?” Nikki asks.

“Not tonight,” he says, shaking his head. “We’re looking a little worse for wear. The afterparty was kind of, um, intense.”

“Okay,” she says. “Thanks for talking to us though. And signing the stuff.”

“You’d better head home before the bars let out,” he says, taking a huge drag off his cigarette. “Lots of assholes around then.”

“We can handle it.”

“Yeah, but I’ll worry about you. Where’s your house?”

“25th and 9th.”
“How about this. Manny’s gotta leave soon to go pick up Mikey and Moff. He can drop you guys off on his way.”

Three jaws drop. The quiet one recovers first. “Okay! Yeah. Oh my God!”

Manny opens the door and the girls pile in, eyes wide.

“Stay away from the bar!” Kylo admonishes. Their squeals are cut off as Manny closes the door.

After seeing the car off, they head up to the loft.

“That was sweet.”

Kylo shrugs. “It gets them out of our hair. They’d have stayed out there all night. Probably called Nikki’s mom and told her they were staying at blondie’s house or something.”

“Does that happen a lot?”

“A couple of times before.”

“What do you usually do?”

“Ask them nicely to leave. Call the cops if they don’t. It’s not safe for them out there.”

“Do they get mad at you?”

He shrugs again. “Honestly I don’t know.”

At the top of the stairs, Rey freezes, putting her hand on his arm as he unlocks the door.

“Kylo,” she says.

“Yeah?”

“Did you leave my pasties on the car seat?”

“I thought you grabbed them.”

They both look toward the door, back at each other, and burst out laughing.

“Those are going to end up in a scrapbook, aren’t they?” Rey says.

“Nah. More likely on eBay.” He takes her hand and pulls her inside. “Now what were you saying about a Swiss Army knife?”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" by Tears for Fears.
The loft is huge and silent after the chaos they’d left it in, and the frenzy of the evening. Once inside, Rey goes straight for the bedroom, but grabs her hairbrush rather than her knife. The brush sends shivers down her spine as she moves it down her scalp, her nerve endings still buzzing from her orgasm. Closing her eyes, she puts herself back in the limo, with his hands on her waist and his breath on her neck.

Then his hands are on her waist, and his breath is in her ear, as he comes up behind her.

“What are you doing?” he asks. She melts back into his solid chest, hands dropping to her sides. He’s shed both of his shirts and his skin is warm and soft against her back.

“What does it look like?”

“A waste of time.”

Rey opens her eyes. The two of them are framed perfectly in the mirror, backlit by the dim light flowing in from the other room, highlighting their shadows and angles. She meets his eyes in the mirror as he begins sliding her dress up her body.

“You loved it, didn’t you?” he whispers.

She lifts her arms as he pulls her dress over her head. “What?”

When she’s free of the dress he tosses it aside and moves her hair from where it’s fallen in her face. She looks in the mirror again, at her body, naked other than her panties, a scrap of red satin. He’s seen her completely nude more than he’s seen her clothed in the past week, but she feels exposed in a way she never has with him, and her hands drift to cover her breasts. He takes her wrists and brings her hands back to her sides.

“You loved it. Everyone looking at you. Everyone wanting you. They all did, you know. They all either wanted to be you or to fuck you.”

He’s hard again, pressed against her back, insistent as he runs his hands up her body, cupping her breasts, squeezing her nipples, then back down, his right hand sliding into her panties and finding her center as he sucks on her neck.

“Yes,” she says.

“Yes, what?”

“I liked it.”

“Only liked?”

“Loved it.”

“But I’m the only one who knows what your cunt tastes like. How sweet it is.”

Rey nods, stupidly, as he dips his finger between her lips, pressing on her clit just so. She buckles
forward but his other arm locks her against him.

“Look,” he says.

She looks in the mirror, into his dark eyes, at her face and the way his gorgeous, inky hair contrasts against her pale cheek, and finally, her body.

Lately, she hasn’t spent a lot of time looking at her body. On tour there was no privacy, no time. She often felt dirty and exhausted, so the only things she focused on were her hands and her voice.

Even in the soft light, her skin glows. Many of her sharp angles have softened into curves. Still, she looks tiny in his massive arms, against his wide chest. They fit together so perfectly that if she believed that people were made for each other, she would think, maybe, they were.

“We’re so beautiful,” she whispers.

His fingers move against her, slipping inside her at last as she closes her eyes.

“Watch,” he says.

She opens her eyes and watches as his hand moves, his fingers sliding in and out of her, easing the aching emptiness. Redness blooms across her cheeks, part arousal, part inhibition, and perhaps a bit of arousal at her own inhibition. He locks eyes with her in the mirror again and it’s like being a voyeur to her own experience.

Is this why people make sex tapes?

His fingers work faster, chasing away further coherent thought, and she reaches up to grasp the hair at his nape.

“Watch,” she says, as he tilts his head back and closes his eyes.

Abruptly, he takes his hand away and steps in front of her, pulling her tight against him and pressing his forehead against hers.

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“Okay.” She tries to kiss him but he falls to his knees, kissing her body on the way, his fingernails raking her thighs as he drags her panties down. As she steps out of them, he takes her leg and drapes it over his shoulder.

“Hold on.”

He takes his first lick before her hands are fully planted on his shoulders.

“Holy fuck,” she breathes, grabbing onto this hair.

He laps at her slowly, tongue swirling around her clit, one hand gripping her thigh and the other wrapped around her waist to hold her upright. She looks in the mirror again, at the muscles working in his broad back and the long line of her leg over his shoulder and her hair falling over her breasts, stray tendrils plastered to her sweaty forehead.

Her belly tightens and she squeezes her eyes shut. “I can’t stand up,” she whispers as she starts to crest.

Showing no signs of relenting, he holds onto her tighter and sucks on her clit, drawing her orgasm
out of her, like pulling taffy. She suppresses her moan, even though there’s no one to overhear, but when he pulls her even closer, fingers digging into her side, she lets it out, a long, breathy wail. Her hand spasms on his shoulder, her nails leaving red crescents in his skin.

When she’s finished, he guides her foot to the floor, then stands up, tipping her over his shoulder as he rises. Still dizzy from her release, the room spins around Rey and her stomach flops. This isn’t the first time he’s picked her up, but it’s still amazing how effortless it seems. He turns to the bed and to the door before deciding to toss her onto the bed.

While Kylo throws all the pillows onto the floor, she rolls over and reaches for her bag on the nightstand. The knife is somewhere at the bottom and she fishes it out, despite the distraction of Kylo’s hands running up her thighs and over her ass. He flips her over and hovers over her on all fours, watching with bright eyes as she pulls out the knife’s various tools.

“There are sixteen tools on this thing. Which one should I use? Scissors? Can opener? Corkscrew?”

“I have to return the pants,” he laughs. “So you’d better work on the side seam.”

She looks at the knife again and back at him. “They didn’t leave you a seam ripper?”

“Probably, somewhere. But I prefer the knife.”

All the humor has vanished from his face, replaced by something dark and wanting. Placing her hands flat on his chest, she pushes him off her and onto his back.

“Which seam did they sew?”

“The right one.”

The awl isn’t as sharp as the knife but it’s also thinner, and less likely to cut him if her hand slips. She’s done plenty of simple clothing alterations before, and even resorted to using a knife or scissors when she had a broken seam ripper and no way to replace it, but she’s never worked on a piece of clothing with a human occupying it. She pulls the awl out of the casing, takes a deep breath, and finds the first stitch at the top of the seam. It comes open and he inhales sharply as the tip of the awl grazes his skin.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

Each stitch comes open with a satisfying pop as she works her way down his side, taking a moment every few stitches to place a kiss on the newly exposed skin, where the seam has left red indentations. She works her way down until the opening is long enough, he lifts his hips and she starts to peel the pants off of him. She lets out a huge sigh and they both giggle when his dick springs free.

“This is not as sexy as I imagined it in the car,” she grunts as she struggles to get them past his calves.

Getting his feet free is an even bigger struggle, so much so that she tumbles off the edge of the bed after a final tug releases his left foot.

“Fuck,” he says, scrambling to the edge of the bed and looking down at her. “Are you okay?”
She blows the hair out of her eyes and looks up at him. “Yeah. All of these rich person pillows down here broke my fall.” She takes his outstretched hand and climbs back on the bed.

Crawling toward the head of the bed, she locks eyes with him and runs her hands up his calves. They feel different. Smoother. She looks down.

“You shaved your legs?”

“Yeah. Less friction.”

The smooth skin of his thighs is especially intriguing, and oddly arousing.

“Fuck,” he says, right as she’s about to grab his dick. “I really do need to piss.”

She sighs and sits back.

“It’s going to take a minute. With this,” he says, gesturing to his erection. “Meet me in my bed?”

“This one not good enough?”

“No, actually. Mine’s like ten times more luxurious.”

She kisses him hard and gets off the bed. She kisses him again when he stands up and again as he makes his way to the bathroom.

His bed is pristine, having been made to within an inch of its life for the camera earlier. She shoves the superfluous pillows onto the floor, pushes the duvet to the end of the bed, and flops on top of the sheet, lying on her side in an exaggerated pose, head propped on her elbow and her hair cascading over her breasts.

The atmosphere isn’t quite right. She doesn’t mind making love with the lights but not with almost every light in the place on.

Cursing under her breath, she gets up again and scampers around the loft, turning out all the lights except the one above the sofa. She scurries back to the bed as she hears the water turn on in the bathroom, barely managing to resume her pose before he comes out of the guest room.

He stops and looks at her, bemused.

“I want you to draw me like one of your French girls,” she says, pitching her voice low.

“What?”

“You’ve seen Titanic, right?” she says, sitting up.

“Um, yeah. No. How many times did you see it?”

“None of your business,” she says, getting to her knees. He smiles as she takes his hand and pulls him closer.

The callouses on his hands are rough against her cheeks as he cups her face and leans in to kiss her. This could almost be enough, just kissing him, but she wraps one hand around his cock and grabs his bare ass with the other, urging him forward and onto his back. She straddles him, but despite the ache between her legs she doesn’t sink onto him. Not yet. Instead, she moves down and positions her mouth above his cock, holding it in her hand.
This is one of the few things they haven’t done. He hasn’t even asked her to, as many times as he’s made her lose her mind with his tongue.

She’s never really wanted to, before, with anyone else. She always did it because it was expected. It’s almost as though Kylo sensed that.

Or maybe he doesn’t like it?

“Um, do you want me to…”

“If you want to.”

“No, but. I do but do you want me to or are you saying yes because I want to?”

He sits up on his elbows and looks her in the eye. “Rey, please put your mouth on my dick and suck it until I can’t see straight.”

Rey nods her head and licks him from base to tip. His head falls back as he closes his eyes.

With a low moan, he collapses fully on his back as she circles the head with her tongue. She takes him into her mouth, sucking lightly while stroking the base of his shaft with her hand. There’s no way, even if she knew how to deep throat, that she could take all of him, but the sounds he’s making and the way he weaves his fingers into her hair indicate what she’s doing is more than enough.

And for the first time she actually enjoys it. The slippery feel of him in her mouth and velvet cloaked steel of him in her hand. The smell of him, all sweat and manhood. She never imagined this could be something that could turn her on.

She looks up and watches as she releases her grip and takes another lick up the length of him. His arm is thrown over his face and his chest is heaving.

“Rey,” he says. “Please.”

“Please what?”

“Let me fuck you.”

“Okay.” She sits up and starts to straddle him, but in a flash he slithers out from beneath her and gets behind her, gently pushing her onto her hands and knees. Looking back over her shoulder, she watches him position himself, a strange kind of peace falling over his face as he pushes into her.

No matter how ready she is, no matter how many times they do this, there will always be that delicious sting at the beginning. She’s not sure she’s supposed to like it this much. Or at all.

In this position that pleasure on the edge of pain is glorious. Drawn out in ways she never imagined as he takes long strokes, his hands caressing her hips and her back and her ass.

A flips switches in the primal part of her brain. She wants more.

“Fuck me,” she says.

“I am.”

She looks over her shoulder at him again. “Hard.”
He stops.

“Okay,” he says, snaking one arm around her waist and folding himself over her. He places a tiny kiss between her shoulder blades before he starts to move, snapping his hips against her while pulling her against him, slow at first but building quickly. It’s a challenge to keep herself planted but she manages, pushing back against him and reveling in the burn, her own hand working on her clit until she explodes, coming hard with a stream of curses, begging him to keep fucking her as she pulses around him.

He obliges, but it’s not long before he pulls out, and there’s the sound of his tortured breathing and the slap of his hand on his dick and then the warm splash on her back, followed by his hand, making slow circles as his breathing slows.

She collapses onto her stomach and this time, it’s laughter that bubbles up from the tight place in her chest, coming from somewhere adjacent to where her tears have come before. She closes her eyes and loses herself to it.

“Don’t move,” he says, and she feels the mattress rise as he gets off the bed.

She catches her breath and does as she’s told, resting her cheek on her folded arms. He’s back soon, with a wet wash cloth and a towel. Sitting on the edge of the bed beside her, he wipes down her back with the warm cloth, then dries her off. When he’s finished, he tosses the towel aside with the washcloth wrapped inside it and retrieves two pillows from the floor. He nudges her over and climbs in beside her, pulling the duvet over both of them and settling in with his head on her chest.

It’s like their first day together, except that now she knows so much more about him. The way he smells isn’t mysterious anymore. It’s his cologne and his laundry detergent, and the herbal cream he uses on the patches of eczema on his arms, and cigarettes, and cinnamon gum. (And right now, her sweat and her sex play in the mix.) She knows what he looks like when he’s about to sneeze and when he’s about to come. She knows that his mother’s last album, recorded the year he was born, is on the heavy rotation shelf in his record collection.

She knows that, somehow, he makes her feel safer than she ever has.

Her stomach growls.

“Shit,” he says, looking up. “I promised you fries, didn’t I?”

“You did.”

“There’s got to be some place open that delivers. Or I could call Lorna.”

“Don’t you dare. Have you woken her up to bring you food before?”

“Not in L.A. There’s Pink Dot in L.A.”

“But you’ve made her go out in the middle of the night here?”

“A few times. When I was writing”

“Have you ever thought about how dangerous it is for a woman at night in a city like this?”

“Oh,” he says. “No. Honestly, I haven’t. But she uses the car service or takes cabs. Besides I pay her really well. Ridiculously as my business manager says every quarter.”
“What would you do if you lost all your money?”

“I don’t know. Busk. Survive on French fries and peanut butter. Couch surf.”

“Poverty’s not a joke.”

“It’s not. But you have to admit there’s something hilarious about the idea of someone like me being forced to live on a budget.”

Neither of them move to attend to the task of finding food. Outside, an ambulance drives by, siren wailing, followed by a police car, the lights of both vehicles flashing dully against the window shades.

“I’m afraid,” Rey says, so softly she thinks for a moment she might not have said it out loud.

“Of what?”

“I don’t want this to end.”

“Tomorrow is a beginning, not an ending. Your life is starting. You’ve got infinite possibilities ahead.”

“Why do you hate it so much?”

“What?”

“What you do. You hate your band and your music.”

He screws up his face and closes his eyes, pulling the duvet over his head.

“Tell me.”

“Because I didn’t choose them,” he says, voice muffled. “And I didn’t choose our style. Snoke did.” He pushes the duvet back off his head and looks at her, eyes hard. “He told me I’d be free of my parents and then shackled me to a bunch of idiots and now I make really fucking profitable garbage.”

“Oh.”

“Now you know. So we can drop it.”

“Sure.”

Her stomach growls again and Kylo lets out an exaggerated sigh.

“Come on,” he says, getting out of bed and taking her hand. “We’re hitting the shower, then we’re gonna find an all-night diner.”

“Shouldn’t we try to get some sleep?”

“Nope,” he says, picking her up and tossing her over his shoulder again. “We’ll sleep on the plane.”
Chapter title from "Closer" by Nine Inch Nails.
From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

Date: Friday, September 10, 1999 at 10:09 AM

RE: Itinerary

Finn! I’m back in town but so exhausted and a little sick and I’m pretty sure I’m jetlagged, and my brain is just not really working yet. Can we move our meeting to tomorrow? At my place? I’ll treat you to the biggest, cheesiest, pepperoni pizza LA has to offer. I can’t wait to get started on everything but I know I’ll be totally useless if we meet this afternoon. If this won’t work I’ll be there, though.

Peace,

Rey

For the past three months, Finn and Rey talked regularly by email and phone, usually about Rey’s album, but Finn also gave plenty of advice on what to check out in different cities, which Rey ignored in favor of sleep. Rey asked probing questions about Poe, which Finn avoided because he didn’t have the answers yet.

The last he heard from her was the day her tour ended, an exclamation point-laden response to his email about final plans for recording, confirming that she had decided for sure to stay in New York for the week. He would have been content to let her fill him in on everything when she got back, but the label publicist assigned to Rey had other ideas, so Finn received a daily email with updates on Rey’s activities, complete with links to articles and photos.

When the first photos came out—the ones Rey’s team dubbed “the morning after shots”—Robyn insisted on calling Rey, saying that it made the most sense if she did it.

“I’m a woman, and this whole thing was my idea anyway,” she said.

“Don’t think I’ll forget that if this all goes to hell.”

“I wouldn’t expect you to.”

A few days after TRL, someone caught them coming out of a movie theatre, then another pap followed them all over Manhattan and even into Williamsburg, where they visited a head shop and a vegan bakery. They had boxes with them coming out of the bakery. If they bought anything at the head shop, Kylo had been smart enough to have it delivered. Fans seemed split between lecturing each other that Kylo is a grown man and weed isn’t that bad anyway, and accusing Kylo of being a hopeless addict and Rey his enabler.

Then, the VMAs. Finn didn’t watch last night—he had back-to-back showcases—but the publicist sent him a forum link where Kylo’s fans were talking about the VMAs as they happened. Their opinions ranged from gushing praise for both to begrudging confessions that Rey might be just a teeny tiny bit pretty. There were only one or two posts outright bashing her.
One girl summed it all up. “You guys,” she said. “I think we’d better get used to this. I think they’re in it for the long haul.”

She punctuated her post with a sad-face emoticon. Finn’s feelings were a bit more complex.

He’s happy for her, if her feelings are real and mutual. But the other shoe could drop at any moment. No matter how circumspect they had all been, there’s still a chance someone else knows what’s going on. Or Rey could have a crisis of conscience and confess. If Ren found out, and left her, not only would he have a heartbroken friend, but they’d have a heartbroken artist on their hands in the studio.

Relationship woes are great for the writing process but are almost always a horror show in the studio. Finn has been called in more than once to do damage control when an artist is too drunk or distraught (or both) to record after a breakup. And they weren’t always female artists. In fact, the worst cases were usually guys. Two years ago, he had to pay a lead singer’s ex to come and sit in the control room during the session. She didn’t say a word to him and wouldn’t even look at him, but they got the record in the can. Another time, an artist demanded they switch studios mid-session because the entire state of Tennessee reminded him too much of his ex, because she’d gone to Vanderbilt.

But the VMA photos are absolute gold. From a business standpoint, it might all be worth it for the VMA shots alone, no matter how it ends. Rey is radiant. Ren is more relaxed than Finn has ever seen him. And they both look smoking hot. The weeklies will have a field day with these in their awards show coverage and red carpet fashion reports.

The publicist also unearthed a breathless post on Yahoo Groups from a group of girls who met the disheveled duo outside Ren’s loft after the show. Fortunately, there are no accompanying photos. The girl hadn’t outright said it, but it’s clear from reading between the lines that Rey and Ren weren’t having Bible study in that limo.

Finn clicks on a second email from the publicist. The first link is for a photo agency site, with new shots of Ren and Rey at a twenty-four-hour diner, sharing a plate of fries. Rey’s skin glows, despite the late hour and her lack of makeup. They both have damp hair.

He scrolls further down and there’s an array of airport photos. Taken only a few hours after the diner ones, it’s obvious the two didn’t sleep. Even with the large, dark sunglasses, Rey looks dazed, and Kylo looks more likely to punch a photographer than usual.

Despite the obvious exhaustion, Rey is beautiful, in a haphazard way, wearing an oversized Army jacket thrown over a cropped sweater and long skirt.

Overall, it’s the usual celebrity-couple-at-the-airport photo set, but there’s one photo that stands out, and will likely have Ren’s fans either melting into puddles or exploding with rage, depending on where they fall on the Rey issue.

The two of them are standing outside of their car while a Skycap unloads their bags. Rey is leaning against him, with her hands in his back pockets and her head on his chest, and he’s got one arm around her as he smokes, holding the cigarette as far from his body (and hers) as possible.

Finn closes out the window and looks at Rey’s email again. Phasma never allowed artists to put off meetings because they were tired from travel, and rarely if they were ill. Eventually, Rey will need to learn to suck it up. There will be times she’ll have to get off a plane with little or no sleep.
and go straight to a talk show appearance or interview or photo shoot or even play a show.

But there’s no real harm in giving her a break this once, so he replies that they can meet the next evening.

Emails finished—for now—he dials Poe’s office number and puts it on speaker while he opens his mail.

“Poe Dameron.”

“Hey, my afternoon just opened up.”

“Was Rey’s flight delayed?”

“No, she’s back. We’re just postponing until tomorrow. Giving her some time to rest.”

“Don’t let her get used to it.”

“I don’t think she could get used to it. Anyway, how about we go down to the Pier after lunch, check out the buskers. I haven’t done that in a minute.”

“Yeah because when’s the last time you actually discovered someone down there?”


“You found them on the Pier?”

“Yeah, they were covering Savage Garden. It showcased their harmonies.”

“I swear to God, Finn. I thought I was good, signing Kaydel waiting tables at Fridays, singing that birthday song.”

“Nah, man, that’s definitely more impressive. What were you doing at Fridays?”

“Lost a bet. Anyway, yeah. I gotta clear up a few things here but I can meet up at two.”

With school back in, the Pier is quiet for a Friday afternoon. They walk along under a pale cloudless sky, eating Italian ices, none of the performers catching their attention for more than a few seconds. Only the most determined (read: broke) street performers are out, and the most interesting of them aren’t musicians.

“So I forgot how much Fridays suck around here,” Finn says. “All the good ones are getting ready for gigs.”

“I remembered,” Poe says.

“Why didn’t you remind me?”

“I wanted to get out of the office,” Poe smiles. “With you.”

Finn returns the smile. They’re keeping their relationship on the down low for a while, because Finn’s transition to the new label isn’t totally complete until he finishes up his work with Rey. Leia knows, and as do their assistants, and both have casually mentioned it to family, but it’s not general knowledge at the office so they don’t get a lot of non-business related face time during the
“Rey leaves again in a few days, right?”

“Yes. She’ll be the first artist to record at Skywalker’s ranch since her boyfriend’s old band.”

“That’s going to be a huge marketing angle. I still can’t believe he agreed to it, though. Leia sent him demos all the time, whenever we came across someone who’d be a good fit. He always sent them back unopened.”

“Did Leia say why he agreed this time?”

“All she would say is that Luke thought it was time, but I’m sure there’s more to it. Rey is talented, but something made him open that envelope to begin with.”

“I’d ask him, if I was going,” Finn says.

Skywalker had stipulated that he only wanted to work with Rey and the band, no label people allowed.

“Cheer up, Finn. You ever been to Wyoming? Beautiful, but more sheep and cows than people.”

“I won’t lie, I was a little relieved,” Finn says. “That shit in Laramie wasn’t even a year ago. Small towns have had me a little spooked since then. Still, I would never have agreed to it for any other producer, even with daily reports. Well, maybe Rodney Jerkins.”

“Terry Lewis for me,” Poe says.

“You are so old school.”

“It’s not like I said Phil Specter.”

Finn slips his hand in Poe’s and they reach the end of the pier. “Can you imagine growing up somewhere as small as Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, or Riverton, Wyoming?”

“I used to think about it, when I was a kid. In the summer, we’d drive to Atlanta to visit my mom’s family, and we would stop in these tiny towns. I’d see kids in their yards or riding their bikes and it was so weird to me, that these towns were where they lived, and I was just there to buy a Coke and some Nerds while my dad filled the gas tank. Some of those towns didn’t have any stop lights.”

“Always at least two churches though, right?” Finn says. “One Baptist, one Methodist.”

“Do you miss that? Finding the diamonds in the rough?”

“I found Rey because I missed it. Took a chance on a small-town kid and it changed my entire life.”

Poe smiles and tugs Finn to the railing. “I may have to send Rey flowers.”

“Why?”

“How long have we known each other? I started hinting from day one that you were welcome to jump ship and come to Resistance whenever. And when I gave up on that, about day fifty-eight, I started hinting that maybe it didn’t have to be a work thing. I thought I was being so obvious. I was embarrassed by how desperate I thought I sounded.”
“I did pick up on it, you know,” Finn says. “But at First Order they strongly discourage dating the competition.”

“Wonder how they feel about their precious Knight dating outside the fold.”

“Oh, it didn’t apply to the artists.”

“Those things never do. The bastards.” He stands up straight and tosses his cup into a trash can. “This is a bust. Let’s get some food.”

“It’s three o’clock. You’re not going back to work?”

“Taking the rest of the afternoon off.”

“Oh.”

“You still keep that overnight bag in your car in case of last minute trips?”

“Started up again right after I signed Rey, why?”

“Could be a long afternoon.”

“Oh,” Finn says. “Oh!”

Finn is late for his meeting with Rey the next day. He’s been running late all day, having woken up to a note from Poe saying he had an early morning run with an artist who was considering switching labels. After a chilly shower (the controls were impossible) he downed a PowerBar and ran out the door.

He would remember in the future that the drive from Poe’s was at least twenty minutes longer, in good traffic.

When he walks through the gate in the hedge, Rey is lying on her chaise lounge, a glass of lemonade sweating on the ground beside her. “I’ve been watching this one lizard crawl in and out of the eucalyptus for half an hour.”

“Are you stoned?”

“Finn!” she says, popping up and pushing her sunglasses onto her forehead. “This is a business meeting, right? I would never.”

“Hey, no judgment. Wouldn’t be the first time I met with a stoned artist. Or the last.”

“I’m just tired, and I’m on antibiotics so I couldn’t even have a glass of wine if I wanted.”

“Rey when you said you were sick, I just thought you had post-tour crud or something. Why are you on antibiotics?”

“Do you want some lemonade?” she says, standing up and going into the house. “Mun made it. I couldn’t even get my landlord back home to fix the heater when it went out and Mun and Jashco hired a housekeeper after the subleaser left, and made sure it was all aired out. And when I got here this morning, Bebe showed up ten minutes later with groceries.”
“Rey, I’m not trying to pry. I’m worried. As a friend. Even though it’s probably not my business. And as the person in charge of your album, I really need to know if you’re dealing with something that’s going to affect recording.”

She pours him a glass of lemonade and spends a long time wiping down the counter.

“It’s not strep, is it?” he continues. “Please tell me it’s not strep.”

“It’s not strep,” she says, handing him his glass. “I was fine when we got on the plane, or I thought I was. I figured I was just tired from all the commotion and staying up all night. Then I went to the bathroom on the plane and it hurt so bad I almost passed out and I was just shaky feeling shitty in general. I went with Kylo to his house when we landed because I didn’t want to be alone, and he has a doctor that makes house calls and he gave me a shot in the ass because he was afraid it was going to spread to my kidneys, and a prescription, and then was nice enough to be the first person to ever tell me that you’re supposed to pee after sex and then I’m pretty sure he lectured Kylo for not taking care of me but I only heard part of that conversation because I was dying in the bathroom again.”

“Oh. So you have a—“

“I have a UTI. From too much sex and not enough peeing. I should be fine in a couple of days. So I don’t think it will affect recording. So now you know. More lemonade?”

“I’m fine,” he says, holding up his mostly full glass. “I’ve never dated a woman and I don’t have any sisters and even I know about the whole peeing after sex thing.”

“Yeah well between shitty foster parents and shitty sex ed and not really having any close friends I missed that part. Ahsoka told me as much as she could about safe sex but she had to be careful because the holy rollers in town already thought she was some kind of child-corrupting witch. It’s really embarrassing, okay?”

“Got it,” he says. “So. You promised me a pizza.”

“It’s on the way. All the meat. Extra cheese.”

“Had enough of the vegan life?”

“It’s not like he made me eat how he does. I ate whatever I wanted. Sometimes it was easier, and I like trying new things. But yeah, I don’t know how a person survives without cheese. And did you know he’s been vegan since he was a kid? He doesn’t remember what cheese tastes like.”

She says this with a scandalized expression, as if she’d just told him that he likes to wear snorkeling gear to bed. She goes over to the cupboard to get plates. She has to move a couple of large flower arrangements out of the way to do so.

“Welcome home gift from the landlords?” he asks.

“Um, no. Not from them.”

“These are all from Kylo?”

“Yeah. I mean, he probably just told Lorna to order them, though.”

“It’s the thought I guess.”
“You know, it was so crazy travelling with him? He just...he expects things to be taken care of and they are. Like, we got out of the car at the airport and he took my hand and we just walked inside, because he knew someone would take care of the luggage. Lorna had everything we needed to check in. And then there was the first class lounge, and first class on the plane. He just expected things would be done for him. He’s always like that in a way but it was so different from my first time flying.”

“Doesn’t sound too bad, though.”

“That’s the thing. I did like it. I just don’t want to end up just expecting that kind of treatment, and being rude about it. Though he’s gotten better about that, at least around me. It’s weird, because he’s so nice to his fans.”

“You know we used to talk about that, at First Order, how nice he is to his fans. It’s brilliant, really. Because no matter what stories come out about him being a brat on a video set or in studio or to a waiter, his fans have his back. He could murder someone and they’d defend him.”

“That’s exactly what I told him!”

“Really? What did he do?”

She turns and goes to look out the back door. “Oh. Um. The whole thing with Kid Greedo. Anyway, whatever with all of that.” She turns around and smiles. “I need all the details.”

“Okay. Well the only new development since I last emailed you is that the first house fell through. The one we got is smaller so you’re going to have to share a room with Jess.”

Rey rolls her eyes and lets out an exaggerated sigh. “Finn. About you and Poe.”

“Why do you think there’s something going on between me and Poe?”

“Because of course there is. I can always spot when people like each other and he’s not your boss anymore.”

“Leia told you.”

“Leia told me.” She pulls him over to the sofa and sits down. “But all she said was that you’re dating. I need details.”

“Details?” he asks, sitting next to her. “Like how detailed are you talking?”

“Just like, who asked who out first? What was your first date? When are you moving in together?”

When he tells her that they got together the same day that she and Kylo became official she jumps up off the sofa. “Are you serious? Our love inspired you?”

“Whoa. Your love? You got something to tell me?”

She opens her mouth to reply, but a knock on the gate interrupts her. “Oh, look! Our heart attack in a box is here.” She scoops up some money off the counter and scurries out the door. When she comes back with the pizza, she chatters at him about a song she’s been working on, not looking at him as she loads their plates with slices. He doesn’t bring it up again until after they’ve eaten and she’s showing him some of the songs she wrote on the road.

“Rey, are you in love with him?” he asks.
“I don’t know,” she says. “No, I’m being serious. I don’t know what it’s supposed to feel like. But I like him a lot.”

“Are you going to come clean with him. About the beginning?”

“No. I don’t see the point. It doesn’t matter.”

“Does it bother you?”

“Sometimes. But I forget about it most of the time. I mean. I’m young and this is my first relationship. It probably won’t last anyway.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“I don’t know,” she sighs, getting up to put away her guitar. “It’s hard to imagine anything in my life being long term, other than longing.”

“You should put that in a song.”

She smiles. “Maybe I should.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Californication" by the Red Hot Chili Peppers
A late lunch meeting in the back room of a Michelin starred restaurant has never been Snoke’s style. Neither is making his artists wait. He told Kylo once that it’s a pointless power play.

Either Snoke sees a point to it today, or he’s died a fiery death on the freeway. But Kylo has never been that lucky.

Kylo sits at a table in the corner. Business is brisk up front, but this part of the restaurant is a ghost town, meaning Snoke wants to ensure they aren’t overheard.

So why the public setting? Snoke’s office is utterly private. A public setting for a difficult talk is generally a tactic used so the other party doesn’t make a scene. But Kylo has never cared about making a scene.

Perhaps Snoke wants him to make a scene?

He shakes his head and fishes the ices cubes out of his glass, tossing them onto the table. The hostess hurries over.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Ren,” she says, scooping the cubes into her hand. “Your server is new.”

Biting back a retort about the difficulty of remembering “no ice,” and smiles thinly and offers a clipped “thank you.”

As she walks away with her handful of ice, he calls her back. “For her sake,” he explains. “The server? Maybe get us someone more experienced for when Mr. Snoke gets here?”

“Oh!” she says. “Yes. Good thinking. Thank you.”

Snoke is now fifteen minutes late, but Kylo can’t leave unless he gets a call saying the meeting is cancelled. (Or that Snoke has indeed died in a fiery crash on the freeway.) He pulls out his small notebook, intending to jot down some song notes, but his mind keeps drifting back to this morning, to last night, to yesterday.

After the doctor left, Kylo put Rey to bed, settling in beside her once he made sure everything she needed was in arms reach. They didn’t make love, but lying there with her, even in his bright, white, sun drenched room, filled with the sound of the surf, he could pretend they were still in New York, huddled in his bed while it stormed outside. He held her and talked with her until she drifted off, helped along by a large dose of Vicodin.

She slept the afternoon and the evening away, and he slipped downstairs, spending part of the time fiddling with his guitar. He made arrangements for her house to be put back in order, asking her landlords to take credit for it, then he got back in bed and stared at her like a creep for a while before falling asleep.
He woke up to a moonlight and Rey staring at him.

“Hi,” she said.

“What time is it?”

“4:45,” she said. “AM.”

“Are you hungry?”

“A little,” she shifted and stretched. “I have to pee but I know it’s going to hurt.”

“Maybe it won’t be as bad as before.”

“Maybe.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing.”

He had breakfast ready by the time she got out of the bathroom. She was still pale, and her hands shook when he handed her a glass of orange juice, but she said she felt better.

“Ugh,” she said as she swallowed another pain pill and an antibiotic. “I really think he prescribed me horse pills.”

“Do we need to call back and ask for the banana flavored liquid, or is bubblegum more your speed?”

“Are you calling me a baby?”

“If the shoe fits,” he said, kissing her before she could respond.

They ate on the balcony as the sky lightened, and Kylo vacillated between feeling embarrassed at how cliché it all was, and on the verge of tears at how perfect.

“Kylo,” a voice brings him back to the present. “You look positively radiant.”

He looks up. Removed from the flattering lighting in his office, Alistair Snoke does not look radiant. Kylo stands and shakes the man’s hand. He is always unnerved by how soft Snoke’s hands are, seeing as how the rest of him resembles an empty cicada skin.

“I, um. I had a good week,” he says, sitting back down.

Snoke takes his own seat and begins inspecting the silverware. “I saw the photographs.”

They fall into silence as Snoke moves on from scrutinizing a fork to studying Kylo’s face. He shakes his head sadly and snaps his fingers to bring the server over. After ordering both their meals, he resumes his consideration.

“I’m no longer interested in signing Rey Kenobi to First Order.”

Kylo waits, but Snoke does not elaborate.

“What, sir?” he says, finally.

“It’s obvious you have no intention of doing as I asked, because you think you’re in love with
her.” He leans forward and smiles. “Instead, I’m going to file for an injunction to stop her album. I think about two weeks in advance of the release date is sufficient, don’t you?”

“Why would you do that? You can’t prove there was any kind of agreement between Rey and First Order, not even verbal.”

“Of course, I know that I won’t be able to stop it permanently, but by the time they’re finished fighting, the momentum will be gone. All that money wasted. They’ll at least partially blame Mr. Storm, which will put any further advancement within the company on hold.”

“She has nothing to do with what happened with Finn. Sir.”

“She has everything to do with it. She made the choice to sign with Resistance after making a promise to sign with First Order. He wouldn’t have gone without knowing he had at least one artist in his roster. But none of that will matter once you sign an affidavit stating she told you all about her original deal.”

Kylo sits back in his chair, looking down at the table. Their food arrives and he stares at it. This is it, then. He’s going to have to tell her everything.

“Poor boy.” Snoke says as he picks up his fork. “I can see the wheels spinning in that pretty head of yours.” He takes a bite of his steak. “If you warn her, your career is over, and she will also learn exactly why.”

“She already knows about the notebook.”

Snoke grins. “I take back what I said earlier. You may be in love with her. Shame. Well. She knows about the notebook but she doesn’t know you’re a liar and a user, does she? Come on then, eat up.”

Somehow, he gets through the meal, choking down what should be an exquisite sweet onion tart, nodding along as Snoke updates him on recording plans, and giving perfunctory answers to his questions about writing.

The moment Snoke is finished with his meal, he calls for the check, sends the server way with a sheaf of bills, then rises, nods at Kylo, and leaves.

On the drive home, Kylo turns the stereo off and rolls the windows down as he enters the freeway, so that he is buffeted by the smell of exhaust and his ears are assaulted by the traffic sounds and there is no comfort in artificially cooled air.

He looks over as a school bus creeps past, and laughs. Snoke chose the time and the restaurant so that Kylo would get stuck in afternoon traffic on the way home. More time to himself to stew things over. Less time to act rashly.

He rushes upstairs when he gets home. The bed is made, the bathroom cleaned and all the dishes put away. He’d left her napping, but now there’s no sign that Rey was ever here.

His skin crawls and his face burns, but instead of reaching for the first thing he can throw or punch, he climbs into his bed and buries his face in the pillow.

And there it is. Faint, but still there. Her perfume. Because laundry day isn’t until tomorrow.

Rey had been so nervous when they walked into Bergdorf’s that she didn’t speak above a whisper until he pointed out to her that it wasn’t a library.
“I’m just afraid they’ll kick me out,” she said.

“You’re with me,” he said. “But I don’t think they would, anyway.”

He didn’t really know if that was true, but he figured being thin and beautiful opened some doors even if you didn’t have any money.

At the perfume counter, she shook her head at Chanel and Cartier and Prada and shyly asked if they carried Sunflowers.

“Of course,” the salesgirl said. “It’s over here. These fragrances are a bit more…youthful.”

She told him, later, as they walked down Fifth Avenue, that she knew it wasn’t all that sophisticated, but she’d wanted it since the ninth grade, when a girl had passed some around the locker room after PE.

“It smelled so good. Like hope. And she didn’t even care that I used it, too. She let everyone have some.”

Kylo hugs the pillow, unsure if he’s going to throw up or scream, but something needs to escape.

A small voice he thought he silenced years ago pops into his head. The one that used to tell him everyone would be better off without him.

But she wouldn’t. Snoke wouldn’t let a little thing like Kylo committing suicide stop his plans for Rey, and he would make bank off the guaranteed surge in Knights of Ren sales.

The rational voice in his head says he’s going to have to tell Rey the entire truth. He uncurls himself and gets out of bed. He holds the phone in his hand for a long time before dialing.

“Lorna, I’m, um…I’m behind on writing so I’m going to have all my calls forwarded to you. Email me if anything urgent comes up.”

“Any edits to the list?”

“Take Rey Kenobi off.”

Lorna pauses. “Are you—“

“Just do it. And I’m turning off my cell.”

He hangs up, cutting her off mid-question.

Now there’s nothing left to do but wait.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Summer Girls" by LFO
For three days, he writes. He writes more in those three days than he has in the past six months. He emails the band and gives a date to start recording. He looks over a few endorsement deals that Hux has been pushing for weeks.

What he doesn’t do is eat, or leave his house. He barely sleeps. He goes through three packs of cigarettes, and Lorna says she’s not bringing anymore.

She also tells him how many times Rey has called. He changes the subject. He doesn’t check his personal email account.

When Lorna brings over his fan mail on the fourth day, he pulls her into the studio to listen to a song, telling her he’s reached a state of beatific enlightenment.

“It’s fucking low blood sugar and sleep deprivation, you idiot,” she says. “If you haven’t showered, slept, and eaten by the time I come back tonight I won’t hesitate to call Dr. Grievous.”

“And what’s he going to do, section me? Is that where we’re at now? You can’t ground me so you threaten me with a 5150?”

“Kylo, I’m worried. If you were throwing things around and punching walls and driving by her house I’d know how to handle it but this…I don’t even know what this is. What did you do? I can help you figure out how to make it right.”

“What makes you think it’s my fault?” he says. “I’m the one not taking her calls.”

“You’re right,” she says. “Sorry. Tell me what she did.”

He looks at her and imagines what she would say if he spilled it all. The notebook. Dating Rey to get Snoke and Hux off his back. The reason Snoke and Hux were on his back to begin with. Snoke’s plans to sabotage Rey’s album. Lorna has the most integrity of anyone he knows. She’s put up with a lot of shit from him over the years, but he can’t see her sticking around if he confesses.

So, he tells her to leave.

“I promise,” he says, ushering her out of the room. “I will do everything you asked. I may even shave. Just give me some fucking space.”

After she leaves, he does most of what Lorna asked, throwing together a meal from the deli containers Lindsay had brought over, then standing in the shower until the water runs cold. Shaving is too much of a hassle, though, and he’s too tired to sleep.

He needs to get through today and tomorrow. Then she’ll leave to go record and that’ll be another three weeks and then he’ll go off and record and then surely, she’ll be over him.

His screening room is dark and cool, a relief from the starkness of the rest of the house. It is
neutral; free of any memories of Rey. (All he can think about when he’s in his studio is their first kiss.) He chooses an old VHS copy of E.T. He has a hazy memory of attending the premiere of this movie, and a subsequent play date with Drew Barrymore, who he thought was an absolute baby, being two years younger than him.

Rey would have been three when this came out.

His mind drifts as he half watches the movie; he knows it by heart. At the climax, right as the boys take to the sky on their bikes, someone opens the door and a shaft of light cuts across the screen. He turns around, ready to yell at Lindsay.

It’s Rey. He can’t see her face but he knows every curve of that silhouette. She turns on the overhead lights and he blinks.

“What are you doing here?”

“Lorna called me. She was on her way here and said that when she left she might forget to lock the door.”

“I should fire her.”

“But you won’t.”

“No.”

He turns back to the movie. She switches the lights back off and sits in the chair beside him. He steals a glance at her. Even in the low, flickering light, he can see that she’s been crying recently. The puffy eyes and red nose, the tremble in her lip, all of it is his fault. He looks away.

“Are you breaking up with me?” She asks as the credits start to roll.

Would saying “yes” make anything right? It wouldn’t stop Snoke. Snoke doesn’t care about Kylo’s relationship, only about getting back at Finn and Resistance. He doesn’t even care about money, except as a means of controlling people. Breaking up with her won’t solve anything.

Except, if he breaks her heart now, it may not be as bad as it would be later. There is no “if” here. He is destined to break her heart someday.

He looks at her again. Her eyes are still locked on the screen, as if the tech crew credits are the most fascinating thing he’s ever seen, but she’s twisting the hem of her shirt in one hand wiping her eyes with the other.

“No,” he says.

“Then what the fuck are you doing?” She turns to him now, more anger in her eyes than sadness.

“I don’t know.”

“You can’t just do that. Say all those things to someone and make them feel like they matter and then just disappear.”

“I know.”

She climbs over the armrest between the chairs and into his lap, taking his face in her hands.

“Talk to me.”
“I’m afraid.”

She laughs and sits back. “You think I’m not?”

“Why are you afraid?”

“I’m terrified that New York is going to end up being just a couple of songs I wrote about a guy I knew for a little while. Because nothing good I ever have lasts.”

He pulls her close, pressing his face into the crook of her neck. He can’t tell her she’s wrong so he says nothing.

“You smell so good,” she whispers. “I missed you so much and I felt so fucking stupid.”

“You’re not stupid, I’m just an asshole.”

She leans back again and takes a long look at him. “I like this on you,” she says, running her finger along his jaw. “You should keep it.”

“I’m sorry.”

“For growing a beard?”

“For being an asshole.”

She takes his face in her hands again. “Don’t you dare ever do this again. I can’t.” She whispers the last two words, all her bravado gone.

“I won’t,” he says. He won’t run away again.

“I’m going to kiss you now.”

“Okay.”

It’s not quite like the first time, or even like their first kiss in New York, but it’s close. It’s a rediscovery of the way her bottom lip feels between his teeth, how her hand slides through his hair. But when he puts his hand under her shirt, she pulls away.

“Shit,” she says, pulling the shirt down. “Sorry. We can’t.”

“Are you still sick? Do you need to see the doctor again?”

“No. That’s all fine. Just your plain old garden variety case of like, totally surfin’ the crimson wave.”

That does put a damper on things, but he considers, taking in her flushed face and how hard her nipple is under his palm. “Well, I don’t mind—“

“I do. Not into it.”

He takes his hand off her breast.

“I have to go home, anyway,” she says. “I haven’t started packing.”

“Stay here tonight. I’ll get someone to pack for you.”

“As much as I would love having a stranger handle my underwear, no. Why don’t you come home
with me?”

It would be good to get out of this house, and her little cottage is charming. Plus, she’ll be there.

“Sure.”

As he’s packing, she asks what to expect recording with Luke.

“Like I told you before, you’re going to hate him by the time it’s over. Sometimes, he’ll rush you through one take of a song and you’ll never go back to it, and other times you’ll spend three days on one song.”

“Yeah, he’s already said it may end up taking longer than two weeks. But no more than three. So, three weeks isn’t that bad to go without seeing each other, right?”

“More like five.”

“Five?”

“I’m going to Sweden with the band to work on the album. I was supposed to leave the day after you got back but if you take longer, it’ll overlap. We’ll need a week to finish writing and arranging and a week or two to record.”

“Why Sweden?”

“Why Wyoming?”

“It’s where my producer lives and he won’t come here.”

“He’s not the only producer who hates L.A.”

“So, you’ll be back mid-October? Shit. I’m going to Texas then for my album shoot. Is this what it’s going to be like?”

“Yeah,” he says, softly.

“We really did spoil ourselves in New York.”

“Think of it this way. We’ll get to have a lot of reunion sex.”

“And goodbye sex. Just not tonight.”

She insists on driving, and he realizes when he gets in that it’s the first time he’s been in her car. The interior is impeccably clean, or as clean as it can get. He starts digging through the box of cassette tapes in the console.

“Ever think about putting a CD player in here?” he asks, as he chooses a mix called “Cherry Limeade.” It starts with Will Smith’s “Summertime.”

“I guess I could, now. Oh, shit have you seen that thing where you can share your music with other people online and download theirs?”

“Hux was droning on about it the other day.”
“Aren’t you worried?”

“We can’t do anything about it, and Snoke gets most of the money from our album sales anyway so I don’t care.”

“Yeah, but you’re already rich.”

“You’re gonna be fine, Rey.”

As she accelerates onto the freeway, the car starts vibrating.

“Is it supposed to do that?” he asks.

“No but she’s old.” She says, patting the dashboard lovingly.

“If you could have a new car, what kind would you get?”

“PT Cruiser, but I’m buying it myself. *After* this one can’t go anymore.”

“Those are only like twenty thousand, I could—“

“No,” she smiles, and turns the music up, ending the conversation.

At her house, the alley is being repaved, so Rey pulls up in front of the house. Kylo freezes when he sees the Thunderbird in the driveway with the hood up.

“Shit,” Kylo says.

“What? Who is that?”


Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Adam's Song" by Blink I82

The Cherry Limeade mix is one of Rey's high school summer mixes. Just imagine half the songs are recorded off the radio and the other half from other people's tapes.

Side A
Side B
Rey turns the car off, but Kylo doesn’t move to get out. He watches as a tall man with shaggy brown hair walks out of the garage and leans under the hood. He doesn’t look anything like the photos of Han Solo she’s seen.

“That’s Chewbacca,” Kylo says. “Drummer for Millennium Falcon. Han’s known him for a million years. Helped him get his green card or something. I don’t know, it was all a little shady and no one ever really tells me anything.”

Rey turns to retrieve her purse from behind the seat, but Kylo hasn’t even unbuckled his seatbelt.

“Are we going in?"

“Sure.”

The sprinklers turn on as Kylo gets out of the car, but that doesn’t prevent him from taking the most direct path from the car toward the gate to the back yard, avoiding the driveway. He keeps his head down, preoccupied with lighting a cigarette.

Rey looks toward the garage as Han comes out, wiping his hands on a shop towel. Rey hasn’t seen any recent photos of him, but he has the same crooked smile and twinkling eyes as he did on all the album covers. Those eyes are half sad, half amused as he watches Kylo book it through the gate and into the backyard.

“Hey son! Good to see you, too!” Han calls after him. He looks at Chewbacca, who grunts and goes back to his inspection of the engine.

Rey hesitates, curious about the car, but also about the man who raised Kylo.

“You must be Rey,” Han says.

“Yeah,” she looks in the direction where Kylo went, but he’s disappeared. She shrugs and turns back to Han. “What are you working on?”

“Came over to see Mun and Jashco, came back outside and she won’t start. Even Chewie can’t figure out what’s wrong.”

“Mind if I take a look?”

“You?”

“You saw what I drove up in, right? I’ve kept that car running by myself for years.”

“’83 Eagle?”

Rey nods.

“’58 Thunderbird. Have at her,” he says, stepping aside. “Chewie, this is Rey. Rey, Chewie.”

Chewbacca smiles and shakes her hand, then goes back into the garage.
“He doesn’t speak much to strangers. Shy about his accent.”

“Got it.” She looks under the hood. The engine is clean for its age, with a few modifications. She assumes they had already checked the more obvious potential problems, like the alternator. “Does it have an alarm system?” she asks, looking closer.

“Lost it in a bet for a while and the dumbass put one in. Didn’t make any other so-called improvements.”

Rey looks up. “Why would you bet your car?”

“The guy wasn’t interested in money. Wanted the car. Then he hid it and ran off to Peru for a year.”

“What did you do to piss him off?”

He hands her the rag. “What didn’t I do? You got any ideas?”

“Take the alarm system out. That’s all I’ve got.” She looks over her shoulder at the house. “I should go.”

“Sure thing. And thanks, kid.”

She lingers, giving him a chance to ask after his son, but he nods and goes into the garage for tools. She waves at Chewbacca and goes through the gate.

Kylo is sitting by her door, elbows resting on his knees.

“What took you so long?”

“I was helping your dad with his car.”

Kylo laughs. “Well, you just made a friend for life.”

“Coming?” she asks as she unlocks the door.

With a long sigh, he heaves himself off the ground and shuffles into the cottage after her. The place is a bit of a mess, but he ignores the pile of tissues by the couch and the dirty dishes on the counter on his way to the fridge.

“When’s the last time you saw him?” she asks.

“Who?” Rey gives him a look and he shrugs. “Couple of years ago probably.”

“He seemed to want to talk to you.”

Kylo is taking a long time rummaging around in her fridge, considering there’s only a half empty bottle of wine, a bottle of ketchup and some leftover nachos.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” he says as he shuts the refrigerator door. “You want to order Chinese?”

Getting between him and the phone, she puts her hands on his chest. “You could tell me about it.”
“There’s nothing to tell and I don’t even want to think about it right now,” he says, pulling her close. It is an obvious distraction, kissing her, but she allows it, because kissing him has become one of her favorite things to do, and this morning she woke up certain she would never get to do it again.

“I’m going to miss you,” she whispers and wraps her arms around his waist. Barefoot, she’s the right height for him to rest his chin on her head.

“You’re going to be too busy to notice. And if not, just put it in the music.”

One night, in New York, they’d gotten stoned together and were playing each other their favorite songs from when they were teenagers. She played “Black,” by Pearl Jam, and told him about eighth grade, and the time she had to watch the boy she was totally in love with ask his ex-girlfriend to dance with him to that song.

When he told her that he’d never slow danced with anyone at a school dance, she hopped up and held out her hand.

“Let’s fix all of it. Right now.” They started off dancing like middle schoolers, her arms around his neck and his around her waist, a foot of space between them. Laughing, she tucked herself into him, his chin resting on the top of her head and he ear pressed to his chest.

“I was already out of high school when this came out,” he said. “Is that weird?”

“It would be if we were dating then but it’s whatever, now. I’d say we’re about the same age, emotionally.”

“Hey!”

She’d stopped his protests with a kiss.

She’s brought back to the present by the warm pressure of Kylo’s hand on the back of her neck, his thumb caressing behind her ear. She stands on her toes and kisses his neck.

“Rey,” he warns.

“What?” she says, kissing the other side. “You started it. And kissing doesn’t have to lead to fucking, right?”

“No,” he sighs. “Can I touch your boobs now?”

“Be gentle.”

“Like this?” Outside her shirt, his thumb grazes her right nipple and she sucks in a breath, then leans into it. It doesn’t really hurt, not quite, but it sits right on the edge of pain, just like when he fucks her. She reaches up and grabs him behind the neck, tugging him toward her.

There’s a fervor to his kisses now, as he stoops down and pulls her tight against his body. She’s on the verge of telling him it’s okay, period or not, when he steps back, taking her arms by the wrists and putting them at her sides.

“We really should stop,” he says.

“Okay.” He’s right. As much as she wants it, she would be self-conscious and uncomfortable. As frustrating as it is, she would rather wait.
She kisses him one more time, on the tip of his nose. “I need to pack. You can order the food.”

In her bedroom, she starts dragging her cool weather clothes from the bottom of her dresser, since Finn had said to expect it to get chilly at night. None of it is new, and everything looks shabbier than she remembered, but they also bring her a strange sense of comfort. The sweater she was wearing the day she got the email from Finn still smells like the rosemary and mint Ahsoka gave her to put in her drawers to keep moths away.

In the living room, it sounds like Kylo is winding up the food order, so she fills her duffel with the efficiency she picked up on the road. If Kylo sees any of her winter stuff, he’ll insist on buying her new things and she might be too exhausted to say no. She’s zipping it up when he comes into the room.

“They said an hour and a half, but I told them there’s a hundred-dollar tip in it if they make it in forty-five.”

“You didn’t have to do that. I’m not that hungry.”

“So, you think it’s a bad thing that I’m giving someone who makes minimum wage like, a week’s pay or whatever?”

“Well, when you put it that way…” she trails off. It still doesn’t sit well with her, because she suspects he may have been rude on the phone, but she doesn’t want to get into it. Not today. Instead, she pulls him to the sofa and maneuvers them so she’s laying down with her head in his lap. She turns the television on and stops on a Brady Bunch rerun.

Kylo traces his finger around her ear, down her neck, and back. It feels amazing, though not in a sexual way. It’s the simple connection he’s making, attentive to her even as he’s watching the television.

“I’m so nervous,” she says. “Like, so nervous I’m afraid I’m going to puke.”

“I was scared shitless the first time I went in a studio with the Knights,” he says. He turns the TV volume down. “First time that I wasn’t with friends. First producer I wasn’t related to. All those expectations.”

“What did you do?”

“Threw up my breakfast in the bathroom, splashed water on my face, had an intern get me a ginger ale, and spent the first day fucking up until I figured it out.”

Rey sits up so she can see his face. He’s not kidding.

“I keep thinking that he’s going to change his mind when he hears the songs. Or that when Leia and Poe hear the record they’ll change their mind about marketing it.”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“It could.”

They finish watching the episode in silence, but it’s one she’s somehow seen a million times so it doesn’t matter. She considers the subject dropped when the food arrives (in thirty-nine minutes) but he brings it up again later as they’re changing for bed.

“What would you do if it did happen? If your album never came out?” he asks, focusing on folding
his jeans and t shirt.

“Fuck. I don’t know.”

“You’d survive,” he says. There’s an edge to his voice that makes her wary and attentive. “You survived a lot worse. You’d go out and keep playing and you’d get an even better contract.”

“I—I guess. Yeah. I would.” Her pajamas are packed so she takes Kylo’s shirt from where he stacked it on the dresser and puts it on. When she turns back to face him, he’s standing on the other side of the bed looking at her with watery eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“Just thinking about how I could have spent the last few days with you and I wasted it.”

“That’s over and done.”

“You should get some sleep.”

“Yeah.”

She turns out the light and they climb into bed, finding each other in the dark. With her head on his chest, Rey tells him about the first time she played in front of an audience, and how she tried to picture everyone naked to calm her nerves but couldn’t stop laughing because her Home Ec teacher was there. And if his grip is a little too tight as he holds her, she doesn’t mind.

Rey wakes up five minutes before her alarm. She’d slept well, only waking up once to share some sleepy kisses with Kylo before they both drifted off again. He’s still asleep, sprawled out across the bed on his back, leaving her only enough space to lay on her side.

“Hey,” she says, and gives him a kick in the calf. He grunts and rolls over. It takes a few seconds for his eyes to focus on her. He smiles.

“When do you have to leave?”

“My car is here in an hour.”

“I can drive you.”

“Your car isn’t here and I doubt you want to drive mine.”

“Then I’ll come with you. I have to call a car to come for me here anyway.”

“I don’t want to say goodbye at the airport, in front of an audience.”

“We’ll go to the First Class lounge.”

“I’m not flying First.”

“Doesn’t matter if you’re with me. And why not?”

“Because I can’t afford it and I’m smart enough to know I’m paying for it in the long run.”

“I won’t get out of the car.”
“I want to say goodbye to you here. So that I’ll think of you here and not at the airport.”

“And so you can cry in the car and not at the gate.”

“Who said I’m going to cry?”

He kisses her, then, sweetly. “A guy can dream, right?”

“Yes.” She rolls over, not quite ready to get out of bed, and he curves his body around hers, his big, warm hand on her belly and his breath in her ear. “Are you worried he’s going to tell me all sorts of terrible things about you?” she asks.

He shakes his head. “No. You know me.”

“Not better than he does.”

“You do. You listen to me.”

She squeezes her eyes shut and swallows the lump in her throat. “I should get in the shower.”

As she’s waiting for the water to heat up, she wonders if Robyn and the publicists will be pissed that there won’t be any teary goodbye photos at the airport. She’s finished with all of that. It’s one thing if they can’t avoid photographers, but she doesn’t want to perform for them anymore. She turns the water up as hot as she can stand it and stays under it until she’s light headed.

Kylo is on the patio when she gets out, and has somehow conjured up breakfast. It’s simple, just bagels and fruit and juice, but none of it had come from her kitchen.

“How long was I in there?” she asks.

“I raided your landlords’ kitchen,” he shrugs.

“What?”

“They had a ton of food.”

“Yeah, because they have people over after Temple every week.”

“I’m not a monster. I didn’t take the lox.”

“You seriously just walked into their kitchen and rummaged around?”

He nods, but there’s a glint in his eye and he can’t keep it up. “Rey, they were still home. I was just going to ask if they had any cereal and they packed a whole basket.”

“Seriously?”

“They’ve known me forever. I think Mun was at my bris.”

“Asshole,” she says, punching him in the arm. He shrugs again and lights a cigarette while she tears into a bagel.

“You think I should take those up?”

“Hell no. You’ll ruin your voice.”

“What about yours?”
“The sooner the better.”

There’s so much she could say to this, but at the same time, absolutely nothing she can really say, and no time to say it anyway. She lets it go and focuses on how his eyes turn to gold in the sun, and how his hair looks more brown than black.

Something wells in her, painfully. Something she’s never felt looking at someone she likes so much. And she likes him so much.

“What?” he says.

“Nothing. You look pretty.”

He giggles at this and shakes his head. “Come here.” She goes to him, and he puts out his cigarette before taking her in his arms. “You should finish getting ready.”

“I know.”

She doesn’t move, even after she hears her car pull up.

“Rey,” he says.

She squeezes him tighter. “I know.”

“Let’s get your stuff.” Rey nods and throws her still-damp hair into a ponytail as she follows him inside. He takes her duffel and guitar out while she double checks her backpack. Ticket, cash, debit card, ID, notebook. Anything else she’s forgotten she can buy.

“Will you be okay getting home?” she asks, meeting him at her back door.

“Of course. My car should be here soon. “You sure you don’t want me to come with?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

It’s meant to be a quick kiss goodbye, but like every time she kisses him, her mind goes to a place that is nothing but desire, and she feels like an idiot for not making love to him while she had the chance.

She tears herself away from him all at once, sprinting for the door with a choked “Goodbye.” The driver has the door open for her and she manages to climb into the SUV with some dignity, though she shoves her sunglasses on her face and huddles in the corner as soon as the door is shut. He may have followed her to the gate, but she doesn’t look back.

When she arrives at the airport, a few of the gaggle of paparazzi take interest in her, but since Kylo isn’t with her, none of them follow her inside. Oddly, her ego takes a bit of bruising from that, but it’s restored somewhat during check in when she learns that Kylo upgraded her ticket. She’s also hit with that strange feeling in her chest again, but there’s no time to dwell. Her future is now.

Chapter End Notes
Chapter title from "Cats in the Cradle" by Harry Chapin
From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Tuesday, September 21, 1999 at 11:09 PM

Subject: Hey

First I’m so so so so so sorry I haven’t called or emailed before now. I’ve been trying that whole compartmentalizing thing so I can just focus on music. I don’t know how well it’s working because I think about you all the time when I’m working. God that’s so embarrassing.

Did you get the mixtape? I actually made it before I came to see you and I was going to leave it if you weren’t home or wouldn’t let me in. Then I forgot about it so I put it in the mail as soon as I got here.

The house is so awesome! It’s pretty big, and I think the view would even impress you. A big beautiful field and a pond and then mountains in front of mountains in front of mountains, and the whole west side of the house is windows (not that we’ve actually been home for the sunset at all yet) And there’s a really big tub by the main bedroom. The only sucky part is that it only has three bedrooms. Originally it was set up with me and Jess with our own rooms and the guys sharing but Snap snores AND talks in his sleep so I didn’t want to make Bastian share with him so Jess and I decided to take one for the team and share. Though it’s actually awesome. I was only away from her for a couple of weeks and we kind of wanted to kill each other by the end of tour, but I missed her. And things are a little more chill when we aren’t stuck in a van all the time.

Today was the first day in the studio and I have so much I want to tell you, but I’m so tired and Jessika needs to use the phone. None of our cell phones work here and there’s only one line.

Love,

Rey

PS Thank you for upgrading my ticket. It wasn’t a long flight but. You know. That was really cool.

From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

On: Wednesday, September 22, 1999 at 3:18 PM

RE: Hey

I got the tape this morning. I didn’t realize you literally meant mixtape, so I had to hunt down a Walkman.

Actually it wasn’t a big deal, I just had Lindsay go find one and they still sell them at RadioShack I guess. Whatever. I haven’t gotten an actual cassette in forever. Shit I mostly made them back then and the only ones I ever got were from a ninth grader who had a crush on me when I was a senior and she REALLY fucking liked Devo. It really took me back though, like it sounded like some of
the songs were recorded off of other tapes, recorded from other tapes, recorded off the radio?? It was clever starting it with Bizarre Love Triangle and ending it with the Frente cover. Also that transition from You Might Think into Just Like Heaven was perfect. I love hitting on those moments where one song blends into the next like they were supposed to be on the same album. And the mood of it…like that night in the diner before you left on tour…or that first night in New York…

I have ten solid songs and three or four weak ones and we usually put down at least 20. I may say fuck it and we’ll record the ones the other guys wrote since they’re always bitching about it. Who knows, they may pull something brilliant out of their asses by accident.

I have to go do a trade magazine interview that Hux set up. It’s going to be about guitar pedals or something. I swear he does this shit just to fuck with me.

I’m dying to know how your sessions are going.

-x

Kylo

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Thursday, September 23, 1999 at 9:56 PM

RE: Hey

I’m going to totally admit that I thought you were exaggerating about Luke, but we’ve been working on one song the last two days!

It was great at first. We all went out to dinner the first night and even though Luke is kind of aloof I think we all had a good connection with him.

He let us rehearse on our own with no input for a couple of days and then we managed to lay down three tracks the first day. I mean they WERE ones that we played in almost every set on tour so they were tight but then we hit this one, which we didn’t play as much but it’s not like, one of the brand new ones and wow. WOW. I may have had a tiny tantrum at one point because I know what he wants, or at least I think I do, I just can’t DO it yet and I don’t think he’s going to quit until I CAN do it. So after we’d been working on the bridge for about 8 hours and he wanted to do it again, I may have thrown down the headphones and run outside. When I came back in everything was kind of tense and weird and scattered so he ended the session early. I’m so embarrassed.

I’m also so afraid he’s going to call in a session player or just have Snap do all the guitar on the album because my guitar skills aren’t up to par. He told me at the beginning he wouldn’t do that, but he just keeps pushing me, and I’m not even playing lead!

But the rough cuts I’ve heard are good. They’re so so so good. I didn’t know my voice could sound like that. And the band is crazy good and I feel like I’m being ungrateful every time I get frustrated or feel resentful. I never thought I’d feel anything other than happy about this so it’s fucking with me.

The songs are good, though. I can’t wait for you to hear them.

I need to crash now. Maybe I’ll be more positive in the morning.
Love,

Rey

PS when you leave messages please remember that we all get messages on that machine and that I’m not always the first one to check it and I’m not always alone when I do?????

From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

On: Thursday, September 23, 1999 at 11:25 PM

RE: Hey

I have about five seconds before I leave the house for this stupid club appearance, but I know exactly how you feel. I think your email even gave me flashbacks.

Don’t feel bad about anything you’re feeling. It’s normal. You don’t have to go around feeling like you can’t stand up for yourself just because your life used to be harder. Ask him for a day off. No fuck that tell him you’re taking a day off. Or tell him you want to come back to that song later. It’s just like how it is when you’re writing one. You get stuck and you set it aside and when you come back you see it differently. He has this thing about pushing until you have a breakthrough but not everyone works like that.

If there’s any way you can send me some rough cuts, I wanna listen. Oh and if he said he won’t replace you he’s not going to.

-x

Kylo

PS Take a hot bath when you get home tomorrow.

PPS I can make no promises about the answering machine

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Saturday, September 25, 1999 at 2:47 AM

Subject: Thank U

I did what you said. I couldn’t bring myself to take a whole day off but I did say we needed to move on and also said I was leaving at 5. He tried to keep the band when I left but I said no, so we all went out to the one bar in town (it’s country western of course) and I learned how to line dance and how to shoot tequila. They just don’t give a fuck about the drinking age here I guess or I really am as hot as you say and it doesn’t matter or maybe it’s because I’m a little bit famous. (ha it feels stupid saying that) But we walked there and back so don’t worry.

I didn’t take a bath though because I’m so tired and kind of tipsy and that’s not a good combo.

Fuck I’m just exhausted. And my fingers are sore and my throat is raw and my whole body feels like I’ve been whipped with a switch for some reason.
I’ve been home for a few hours but it’s so quiet here at night that that it’s hard to sleep. I don’t know how I slept with this kind of quiet back home.

But okay the real reason I’m still up is that I started thinking about that time you fucked me on the table in the loft, when we were gonna have a “real” meal even though it was still takeout so I was trying to set the table, but you came up behind me and took my shirt off and that’s all I was wearing. I remembered how when you were slamming into me from behind, I looked down and I still had this handful of silverware in one hand and how your thumb was barely touching my little finger. Your other hand was on my belly, and I felt so small because your hands are so goddamn big, and I looked over and the shades were up and I didn’t care if anyone saw us. I almost wanted someone to see us, but I also wanted to be that person, watching us, to see what we looked like.

And then you kissed my shoulder, and I should barely have felt it, because of everything else, every other sensation. How could that one thing matter when I had your dick inside me, your hands all over me. But I felt it, and that’s when I came.

And I thought about that and I was so fucking hot thinking about it, and I couldn’t get myself off because Jess was in the room so I went downstairs to the guest bathroom and ran the water in the sink and thought about you and that table while I got off.

I hope you read this as soon as you wake up and think about it all day.

Love,

Rey

From: Kylo Ren <bensoloney@yahoo.com>

On: Saturday, September 25, 1999 at 7:31 PM

RE: Thank U

So I’m guessing that last email was revenge for the answering machine business? Okay if that’s how you want to play it.

I woke up, early as hell again because I had meetings all day, and I saved your email for last, right before I left and I can’t tell you what a single one of my meetings was about because all I could think about was that fucking email. I may have agreed to endorse chia pets. Hell I may have agreed to let them market my head as a chia pet for all I know.

But I was also thinking about how you look when you’re about to come, like you’re begging me, but you don’t know if you’re begging me to stop or to keep going (I’ll always stop when you tell me to btw) and how when you finally do every part of your body quivers around me and under me or on top of me.

And when I finally got home I started thinking about how your mouth felt on me. It felt like a gift I’ll never deserve, those lips that sing poetry, that always speak kind things, doing that to me.

I want to bury myself in you.

All the songs I was talking about? I’m afraid to share them because you’re in the fabric of every single one and while part of me wants to shout it from the rooftops another part of me wants it to just be ours.
From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Sunday, September 26, 1999 at 10:03 AM

RE: Thank U

Holy shit. I don’t know what you’re talking about with “supposed to be,” because that was seriously a sexy email. I was sitting here with other people hanging out in this room while I read it, trying to keep it together. I kept having to switch over to business emails.

This sucks so bad. How do people do this? Does it get easier once you get to the point where you aren’t boning every day? Or does being apart a lot makes you still want to bone every day? I can ALMOST see why some women quit their jobs to go on the road with their boyfriends or husbands. Almost. And it’s not just the sex really, it’s not being able to talk to you. And talking for like two minutes at a time on the phone isn’t enough, and soon we’re going to be so many time zones apart and so busy.

You want to know a stupid thing I miss? How your stupid body is so long that you’re always flashing your belly even when you’re not reaching for something high up. And I don’t want to be that girl but you are in so much of my work right now. And not just the songs I wrote on the road when I could barely admit I wanted you, or the one I wrote after that first night…you’re even in the ones I wrote before I ever met you. You’ve given them a new context. It’s crazy. I can’t wait for you to hear them.

I have to go now. We got the morning off because everyone was desperate to sleep in but it’ll probably end up being a late night.

Love,

Rey

From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

On: Sunday, September 26, 1999 at 2:11 PM

RE: Thank U

I’m assuming your questions weren’t rhetorical and I also really hope you don’t care that answering them means I have to talk about my ex. If I’m wrong then just skip the rest of this.

I honestly don’t even know if it really gets easier. I wasn’t out on the road nearly as long when I was with Kat. Dagobah didn’t do 30 city arena tours. And she was able to come out on the road with me some, because at that point she could take work whenever she felt like it. She was in that whole “I won’t get out of bed for less than 20 thousand dollars” club. But also she couldn’t deal with not working for more than a couple of weeks, basically anything that felt longer than a regular
vacation.

But…I guess yeah I’m not the best person to ask about this because she was the only real relationship I had before now.

I don’t know. I think it’s weird when people give up their careers to go on the road. Well I guess it’s not as big a deal if they also have kids but I don’t know. It seems like before that, they get to travel and party and have fun while their husbands or boyfriends do all the work. But also, having someone around is nice, it makes you feel less crazy about living out of a suitcase. It makes you feel like you’re actually real instead of a product. And no I’m not telling you to quit your job and come on the road with me next year. I don’t know what I’m saying.

-x

Kylo

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Sunday, September 26, 1999 at 3:15 PM

RE: Thank U

Hearing about your ex is so weird because at the exact same time I don’t want to hear about it I also want to hear everything about it. Well, to an extent I guess. God though I’m just here on an actual honest to goodness day off and I don’t want to go anywhere. If I had a laptop computer I wouldn’t even be out of bed right now. Everyone else went off to some agricultural festival in the next town. They’re all older than me and have so much energy. Jess introduced me to Red Bull on the road but like, I think that’s fine to drink something like that when you’re about to go on stage for the fifth show in a week after an eight hour drive but not to go see some sheep races, you know?

Anyway, speaking of touring, that thing you said, about the girlfriends giving up their jobs and just getting to travel and party…have you ever really talked to any of your bandmates’ girlfriends or wives? Or at least, observed them? I dunno. I just remember having a couple of friends who were dating guys who were on tour all the time and they’d go with them and they helped them through so much. Like, addiction and money problems and just the stress of touring and everything. (You even said yourself how helpful it is having someone around) and even when they weren’t on the road with them they were supporting them emotionally. That’s a lot of work and those guys can be so needy. I don’t really think it’s all fun and games at all. I’m sure some of them are just all about the lifestyle but they also really don’t last because there are easier ways to get to party and travel. And you see more of cities than hotel lobbies and the loading docks of venues.

I think I’m going to take this opportunity to FINALLY get to use that enormous bathtub. And you should totally think about me sexily lounging in it with my hair in milkmaid braids and then scrubbing all of my callouses and clipping my toenails after. So sexy.

Love,

Rey
From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

On: Monday, September 27, 1999 at 12:24 PM

RE: Thank U

Now is probably the perfect time to tell you about my toenail clipping fetish! I wasn’t sure how to bring it up but you gave me the perfect opportunity.

jk but the milkmaid braids DO sound sexy. I had to ask Lorna what they were but once I found out, yeah. Sexy. I don’t know what that says about me.

I guess I was kind of a dick about the girlfriends thing. And no I haven’t made an effort to get to know my bandmates…mates. I could probably work on that. I don’t know if now will be the best time but hey maybe.

I’m heading to Europe on Wednesday instead of next week because I want to get some new winter clothes in London. Don’t laugh but the girl that put my stuff in storage was like three Lindsays ago and Lorna thinks it all might be in a storage unit in New York. The girl paid in cash for a full year and didn’t turn in her receipts when she left and it’s all so absurd so I just told her to forget about it. They’ll send a bill eventually.

Maybe I’ll send you some really nice tea. Or a pea coat. I’ll try to call you at some point before I leave.

-x

Kylo

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Tuesday, September 28, 1999 at 8:20 AM

Subject: Hello Goodbye

I’m sorry I missed your call. We were all outside looking at a herd of deer after breakfast. I’ll be in the studio all day but maybe you can catch me when I get back. Or tomorrow morning before you leave? I’ll take the phone outside if we’re looking at any more wildlife.

I really think the bigger time difference might work out better for us, as long as you can get up before noon.

You are so lucky I was alone when I listened to that message, btw. I didn’t know the Brits had so many words for breasts. Impressive.

Luke says that we should be finished by Monday. Just two days over schedule but I still would have missed you even if you left on your original day. That doesn’t make me feel much better though.

Love,

Rey
Chapter End Notes

Chapter title is from "Kissing You" by Des'Ree

Rey's Mix
Like many children stuck in unhappy situations, Rey had learned the art of daydreaming at an early age, and was adept at it. Around the time she hit middle school, her fantasies of her mother—and in her wildest fantasies her father—returning for her had given way to dreams of becoming rich and famous. The kind of person who shows up at their ten-year high school reunion and has every one of her former bullies apologizing profusely while she generously forgives them. At the time, she didn’t have a solid idea of what exactly she would be famous for. She hadn’t picked up a guitar yet and was only vaguely aware that her singing voice was anything remarkable. She had an interest in mechanics, and engineering, and knew that sometimes scientists and inventors were famous, but college, especially for something like that, seemed as out of reach a dream as winning an Oscar or being a famous race car driver. The best she could hope for in that direction was the auto mechanic program at the vocational school.

One of her favorite things to daydream about was being interviewed, and it’s a habit she still indulges in, often subconsciously.

Her first experience being interviewed hadn’t been as fun as she imagined. She had been nervous, hadn’t said anything particularly witty, and when she read it, some of the things didn’t sound exactly like what she remembered saying. But it had only been a one-page thing. What she usually dreams about are full features. The kind they write when the audience cares about what kind of tea you drink and what kind of art you have on your walls.

As she makes her way back to the rental house from the studio, Rey imagines a sit down with a journalist to talk about recording her first album. Rey figures she’ll tell them about the bar in town, and the mist on the field and the clouds that sometimes engulfed the house, and how it snowed in September and she still ate her breakfast on the deck, wrapped in a blanket with the fire burning in the little sunken pit.

Depending on the person, and how well she gels with them, she might tell them about the exhaustion, and the tears, and the constant fear that her best isn’t good enough, that she was stupid to think she’s good enough for anyone outside of Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, to care about her music.

It’s not that Luke Skywalker hasn’t been encouraging. He’s been amazing, even while working the band like dogs. The problem is that she’d come into this thinking that the hardest part was over when she got signed. She had a bunch of songs and a great band, after all. Laying down the tracks should have been a breeze once she got used to the professional studio, but those first few days had been a huge wakeup call, a harsh reminder that the work was just beginning, and she had a long way to go before she could rest. Touring had been hard, but this was grueling.

Tonight, Luke let the rest of the band go early. There was one song that Rey had held off recording. The bridge wasn’t quite right, and Rey didn’t want to record it, release the song, then wake up one night with the perfect solution in her head. Luke warned her that might happen with some songs anyway, but he had let her delay recording until they had laid down a few more tracks. Tonight, though, he said she needed to figure it out before they ran out of time, because he thought the song had single potential.

They sat in the control room working on it until her eyelids felt like sandpaper. When she packed
her notebook up for the evening, she still wasn’t certain, but they were closer. What it needed was sleep.

As she pulls into the driveway, the A-frame house looms above, all the windows dark. The other parking space is empty, meaning the others must have gone out. A tiny part of her considers joining them if they’re at the bar, but she is unashamed to admit that she would rather check her email and then go to bed, with the phone on the pillow next to her in case Kylo manages to call.

She dumps her bag in the foyer and hangs her scarf and jacket on the rack. As she’s taking off her boots, she catches a glimpse at the living room sofa and the dark shape lying there, barely visible in the light from the foyer.

“Shit!” she says, throwing at boot at the shape.

The shape yelps and sits up. “Fuck! What the fuck?”

The voice is unmistakable, but it can’t be him, can it?

“Kylo?”

“Yeah,” he says.

Laughing, she kicks off her other boot and runs over to him, throwing herself into his lap.

“Are you okay?”

“It just glanced off my shoulder but I that’s one more reason for me to hate your cowboy boots.

“What are you doing here?”

“I heard the tequila’s good at the bar up the road.”

“It is. And you’re amazing,” she says, before landing a kiss on his mouth. “I think I missed you the most today and all I could think about was you getting on a plane tomorrow and leaving the country.”

“I am still doing that. But not until like, 2.”

“I don’t care. You’re here. How did you get here?”

“Flew into Cheyenne, got a driver for the rest of it.”

“That’s a four-hour drive.”

“I had a good nap.”

He puts his hand on her neck and kisses her properly.

“Fuck,” Rey whispers. “What are we going to do about my roommates?”

“Already taken care of. They’re at the lodge outside of town.”

“Wouldn’t it have been easier to take me there, instead of sending three other people?”

“Maybe, but I want to fuck you in your bed, so you’ll remember it every night you’re here.”

His voice drops so low on this, so close to her ear, that her entire lower body clenches.
Unfortunately, her entire body is also sore and exhausted. “Can I take a bath first?” she asks. “I didn’t take a shower this morning.”

“Only if I can join you.”

“Please.”

“Jessika already gave me the tour. You wait here, and I’ll start it.”

The tub takes forever to fill, so she’s dozing on the sofa when he comes back down. He threatens to carry her up the stairs, but she manages to drag herself up, one hand in his.

The house is older, and furnished like a hunting cabin, with lots of plaid throws and animal heads, but the master suite, which takes up the entire third floor, has been updated in the last ten years. The stairs lead into the bedroom, one wall all windows. Rey peels off her shirt and goes through the sliding barn door to the bathroom, which is larger than some studio apartments.

The room is steamy and smells of orange and patchouli, a mix of her bath oil and the candles scattered around the room. Light from the full moon pours in through the skylight.

She strips out of the rest of her clothes and stands for a moment, savoring her release from them as well as the sharp intake of breath from Kylo. She sneaks a glance over her shoulder as she coils her hair on top of her head. He’s leaning in the doorway, attempting nonchalance as he studies her, but the tension in his body is palpable.

The tub is one of those sunken ones—Jessika had called it a garden tub—so she’s able to step in with some amount of grace, though she winces at the temperature. It’s not hot enough to scald, but hot enough that it’ll remain warm for a good while. It’ll be perfect once she manages to get in.

She takes her foot out and turns to him. “Are you joining me?”

“Yeah.” He doesn’t move, so she goes to him and snakes her arms around his waist, pressing her bare body against him.

His shirt is rough against her skin, an old mechanic shirt with a name patch that says “Benny.” She traces the lettering and he laughs.

“A fan gave it to me. Said I should wear it ironically.”

“Hmmm,” she says as she unbuttons it. “Did anyone ever call you that?”

“Fuck no.”

“Can I?”

“Only if you scream it.”

“That may be the least sexy thing I can imagine screaming.”

“Yeah, I don’t know why I said that.”

Without her clothes, the room is starting to feel chilly, so she heads back to the tub. The water is still blazing hot as she sinks into it, and she lets out a soft groan as her shoulders submerge. Kylo is still standing by the doorway, fully clothed and staring at her.

“Look, you’re either going to have to get in, or you’re going to have to go in the other room,
because that’s just creepy.”

He doesn’t try for seduction as he sheds his clothes, removing them the same way he would if he were alone, but even as he struggles with his boots, sitting on the floor to yank them off, Rey finds herself staring. He stands up again, letting his jeans and boxers drop, and steps out of them.

It’s only been two weeks since she’s seen his body, but it feels like years. Standing under the skylight, the light carves deep shadows in his curves and hollows. He practically shimmers.

He’s also shivering.

“Get in, you big dummy.”

The tub is enormous, but so is he, and Rey isn’t particularly short, so it takes a bit of adjusting before they’re settled at opposite ends, and it still feels like a tangle of legs. They stare at each other for a long time.

“Come here,” Rey says, sitting up and scooting toward the middle. A small wave spills out onto the floor as he moves to meet her. As they kiss, she relishes the slippery feel of his skin against hers. There’s something exciting about holding on when it’s hard to gain purchase. He slips his arms around her waist as she straddles him, but despite the rapid beating of her heart, despite how much she wants to do this, right here and now, the warm water has relaxed her to the point of delirium and she yawns, practically into his mouth.
She hides her face in his shoulder. “Shit. That’s almost as embarrassing as crying after sex.”

“Mikey farted during a blowjob once, so it’s all relative.”

“Wait, did he actually admit that to you?”

“It was on the tour bus, back when we shared one, and she came out of the back half-dressed and screaming bloody murder about it.”

“Okay. I feel a little better.”
“Turn around,” he says. “How about, I wash your back, and then we’ll go to bed and whatever happens, happens. I don’t have to leave for the airport until eight or so.”

Sitting with her arms wrapped around her shins and her cheek resting on her knees, she almost falls asleep as he washes her back and neck. The sound of the water dripping into the tub from the wash cloth takes her back, so far back, to a time before she knew how to be afraid. She’d forgotten a time had ever existed, but somewhere, so long ago, she had sat in a bath while someone washed her back and beyond the bathroom door was a warm bed.

“I wanna go to sleep now,” she says.

Without a word, he stands up, and she smiles at how far the water level goes down. He wraps a towel around his waist and holds up a bathrobe for her. Her legs are rubbery as she gets out, but she manages. The robe is his, black and thick and it feels like stepping into a cloud. It probably cost more than what her car is worth. He ties the belt and straightens the lapels before leading her to the bedroom.

She almost asks him to close the window shades, but the nearest neighbors are miles away, and she wants to see him, fully, in this light. He obliges her with a gorgeous view by drying off in front of the fire.

“You know, I’ve sat in front of this fireplace so many nights when I should have been in bed. Drinking wine or whatever we had around and letting my hair dry. I never thought...you probably never read A Little Princess, right?”

“You’d be surprised.”

“Really?”

“The Secret Garden, too. You’ve met Leia, right? She doesn’t believe in boy books and girl books.”

“Wow. Okay. Yeah. Well you know the part after she’s been getting all the gifts for a while, so she’s got this whole thing going with a fire in the grate and tea and bread or whatever and everything is so warm and perfect?”

“I think so.”

“All I ever wanted was to feel that way and when I sit in front of the fire with a full belly, even though I’m scared to death about what’s going to happen with everything else, when I sit by this fire, with my belly full and no holes in my socks, I feel like I finally have that.”

She looks at him, catches him staring again. He shakes his head and goes to the windows to lower the shades.

“Don’t,” she says. “There’s no one around to see.”

“Would you care if there were?”

“Is it weird if I said, ‘not really?’”

“Yes, but the best kind of weird. Now come on.”

The bed, which Jessika and she had left in a mess this morning, is freshly made with clean sheets, the covers turned down.
“There’s no way you did this yourself.”

“I do know how to make a bed.”

“I know.”

“Okay. Jessika did it. But I didn’t ask her. She volunteered. Now get in.”

Usually, Rey and Jessika sleep under quilts, but Kylo has pulled out the electric blanket and a down comforter. Slipping under the covers is better than getting into the hot bath had been. Why has she been suffering under a single blanket for so long?

It’s warmest in the center of the bed, and she fits herself beside him in a way that’s become familiar. In a way she’s missed more than she can admit. Before she falls asleep, she puts her hand on his cheek, traces the curve of his ear, then along his jaw to his lips. He takes her hand and kisses her fingertips, exactly where the callouses are deepest.

The moon is high when she wakes up, washing the room in light bright enough that Rey panics, afraid they’ve wasted all their time together. But Kylo is still asleep, rolled over onto his belly, hugging his pillow.

Her gaze travels the length of him. The most notable thing about his sleeping face is the smoothness of his forehead, the lack of tension in his jaw. The blankets are all on her side of the bed, leaving the bedsheets draped on his lower half.

She reaches out and runs one finger from his shoulder down to the small of his back. He sighs and shifts, but doesn’t wake up. She flattens her hand and slides it under the sheet, grabbing a handful of his beautiful ass. He turns over, muttering, and the sheet slips away, revealing his dick, fully hard and stretching across his stomach. She looks back at his face. His eyes are closed but he can’t conceal a smirk.

“Faker,” she says, poking him in the arm. Without opening his eyes, he takes her hand and puts it on his dick. “What am I supposed to do with this,” she whispers as she gives it small stroke.

Kylo opens his eyes. “Ride it.”

She gives it another stroke, longer and slower, smiling at his sharp intake of breath. “I think I’m definitely too tired for that,” she says.

He reaches out and brushes the back of his index finger against her nipple and chuckles when she gasps. With an exaggerated sigh, he rolls over and onto her, lacing his fingers in hers.

“Is this how you want it?”

“Yes,” she says, rolling her hips toward him. The tip of his cock brushes against her but he pulls away, sitting back on his heels and resting his forearms on her bent knees.

“I think that’s still going to be too much work for you, being so tired and all.”

“No. It’s not. At all.”

He shakes his head and before she can say anything else, he hooks his hands behind her knees and pulls her toward him. “Put your pillow under your hips.”
“Um, okay,” she says, and grabs the nearest pillow. When she gets it in place, he pulls her even closer, so that her ass is resting between his thighs.

“Are you ready? I mean, we kind of skipped foreplay.”

“I’ve been ready since I saw you on that couch.”

He bends over her, this time to kiss her, reaching between them to run the tip of his cock against her clit before sitting back again. He gets his cock in position at her entrance, then grabs her hips, pulling her toward him as he thrusts into her. Despite how ready she is, it takes her breath away at first, both from his size and the relief it brings. It’s been so long since they’ve done this, and the ache she’s had for him has thrummed underneath everything, an unresolved bassline of want. Kylo pulls back, pausing to caress her face before thrusting into her fully. Her back arches of its own accord and she moans. This angle is insane, especially when he puts his hand flat on her belly, with the heel of his palm pressing against her clit.

“Is that okay?”

“You know it is.”

His fingers dig into her side as he holds onto her. His face is in shadow, but the light plays all over his beautiful body as he moves. As he moves her. When he throws his head back to get his hair out of his face, she glimpses desperate want in his eyes, as if, even though he has her literally in his hands, it’s not enough. And she understands, because right now, no matter how impossible, she needs every part of him touching her.

“Kiss me,” she says, followed by another low moan as he presses deep inside her. He leans over her and she pushes her hips to meet his as she pulls his face to hers.

“I missed you so much,” he whispers, and Rey’s chest tightens, is too full, but she’s not going to cry this time. This is so much worse.

Instead of tears trying to bubble their way to the surface there are words. The worst words she could possibly say. She doesn’t even know if they’re true, but she wants to say them.

She’s so close to the edge, even though she’s still exhausted, and as she inches closer, he buries his head in her neck and her every whimper and sigh flies right into his ear.

He reaches down between them and presses his thumb against her clit, watching as she finally falls apart.

Rey squeezes her eyes shut and bites her lip so she won’t say it.

So she won’t tell him she loves him.

“Come inside me,” she says.

“What?”

She puts her hand on his cheek and he opens his eyes. “Come inside me.”

His eyes widen and then shut again, tight. “Fuck,” he groans, as he slams into her, hard. This is when he usually pulls out, but he collapses, half on top of her as his breathing slows and she can feel him pulsing inside her.
The temptation is still there, to quietly whisper the words to him, especially with him kissing her temple and pushing her hair out of her face. But Soshanna had told her once that you should never tell a man how you feel about him during or after sex. So, she lets the moment pass, cooling like the sweat on her body.

He rolls over onto his back, keeping one hand resting on her thigh. It’s too much for her overstimulated skin, though, and she gets up, telling him she should go pee.

The overheard light in the bathroom is too harsh, so she flips it back off. In the warm glow of the night light, everything is almost okay. It’s the kind with a stained-glass globe like a Tiffany lamp. Her aunt Ginny had one in the living room of her trailer.

Rey doesn’t really need to pee but she tries anyway, just like the doctor said. She sits, staring at her blobby reflection in the shower door.

Telling him to come inside her had seemed like a good idea in the moment. It kept her from saying what she really wanted to say, at least. But now she’s a mess, and not just physically. Though she can’t figure out why it’s bothering her so much.

They had stopped using condoms almost immediately in New York (and she could practically hear Ahsoka’s disapproval in her head) but he’d always pulled out as a precaution, coming on her tits or belly or her back. She’s not worried about getting pregnant but her decision nags at her, like she’s crossed a line. Like maybe he’ll figure out what she really wanted to say.

She gives up on trying to clean up with toilet paper and uses a wet washcloth. She doesn’t have a whole lot of experience with this, having been meticulous about condom use in the past even if she wasn’t meticulous about her choice of partner, but she knows that his scent will linger tomorrow, even after she’s showered and he’s halfway around the world. Maybe that’s why she’d asked him to do it.

Kylo is asleep when she goes back into the bedroom. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she watches him, and an exquisite, tender feeling washes over her. He could have slept a full eight hours tonight, in his own bed. He could have woken up, drank a fresh smoothie he didn’t have to make himself, been driven to the airport. No fuss, everything taken care of. Instead he had come to a tiny town in Wyoming, so that he could be with her for a few hours. Of all the things he’s done for her, this is the sweetest, and she promises herself that the next time they see each other, she’ll tell him everything.

Because she loves him. She does. And he deserves to know.

But she won’t tell him in the morning. She wants tonight to be a perfect memory, in case it’s their last time. With that settled, she feels lighter than she has in months, and when she drops off to sleep with her head resting on his chest, it’s the best sleep she’s had since she left New Mexico.

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Kylo’s side of the bed is cold when she wakes up again, and the sky is overcast, with a heavy look of snow. His voice drifts out of the bathroom, humming as he brushes his teeth. He’s fully dressed when he comes into the bedroom. He comes over to kiss her, and the hair at his nape is still damp.

“Why didn’t you wake me?”
“You need sleep more than you need to watch me get dressed.”

“Says you. What time is it?”

“A little after 8. My car will be back in a few minutes.”

“Did you really pay a guy to drive you from Cheyenne, then put him up in a hotel for the night?”

“Yeah. Still cheaper than chartering a plane.”

He’s putting on his shoes, and she would keep asking him stupid questions forever if it would delay his going. He stands up and looks at her, and she has some idea how she must look to him, and that it must be beautiful.

“You should go.”

“I know.”

She gets out of bed, letting the sheet fall off, and goes to him. When she kisses him, his hands are gentle on her body, skimming the surface of her skin as if he’s afraid if he grabs on too hard he won’t let go. She savors the sensation of his shirt and jeans along her bare skin, the smell of his shaving cream and shampoo, the soft deliciousness of his bottom lip.

“Go,” she says, pulling away. He kisses her one more time, on the forehead, then bolts down the stairs. Wrapping the sheet around her again, Rey gets to the window in time to see him hop into a black Escalade. The driver shuts the door and she watches the car back out of the driveway.

“I love you,” she says as the car disappears around a bend.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Crash Into Me" by Dave Matthews Band
Check out reyloporn's artwork on Tumblr here
The Why and Wherefore I'm Alive

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

London is a lot like New York, except when it isn’t.

Today, the crush of well-dressed people hunched over as they hurry through the drizzle is indistinguishable from a New York crowd, except they feel the need to apologize to him when he bumps into them.

He’s doing a lot of that, because he’s late, there’s not a cab in sight, and he’s carrying his guitar along with a bag full of autographed merch. The nearest tube station is several blocks away. It’s like being in the outer boroughs, except London doesn’t smell quite as much like piss, and there are fewer rats. Now, though, he’d gladly deal with the rats if it meant more tube stations.

A black cab finally appears, and he dives in it just as the drizzle turns into a proper rain.

“Great Ormond Street Hospital,” he tells the cabbie.

Luckily, this one either doesn’t recognize him or doesn’t care, and isn’t chatty, so the ride is relatively peaceful outside of the usual traffic bullshit.

On the plane yesterday, his seatmate had been talkative, and hadn’t taken the hint when Kylo put on his headphones. It was the man’s first time in London, though his sister had lived there for years, and after Kylo made the mistake of telling him he’d been dozens of times, he kept tapping Kylo on the shoulder to ask questions. Kylo finally had to put on his sleep mask to get him to stop.

All he wanted to do was replay his night with Rey, poring over every detail like his mind was an editing room and last night was a music video. Granted, that wasn’t the greatest idea and he’d had to put his pillow in his lap to conceal the resulting erection, but he kept thinking about it anyway. Keeps thinking about it now. Two moments come up most often. The way her tits bounced while he fucked her, all sprawled out below him, her hair everywhere. Then there was the heart stopping moment when she told him to come inside her. How he was a goner the second he comprehended what she wanted.

He wants her here, to see this city through her eyes and to make out in the back of cabs with her and to have her in his bed at night.

The cab makes a sharp turn, bringing him back to the present, where he’s in danger of showing up at a children’s hospital with a massive boner. How do people deal with this, going around turned on all the time, just randomly? It’s exhausting.

“Hey, will you drive around the block a couple of times?”

“It’s your money,” the cabbie says.

It takes three times around the block, and thinking about things like drinking milk and flying coach, but he walks into the hospital with all lewd thoughts tucked away for later. A woman in a suit paces by the reception desk, glancing at her watch.

“Mr. Ren,” she says when she spots him. “Saanvi Patel. Thank you, an awful lot, for coming on such short notice. This traffic is dreadful, isn’t it? I was getting nervous. You’re the first one of
these I’ve arranged. Traffic?”

The truth was that he’d gotten distracted in a record store, but it’s true that traffic was terrible, so he goes along with it. “Um, yeah.”

“It’s dreadful, isn’t it?”

“Not as bad as L.A.”

“I suppose not.” She gestures toward the elevators. “You’ve done this before and nothing’s changed recently with procedures, so I’ll take you right up. We’re going to Lion Ward today. You’ve only got one. Clementine. Age 12. Acute lymphoblastic leukemia. She’ll have finished her schoolwork by now.”

They get off the elevator on the third level, and she leads him to a private room at the end of the ward, knocking on the door before going in. Kylo waits outside.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Holloway. I’ve got Mr. Ren here to see Clems.”

“Where is he?” an impatient voice with a Welsh accent says.

Kylo peeks around the doorway. “I’m right here.”

The girl is small for her age, with big brown eyes set in a sharply featured face. Unlike some patients he’s visited, though, her cheeks are rosy. Though that could be because she’s annoyed.

“You’re late,” she says, arms crossed.

“I am,” he says, crossing over and holding out his hand. “I apologize. Traffic, you know.”

“You should have left earlier, then.”

“Clementine!” the girl’s mother says. “Mr. Ren has taken time out of his busy schedule to come see you.” She lowers her voice. “I know you’re bored, being cooped up in here, but let’s not waste time on grumpiness.”

“Sorry,” Clementine mumbles, letting Kylo shake her hand. She gives a pointed look to her mother and clears her throat.

“I’ll just go make some tea, then. Let you two have a nice chat.”

Mrs. Holloway exits with Saanvi and Kylo takes her place in the chair next to the bed.

“Where’s your mask?”

“Well, I kind of came to London last minute, and I don’t take it with me everywhere. In fact, I don’t even know where all that stuff is stored. It’s kind of weird coming in here with it, anyway. The last time, a kid cried. But all of us where here that time.”

“At least you’re honest about it and didn’t try to tell me it was at the cleaner’s or something.”

“Do people say that?”

“All the time. I suppose it works on the little ones. They should just say they feel weird coming in costume.”
“How long have you been here?”

“Two months, tomorrow. I should get to go home next month but I’ll have to come back sometimes for the next year. Maybe two.”

Kylo swallows the lump in his throat and smiles. Saanvi had told him that Clementine’s prognosis was good, but it’s still so much for a little kid to have to go through. The problems he had as a preteen paled in comparison, mostly having to do with him pushing for freedom from his parents, while demanding more elaborate ways to spend their money.

“Don’t look sad, doofus; I’m going to be fine and you’re meant to cheer me up.”

“I do have my guitar if you want me to play something.”

“Maybe later.”

“Okay. What do you want to do?”

“Are you in love with Rey Kenobi?”

“Excuse me?”

“Rey. Your bird. Your babe. Your missus. Do you love her?”

“I, um. I’ll be honest. I don’t know.”

She stares at him, in a way that makes him get what the English mean by the word “gob smacked.”

“Why don’t you know?”

“Because I’ve only been in love one time, and this feels different.”

“That’s easy. Maybe you weren’t really in love before?”

“No, I was. Definitely.”

Clementine thinks for a moment, tilting her head. “Well, the way I feel about my mum is different from how I feel about my brother. But I still love them both.”

“Yeah, but those are different relationships. So, of course you do.”

“Right, but also they’re different girls.”

“Yeah.”

“Why’d your last girlfriend break up with you?”

“You’re nosy, aren’t you?”

“There are no girls my age on this ward and all the nurses ever gossip about are the royals and Coronation Street. It’s boring.”

“You like gossip?”

“I live for it,” she says, pointing to a stack of magazines on the table. “So, spill.”

“She broke up with me because I became a bad person.”
“What did you do?”
“I let some people down and I was kind of selfish.”
“Are you still a bad person?”
“Maybe not as bad.”
“But you’re here visiting me.”
“That doesn’t make me a good person. It’s just what I’m supposed to do.”

She sighs, at the end of her patience with him. “But bad people don’t do what they’re supposed to do at all. And at least you aren’t here with a bunch of cameras like some people. Kid Greedo came last week to visit Spencer and he had a whole film crew with him.”
“I think you may have a point.”
“Anyway, you’re different now. And she’s different from your last girlfriend, so maybe love feels different.”
“Maybe. You wanna hear a new song?”
“Could you do an old one please?”
“Of course.”

One song turns into two old song and one new, unrecorded song, and he ends up staying over the allotted visitation time. When he finishes the new one, Clementine laughs and rolls her eyes.
“What? Not good?”
“It’s lovely. It’s just so obvious that you’re so in love with her.”
“If I were, and I’m not saying I am, would you mind keeping that to yourself?”
“I suppose. If you play me one more. A Dagobah song.”
“Weren’t you like, five when the last album came out?”
“Seven, thank you. Anyway, there are these things called compact discs that store music forever.”
“Okay, okay. I’ll play one. As long as it’s not ‘City in the Sky.”
“That one’s overrated anyway.”

He plays “Mirrobright,” the B side to “City in the Sky,” and is impressed that she knows it, harmonizing in a bright soprano on the chorus. The nurse comes in during, but stands in the doorway until they’re finished.
“Clementine, it’s time for you to speak to Dr. Forest,” she says.

“Psychologist,” Clementine stage whispers. “It was nice meeting you. Good luck recording the new stuff.”

“Thank you,” he says. “And good luck with…everything.”
“There you go looking sad again.” She crosses her eyes and sticks out her tongue at him, giggling as she leaves with the nurse.

Kylo spends half an hour taking photos and giving away signed t-shirts and CDs at the nurses station. By the time he leaves, the sun has started to set, and traffic is in a bigger snarl than when he arrived. The tube will be jam packed as well, so he walks to a coffee shop to wait it out, finding a dim corner to sit in, forever grateful that people in London are chill about famous people. He’s incapable of going completely incognito anyway, but walking around with a guitar case makes him more conspicuous. Even in London, it’s always obvious when people recognize him, but people here are a lot like New York in that it rarely goes beyond a double take, unless they’re a huge fan.

He takes out his notebook and opens it to the last song he sang for Clementine. Was she right? The song is about Rey, though it’s wrapped up in so many layers of innuendo and poetry he’s amazed Clementine picked up that it was about a girl at all. He’s not certain it will make it to the recording stage, much less final cut, because it’s too much like his early stuff, like everyone’s stuff back then, where no one ever really knew what the lyrics meant, and it didn’t matter so long as your hook was good. There’s never been anything subtle about the Knights of Ren, musically or otherwise.

He lights a cigarette, grateful that, like New York, you can still smoke inside here, and reads it over.

Oh. There it is.

Laid low in the roar of the depths of my shame
I think g-d was in the room when you told me your name.

He pulls his cap further down on his head and slams the book shut. Finishes his cigarette in three long drags before lighting another.

He loves her. Is in love with her. Has been for months. If what he wrote is anything to go by, probably since he first saw her.

Then why is he still lying to her? Snoke’s threats aren’t going to dematerialize, no matter how much Kylo loves Rey. And if he tells her the truth—about everything—she can enlist other people to help. Even if she never wants to see him again, she’ll be able to fight.

He loves her, and he is going to hurt her, and it will be one more hurt on top of every hurt she’s endured since her mother left her, and it’s going to be the same damned kind of betrayal. But he has to tell her. Snoke is counting on his being a coward.

He opens his notebook again.

Tell Her

He writes it at the top of a blank page and underlines it twice, like the title of a song.

That I’m sorry
That I love her
That I used her
Tell her that Snoke is going to sabotage her album release
Tell her that Snoke has been blackmailing me

That I will spend the rest of my life making it up if she will forgive me

He crosses the last one off, because it’s a pointless fantasy, as far away as any hope he’s ever had, then shoves the notebook in his jacket pocket.

Outside, the rain has let up and the undersides of the clouds glow pink and orange, streaked with grey. Rey would be in awe of the way the light paints the limestone buildings, and softens the brick ones. He would take her hand and walk with her, stopping everywhere she did, to look in shop windows and marvel at ancient bits of architecture.

The likelihood of getting to do that with her in the future is small, but it’s something to cling to as he leaves the warmth of the coffee shop and steps out onto the blustery street. He can see the lighted sign of a tube station two blocks away, but when he gets to it, he keeps walking. He walks, through Regent’s Park and up Primrose Hill, not stopping to think about how Rey would admire the view. Down again, and around, and he winds up at his hotel, his hand stiff on the handle of his guitar case by the time he sets it down in his room.

For the first time in his life, he looks at the space he’s occupying and finds it ridiculous. His suite is almost as large as his loft and decorated with genuine antiques and expensive replicas. The concierge, having seen him arrive, will send up tea with a full assortment of vegan pastries, and he’ll eat less than half. He puts his boots outside the door, he’ll wake to find them shined.

It’s all so stupid. This excess—and what little bit of pride he has—is what he’d been trying to protect when he’d decided to bring Rey into this, and it’s all pointless.

The tea arrives, as expected. He puts his boots outside the door. The maid comes to turn down the blankets. The chocolate she leaves on his pillow is dairy free. He sets it on the night stand and falls into the bed with his clothes on, but his body is still on LA time, and it’s too early for bed here, anyway.

Sitting up, he lights a cigarette and puts the ashtray on a pillow in his lap, and picks up the phone.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "She" by Elvis Costello
After grinding for more than two weeks, Rey’s last day in the studio is anti-climactic. She lays down some backing vocals for a few songs, and the only thing that makes it challenging is her hangover. The rest of the band had left early in the morning, after a raucous party at the bar last night that left Rey with a dull pounding in her head and a queasy stomach. When they finish in the studio, Luke takes her to dinner at the lodge, where she finds solace in an enormous elkburger and steak fries. It’s mid-afternoon, so the restaurant is quiet, and Luke lets her enjoy her food in silence, though he only has coffee and pie.

“Leia wants a single out before Thanksgiving. I’m going to cut it close, but it’s doable.”

“Are Finn and I going to get any input on which song we release?”

“Of course. I’m going to give you all the tracks, but you’ve got to promise me not to listen to them for a week after you leave, then come back to them. I need your top three and your album track listing by mid-month. And don’t be surprised if they’re completely different from what Finn or I choose.”

“Okay.”

He lapses into silence again, tapping his fingers on his coffee mug. Rey has never seen a prosthetic as advanced as the one Luke has. There were a couple of veterans in Truth or Consequences who had lost limbs, but Rey guesses their prosthetics are government issue. Luke’s has sensors attached to the muscles in his forearm that allow him a surprising amount of dexterity. Since it’s his right hand, he can still play guitar, even holding a pick, but finger picking is out of the question. Luckily, he’s amazing at conveying what he wants without having to demonstrate.

The waitress refills his mug and he looks at Rey intently over the rim as he takes a drink. All day, Rey has thought Luke wanted to tell her, or ask her something, but every time she catches him looking at her like that, he either looks away or starts talking about something mundane.

“Is there something you want to talk about?” she says. Her mind has spun a thousand scenarios for what it could be and none of them are good, so she wants to get it over with.

Luke puts down his mug. “Do you know why I told Leia I would listen to your demo?”

“No, and I’ve been wondering.”

“First, I want you to know that my decision to produce your album was 100% based on your ability, okay?”

“Okay,” she says. So far, starting this conversation has done nothing to ease her anxiety.

“Leia has sent me demos a few times a year since I retired, but I always sent them back, unopened. This time, she called me beforehand, because of your last name.”

“My last name?”

Luke looks down into his coffee. “What do you know about my father?”
“I’ve listened to his music, and I know he died pretty young.”

“He was born in Oklahoma, but he moved to California with his mother during the Dust Bowl. He worked as an errand boy at a brothel. A jazz musician there taught him how to play guitar, and he was discovered playing at a honkytonk when he was seventeen by a man called Qui Gon Jinn. Jinn was travelling with another musician named Ben Kenobi. They were both WWII vets, discharged due to injuries.”

Rey has already stopped eating, but her stomach does such a flip flop at this that she thinks she might throw up.

“After Jinn died in a bar fight, Kenobi took over looking after Anakin’s career. Even though Anakin’s not well known now, for a few years, he was one of the most successful country singers around, and it really did a number on him. Ben Kenobi tried to be a steadying influence, but he couldn’t stop his descent into drinking and drug use. Anakin became famous too young, had too many people whispering in his ear. He married my mother, Padme, when they were only 19 and had a few good years, but he killed them both in a car accident while she was pregnant. Leia and I barely survived. We were four weeks early and were delivered in the ambulance. When we got out of the hospital, Leia was placed with the Organas in LA and I was sent to my uncle’s ranch in Oklahoma.”

“And Kenobi?”

“He was the executor of Anakin’s estate, such as it was. We were never close, but he helped us out immensely when we decided to pursue music.”

“And he’s related to me somehow?”

“He was your grandfather.”

Rey’s hands are pressed flat on the table, and she lifts them, staring at the wet marks on the table cloth from her fingers. It feels like her world has shifted a few inches in one direction. Her vision blurs and her pulse beats in her ears, muting Luke’s voice.

“Rey, breathe,” he says.

She tries, exhaling through her nose and inhaling through her mouth, counting, the way Ahsoka had taught her.

One more long breath and she’s ready. As ready as she can be. “You said ‘was.’ So he’s--”

“He passed away in 1977.”

“Oh.”

“I’m sorry—”

“Why didn’t Leia say something? Why did you wait?”

“Leia wasn’t sure, and she didn’t want to get your hopes up, so we hired a private investigator. You were on tour and we wanted to tell you in person, and she thought I should be the one to tell you.”

The waitress comes by and refills Rey’s water. She wraps her hands around the glass, then presses her cold fingertips to her eyelids as she tries to grasp a single question to ask from the whirlwind of them in her head.
“Did my mother have any siblings? What about my grandmother?”

“She was an only child, and your grandmother died when your mother was very young.”

“And your investigator, did they find anything about my mother? Where she is?”

“She had dual citizenship, because her mother was English. She used her UK passport in Edinburgh in 1987, and we haven’t found any record that she returned to the States. But pre-computerized immigration records are a mess, and they’re always difficult to access.”

“I keep hoping that she’ll see me on TV or in a magazine and she’ll show up at my door. Even if it’s just for money I wouldn’t care.”

His kind blue eyes are too much for Rey and something inside her bursts. She puts her head in her hands and sobs. All of this is just too much. Luke moves to sit beside her and rubs her back, then asks the waitress for more water once the worst of it has passed.

“Why did she do that?” Rey asks.

“What?”

“My mother. Leave me with Ginny, who barely had enough money to feed herself?”

“I don’t know, Rey. I think that, for most people in a tough situation, they imagine they’ll be back sooner rather than later. I know she had problems with drug use even before her father died.”

More shadows float to the front of her consciousness and resolve themselves. She had thought for a long time that she couldn’t really remember her mother’s voice, and had made up the lilting accent that made her sound like a princess. Other, less pleasant things surface, too. Lots of crying. Mommy being sick a lot, so she couldn’t get out of bed to make breakfast. Boyfriends that didn’t last very long.

So that’s another tragic phrase that enters her life. Her mother’s drug use.

“Tell me everything.”

Luke had met Lila a few times, but she was quite a bit younger than him, and he rarely saw Ben Kenobi.

“I do remember she had big green eyes,” he says. “And she played the piano.”

“What happened to her?”

“Your grandmother, Satine, died when Lila was twelve. It was a sudden illness, completely unexpected. They moved to London not long after, because Satine’s parents were still alive at the time. There was plenty of trouble for a teenage girl to get into in the 70s in London to begin with, but then her father died when she was fourteen, and she went completely out of control. Her grandparents tried to send her to one boarding school, but she was expelled. They sent her to another, but she got off the train at one of the stops and they never heard from her again. That would have been in early ’78.”

“I was born in July of ’79. In Omaha.”

“Yes.”

“Did her grandparents look for her?”
"They never stopped looking for her, up until they died, but this country is big, and it was a lot easier to disappear in it, then. We kept hoping she would show up at mine or Leia’s door."

“They’re dead, too. So, I’m still all alone.”

“I’m sure there are some relatives in England, if you want to reach out to them we can arrange it, even if it’s only to ask about your mom and grandparents.”

Rey stares past Luke to the mountain view out the window. She wants to pick Luke’s brain, about her grandfather, her mother, her grandmother, but something else strikes her.

“What does Kylo know? Has he been keeping this from me?”

“I doubt it. Like I said, your grandfather wasn’t a huge part of our lives, and he was so young. Besides, Ben—Kylo—has always been very…inwardly focused.”

“But he was named after him, right?”

“As little as I saw your grandfather, Leia saw him even less. I may have pressured them a bit on the name, to steer them away from something like Moonbeam or Starglow. But you should ask him. Maybe it’ll jolt some memories.”

They go back to the studio to listen to some of Rey’s tracks, but mostly Luke answers as many of Rey’s questions as he can. He finally insists on taking her home when she nods off in the middle of a song.

By the time she crawls into her bed, though, she’s fully awake again. She lays there, phone clutched against her chest. She punches Kylo’s number in, her thumb hovering above the “call” button, but she turns it back off and sets it on the night stand.

The last time she talked to him had been the day after he went to London. He’d tried to sound upbeat, but he sounded so sad. He blamed it on jet lag and the weather, and admitted he’d felt weird about being in Wyoming again, where he’d had his falling out with Luke. But there was something else. Maybe he was just worried about recording, but whatever it was, she couldn’t get him to open up. He’d finally begged her to talk about anything to him, so he could hear her voice. When she ran out of things to say, she started telling him what she was wearing, which ended up leading to phone sex. In the middle of the day, for her at least. She’d stared out the window at that majestic view, while her hand was down her pants and her boyfriend panted in her ear, the sound of his hand stroking his dick travelling across thousands of miles of cable.

She groans and turns on her side and clutches a pillow to her chest. As she tries to sleep, she daydreams. It’s the same basic premise that got her through a lot of wretched nights as a child. That she was a happy, well fed child, with plenty of pretty clothes and friends and a cat and a dog and a bunny. But this time, she moves it all to southern California. Her mother would have gone to Luke for help, and he would have taken them in and helped Lila get back on her feet.

She adds in a young Ben Solo as a friend. She would have idolized him, probably. Maybe he would have been the one to show her how to play guitar. If they’d known each other when they were so young, would she have fallen in love with him? Would there have been a moment when they looked up and really seen each other?

It seems they would have, because for some reason, despite everything, her life has always been a straight path toward him. The way they met was weird enough, but then bumping into each other twice, in a city that vast. Being signed to his mother’s label. It gives her the slightest hope that if
they’re meant to be, he’ll find his way back to her after she tells him the truth.

“Oh god,” she moans, another wave of anxiety coursing through her. Is she supposed to drop all of this on him at once? Just say, “Oh hey my grandfather and your grandfather were friends. And you know what else is funny? I only went out on those first dates with you for exposure!”

It’s insane. There’s no way she can tell him the family stuff first, because he’ll think she’s manipulating him, and there’s no way he’ll stick around long enough to hear it if she confesses first.

She wraps a quilt around herself and goes downstairs, taking the phone with her and grabbing a bottle of Jack from the bar cart before going out on the deck. She pauses, then goes back inside to get a glass. This isn’t a great idea, considering what she learned about her mother today, but at least she’ll be civilized enough to use a glass.

The whiskey burns her already raw throat, but warmth blooms in her cheeks right away, taking some sting out of the air, some of the ache from her chest.

Rey wants to be angry at her mother, for not seeking out the people who could have helped them. For leaving her. Hell, for running away from what family she had in the first place. But all she can feel is compassion. Lila was sixteen when she had Rey, and twenty-one when she left her. Luke was probably right, that she had thought it would only be temporary.

She needs Kylo so much, but accepting his comfort would be selfish. It’s not fair.

Sitting here in the cold all night, getting drunk, isn’t the answer either, so she picks up the phone

“Finn?” she says, when he answers. “Did I wake you?”

“It’s not that late. What’s up? Are you okay?”

“No,” she says, the dam breaking again. “I’m not.”
Five hours into his seven-hour drive, Finn pulls over at a gas station. He doesn’t need fuel or food or the restroom; he needs to make some lists.

The first list is the twelve songs he thinks should be on Rey’s album. The next, potential singles. Next to those, he lists potential B sides. There’s no telling how his list will align with Rey and Luke’s lists, but he’s confident. He’s always been as good at choosing singles as he is at finding artists.

The long car ride hadn’t been strictly necessary. He could have flown into El Paso and only driven three to Marfa, but he wanted the extra time in a car with Rey’s music, so he flew into Austin instead. He listened to the raw tracks nonstop on the plane, let it marinate for the first two hours of his drive, then listened again after his first pitstop.

Getting out of the car to stretch, he’s hit with a wave of dry heat. His rental is covered in fine dust. The gas station is exactly what you’d expect to find off the Interstate in West Texas. A mid-century relic with a faded Esso sign and pumps that have scrolling numbers. It’s fortunate that he doesn’t need gas, since there’s a handwritten sign on the door stating the station is closed due to a funeral.

Before getting back in the car, he grabs a Coke from the cooler by the door, leaving four quarters in the jar next to it.

For the rest of his journey, Finn skips among the tracks in the order he listed them. He may make some adjustments later, but he likes the way it builds, where it peaks. Likes the way the final song leaves you wanting more, without seeming incomplete. He sure he’s got it.

The concept for Rey’s album artwork places an emphasis on Rey’s southwestern roots, but they hadn’t wanted to veer too close to country. Their photographer—a relative newcomer named Cooper Phil—had suggested shooting in Marfa, at one of the Judd installations, a collection of open concrete cubes in the middle of a field. In his pitch, he’d talked about desolation and structure, urban meets desert. The label had never worked with him before, but he had made a name for himself as a concert photographer and had done some gorgeous feature work for SPIN recently. Admittedly, he’d come off as a bit of a douchebag over the phone, but that wasn’t outside the norm for a photographer. Still, he’d had Robyn fly in with Rey so she could be there from the start of the shoot, and Maz would be there as well.

When Finn gets to the site, however, Robyn is waiting for him in the parking area.

“That bastard kicked me off the set,” she says, meeting him at the car. “I have shit for reception here, but I used the payphone at the Dairy Queen to call the label. I also left you a message.”

“I haven’t had reception since right outside of Austin. What the hell happened?”

Robyn had been late due to a delay with her rental car, and Maz was stuck in New York after a cancelled flight. By the time Robyn arrived, Rey had already been in hair and makeup, and was unhappy with some of the choices.
“It wasn’t what we went over at all. And when I tried to advocate for her, he told me to leave. I told him he couldn’t do that, and he had the security guard walk me out.”

“Security works for the label.”

“No shit.”

“Okay, go back and try Poe again. I’ll handle things here.”

The installation is down a dirt road, and from there it’s a jog to the production tent, set up near a grouping of five of the concrete structures. The artwork reminds him of an empty lot he and his friends used to play in, where a bunch of segments of sewer pipe had been stored and then forgotten by the city. But the sharp angles give it a sense of order rather than neglect. It’s an impressive sight, and will look amazing in the magic hour. Desolate, but richly colored. They don’t have long before the best light, however, so he needs to get things smoothed over so they don’t lose the day.

A tall man—the security guard who Robyn mentioned—checks Finn’s credentials and lets him in. The crew is small, with most of the activity centered around Rey. A flurry of people surrounds her, tweaking her clothes, hair, and makeup.

They part to reveal a heightened version of Rey, the person she’d been at the VMAs, her skin buffed smooth then reshaped with makeup, accentuating the best parts of her bone structure and toning down any problem areas. Her hair is down, and the waves have been enhanced. There’s a good chance they’ve added to the overall volume with some hair pieces, too. She’s wearing a t shirt that’s been knotted in back so that it’s skin-tight and reveals her navel, tiny denim shorts, and fish nets. The waistband of the stockings is visible above the waistband of the shorts. Two women stand off to the side, holding a pair of shoes in each hand.

The photographer brushes past Finn and walks over to Rey, circling her and looking her up and down like he’s buying a car.

“Linda,” he yells. One of the shoe-carrying women steps forward. “Is there a reason you chose shorts that make her ass look the size of Montana?”

Rey visibly deflates as the costumer and Cooper discuss the size of her ass and thighs as if she isn’t there. The costumer defends her choices, and defends Rey’s body as diplomatically as possible, but he isn’t swayed.

“Try something else,” he says. “And if nothing else works we can always put a guitar in front of her.”

Rey stands there, frozen, blinking furiously. One of the makeup artists approaches her with a tissue and tells Rey to look up while she dabs gently under her eyes. Finn hangs back, not wanting to make a scene, and to avoid the perception that Rey needs someone to come to her rescue. He looks around and spots the other costumer, flipping through a rack of clothes.

“Hi!” he says, smiling and holding out his hand. “Finn Storm, from Resistance Records. Everything going okay?”

“Carmen” she says. She looks over her shoulder. Cooper is speaking with a scared looking intern type. “Between us? It’s awful. I’ve worked with some doozies, but never one that treats people like this. That poor girl.”

“I think I can help us all out,” Finn says. “But I need a little time. Do you think you can stall a
“little? Maybe you need some time to make some alterations?”

“Oh, yes,” she says, smiling. “I can probably get us ten minutes.”

“That’s all I need.”

The photographer isn’t happy with the delay, but he allows it. Finn gets to Rey, ignoring the intern’s attempts to introduce him to the photographer, and she greets him with an enormous hug.

“Do you have a dressing room?” he asks.

“Yeah, there’s another little tent out back.” She leads the way. She offers him a water from a cooler when they get inside, then plops down in the mound of floor cushions scattered in the corner. It’s a decent setup for a one day shoot, so at least the production company they hired isn’t slacking, even if they did screw up royally with the photographer.

Finn sits in the chair next to the makeup table. “First of all, Rey, I’m so sorry that Maz couldn’t be here, and that he threw Robyn out. That was unacceptable.”

“I met him this morning and the first thing he said to me was ‘I guess I can work with this.’ And he hasn’t said anything directly to me all day. He keeps telling people his intern to say things to me, or just says things about me to people. And look at this fucking shirt.”

“Good girls go to heaven; bad girls go backstage. What the hell?”

“He thought it was so funny because I’m dating a musician. I don’t care about looking sexy. I know that’s part of it and I legitimately wear shorts this short. But this is insulting. This is my album. I’m on stage.”

“Rey, you know you can say no to working with this guy.”

“What?”

“You don’t have to work with him if you don’t think he’s going to help you. Like you said, this is your album. He’s supposed to be working for you, helping you promote your music.”

“But we’ve spent so much money already, and in the end, it’s my money we’re spending.”

“It’s going to be hard to recoup anything if your promotional materials aren’t any good, and I don’t think this guy is going to get the best out of you at this point.”

“What do I do?”

“Well,” he says. “First, we fire him. No matter what, that’s got to happen. I can do it, but I think it’d be better if you do it.”

“Why? So, people can think I’m a bitch?” Her face crumples and Finn gets up and kneels in front of her, placing his hands on her shoulders.

“This is what the publicity team is for. If it looks like he’s going to go to the press with a sob story, they get the story out first that he’s a sexist douchebag. Then you look like a badass and a role model.”

“I don’t feel like a badass. I’m all stretchmarks and cellulite and acne.”

“How did you feel before he said all those things to you?”
“I felt pretty fucking rad, actually.

“You are rad.”

“Okay, but what about the actual shoot?”

“What did you think about the intern?”

“She seems like she hates him more than I do but she’s good at her job.”

“I guarantee she’s got her portfolio on her, and that he treats her about as well as he treats everyone else, probably worse.”

“So…”

“So, she’s probably good, or he wouldn’t work with her. I know that type. Assholes to all their employees but they still want them to be the best. But she’s not going to be loyal to him because he’s a dick. We fire him, we take a look at her photos, we hire her. Then we’ll at least have something before we lose the light. If she sucks, then we talk money again.”

“Why not” Rey sighs.

“Ready?”

“One thing. Do you have a Sharpie?”

“I think so.” He digs one out of his bag and hands it to her. She goes behind a screen and when she comes back, her shirt is untied in the back, and she’s crossed out the word “back” and written “on” above it.

She marches back to the production tent with her head held high. She falters a little bit when she notices everyone watching, but Finn gives her a nod and she smiles.

“Cooper, I’d like to speak with you privately,” she says.

“No time, babe. Get in those new shorts Linda adjusted for you and get your ass outside before we lose the light.”

“Fine,” Rey says. “I’ll do it here. Your services are no longer needed.” Finn smiles at how steady her voice is.

He laughs and keeps fiddling with his equipment. “You can’t do that.”

“I can, and I will. And Ty over there was hired by the label, which means he works for me, so he can make sure you’re gone within five minutes. Right Ty?”

“Right,” the security guard says, flexing his pecs for effect.

“Oh, Tyrone,” Cooper says, turning toward the guard. “Here I thought we were best friends after we bonded over protein shakes.” He turns to Rey. “Good luck. You’ll need it, you little coat tail riding cunt.”

Punching the photographer was not part of the plan, so Finn had stayed back to give Rey space, and her fist flies so fast that Finn barely sees it happen. It’s a solid punch, and Cooper staggers back, cradling his jaw. Everyone is frozen for a moment, then Finn steps in between Rey and the
asshole while Billy ushers him outside, saying he’ll send someone else with his equipment. Cooper’s subsequent stream of expletives is cut short after a sharp yelp.

When he’s gone, activity resumes as though nothing had happened. The intern runs over with an ice pack for Rey’s hand.

“Thank you, Astrid,” Rey says. “I really fucked up, didn’t I. He could have me arrested. The only photo I’m going to take today is a mugshot. Would that work for an album cover?”

“Relax, Rey. I guarantee that’s the type of guy who would never admit to anyone that he got decked by a girl. You may be onto something with the mugshot, though. Hold on, I’m going to go talk to Astrid.

It turns out that Astrid does have her portfolio with her, and it’s amazing. She’s originally from West Virginia. Her most recent photos are of musicians from her area, but her early stuff depicts ordinary people going about their lives, along with some haunting landscape shots. Looking at her book, a chill runs down his spine like it does when he sees a band he’s got to sign.

“You have your camera on you?”

“Always,” she says, visibly trembling.

“You’re hired,” Finn says, holding out his hand. “I don’t have anything for you to sign but I’ll get someone from legal to send some things over as soon as I can get to a working phone and find a fax machine. Until then, whatever you take is yours. Deal?”

“Oh my God! Yes! Deal!” Astrid says. Her grip is strong when she takes his hand.

Astrid and Rey speak briefly before they start shooting, falling into an easy shorthand the way creative young women tend to do. Astrid takes a few shots with the art installation, but the bulk of her shots are of Rey walking along the dirt road, and some of her lying in the tall grass. When the light goes, they head to the tiny county jail, where Finn and Rey charm the officer on duty into letting them use their booking room as well as their phone and fax machine. For photos, Astrid uses the jail’s camera—a decade old point and shoot—for authenticity.

“I’m thinking these might look great somewhere in the lyrics booklet or on the back of the case?” Astrid says.

Rey grins and puts up devil’s horns in the next shot.

After, sitting in a bar on the main drag, Rey slumps on her stool, nursing her second beer. The crew who’d come out with them moved on to the next bar half an hour ago, but Rey wanted to stay until all her juke box selections played. As the last one drops—Dolly Parton’s “Coat of Many Colors”—Rey turns to Finn.

“You want to know something else Luke told me?”

Rey had called him the night before she came back from Wyoming, dropping on him the bombshell Luke Skywalker had dropped on her. She hasn’t talked about it, since, and he’s been giving her time to process it.

“He told me,” she continues. “That Ginny wasn’t even related to me at all? Her dead husband was one of my grandfather’s fifth cousins or something. Like, of all the people? How did she even know about her? And you know, it made some other stuff make sense.”
“Go on.”

“I remembered how I’d been staying with one of Ginny’s friends when she was in the hospital, and when she died, the social worker who came over kept asking me why I wasn’t home with my mom. When I told them that my mom didn’t live with us, she said that the school records said she did. Ginny was never my legal guardian. She must have forged my mom’s name on stuff, and made up excuses when she went to parent teacher conferences.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“She never would have gotten to keep me if she went about it legally. She was old, and sick, and poor.”

“Sounds like she cared about you a lot.”

“Yeah, more than my mom, obviously. I mean, Ginny never got a stipend without legal custody, but I never went hungry or went to school dirty, or without a coat. Some of my foster parents couldn’t even be bothered to take care of those things. And it should make me feel good, that she loved me but it makes me so much more mad at my mother, because she put this burden on this poor old woman when she could have gone to Luke or Leia if she really wanted to pawn me off on someone.”

“Rey—”

“No, I need to be angry at her. I know that much. I’ve never let myself be mad at her. And it’s pointless that I had all that faith in her. All those years I wondered why no one came to get me, why no one saved me, and it was because there was no one. Only my mother, and it should have been clear to me that she either couldn’t come back, or didn’t want to.”

“It’s okay if you want to believe it’s because she couldn’t.”

“I do think she wanted me. But wanting isn’t always enough.”

Rey picks up her mug and downs the rest of her beer, wiping her mouth with her sleeve when she’s done. “You wanna go see the lights?”

“The lights?”

“Yeah some mythical lights that show up outside of town. You gotta drive though.”

“Obviously,” he says. “As long as you know the way.”

Rey tells him about the lights as they drive out to the viewing platform, how they’ve been around since at least the 1880s and no one can explain them. She’s got her seat leaned back and one boot-clad foot sticking out the open window.

With her hair up, wearing an oversized black hoodie, her makeup mostly gone, she could be a local girl, chilling after a night working at the Dairy Queen. You’d never guess she’s about to drop an album, that she’s dating a rock star.

Speaking of that rock star…

“Have you told Kylo the stuff about your grandfather yet?”

Rey looks down, a tight smile flickering on her face. “I emailed him.”
“You what, now?”

“I’ve been keeping my distance, trying not to call him every day, and when we have talked it seemed like there was never a good time to bring it up. So finally, I said, ‘Fuck it,’ and emailed him.”

“Has he replied?”

“I sent it right before he flew back.” She pulls a joint and a lighter out of her bag. “You know we missed each other by four hours yesterday? My flight left at ten and his got in at two.”

The flame illuminates her face, and her expression is darker than her tone suggests. There’s something else going on, beyond the photo shoot, and the family stuff. She inhales and offers the joint to him. Finn doesn’t indulge often, at least since he got out of school, but he accepts, if only to maintain the sense of camaraderie.

The smoke is harsh and bitter, and he coughs as he exhales. “This tastes like shit.”

Rey shrugs. “I think someone grew it in their backyard. It reminds me of home. I couldn’t believe the stuff Kylo got in New York. I’d never seen anything like it. I swear, it sparkled. I got too fucked up the first time. I ended up with my head in his lap while he talked to me, stroking my hair.” Her voice cracks on this last part, and she looks away.

“What’s up, Rey?”

“That asshole. Cooper Phil. Everything he said I can mostly pass off as bullshit, except that last part. I am a coattail riding cunt.”

“Rey—”

“You know, Kylo sent me a coat from England?”

“Yeah?”

“It’s beautiful. Hunter green, so soft. Plaid lining and wood toggle buttons. And I couldn’t stop myself from looking up how much it cost. It was £1500. I was afraid to look at the conversion.”

Finn does the math in his head instinctively. “About $2200.”

“Fuck,” Rey says. “I can’t keep it. I have to give the guitar back, too.”

“Rey, I know it’s hard to fathom but for him, with as much money as he has, it’s not like it seems like that much money to him. It’s all relative.”

“Even if it was a $20 sweatshirt, I can’t accept anything else from him.” She takes another hit, makes a face, and drops the joint into Finn’s Coke bottle from earlier. “I’m going to tell him, next time I see him.”

Finn’s stomach sinks. It’s obvious her guilt is eating at her, keeping her from fully enjoying her relationship. As her friend, he wants her to be free of that, but he also doesn’t want to see her go through the pain of a breakup. And he’s certain the result of her confession will be a breakup.

As the person in charge of shepherding her album, it’s a potential mess he would rather avoid, but he’s always tried to do what’s best for his artists, not just their careers.

“You sure?” he asks.
“Not really, but I still have to do it.”

“I think you’re right,” he says. “It’s going to suck, but you’re right.”

“I was half hoping you’d talk me out of it.”

“You know I was only halfway on board with that stunt from the start.”

“Did you have any idea I might end up…liking him so much?”

“Girl, I still don’t know what you see in him.”

This earns a soft laugh as she sits up, rolling up the window.

“Do you really want to know?”

“If it has anything to do with the size of his dick, then of course I want to know.”

This earns a full-on laugh, complete with snorting. “I would totally be lying if I said that wasn’t a factor but it’s like, ten or so down on the list. More in bonus territory.”

“So, nothing to write home about.”

“That’s not what I said. But anyway, he’s sweet. Don’t laugh. He is. In ways he would probably die before letting people find out. And he listens to me and he gives me advice without making me feel stupid. Sometimes he’s funny, and he’s smarter than he realizes. And he smells great.”

“Wow. I think this is going beyond liking him a lot, isn’t it?”

Her smile drops. “Yes,” she says.

“It’s going to be okay. I mean, it’s going to suck pretty bad at first but it’s going to be okay, no matter how he reacts.”

She nods and wipes her eyes with the sleeves of her hoodie. “The platform is just up here. I came out here last night with Robyn, but we didn’t see anything.”

The viewing park is a round structure that looks like an old fort, or amphitheatre. There are a few other cars, and when they walk around to the back there are several other people scattered around on the covered platforms, looking out across the scrubland to the mesas and mountains. Not long after they arrive, a bright, flame colored orb pops up and starts moving across one of the mountains. Everyone murmurs with excitement.

“That’s just a car coming down the highway though, right?” Finn whispers.

Rey shrugs, but then the light streaks across the mountain like a comet before disappearing. “Um, maybe not,” she says.

They stay for another hour, and the light appears six more times, sometimes singular, other times overlapping. It’s like some ancient god is over on the mountain playing with sparklers. A local tells them that it’s the most he’s ever seen it in one night. Rey beams at this, tells Finn it’s a sign. Of what, she doesn’t know, but she knows the desert and its boundless mysteries.

Finn’s smile is rueful. As disillusioned as she is by today’s events, she is also starting to live comfortably in a world where amazing things happen just for her benefit.
On the way back to their hotel, though, Rey sings along to the Spice Girls and peppers him with questions about Poe, an average girl again, a typical twenty-year-old, just with a crazy ass job. And when he leaves her at her door and kisses him on the cheek, telling him she’s going to be okay, he believes her. He just doesn’t know how long that will take.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Wide Open Spaces" by The Dixie Chicks
When the sliding doors open and Rey steps back into the California sun, she’s hit by a gust of hot, dusty wind. There’s a hint of smoke underneath the usual smell of exhaust.

“Welcome home,” she says to herself. Then she spots Kylo, leaning against the door of his Range Rover, ignoring the photographers yelling questions at him. He walks over to meet her, kissing her on the forehead before taking her suitcase. At her questioning look, he jerks his head toward the paps.

“I don’t wanna give him the shot they really want,” he says.

“But you were okay with letting them get you leaning casually on a car, wearing a tight t-shirt?”

“You have to throw them a bone every once in a while.”

Once they’re in the car, behind the tinted windows, he leans across the seat and gives her a quick kiss on the mouth. He looks at her for a long moment, lingering on her lips, before pulling away.

The plan is to go to her house and lock themselves in for two days, when Kylo has to go to New York. Or at least that’s what they had planned via email. If Rey sticks to her own plan, she’s going to tell him everything tonight, so there’s a chance she’ll spend the next two days crying and eating her feelings. But at least she’ll be at her house, and he’ll have his car, so he can leave whenever he wants.

Her anxiety over what she’s about to do is intensified by the traffic, which is at a crawl when they first get on the freeway, and completely stops before they’ve gone five miles. In the distance, they can see the flash of emergency vehicles. After fifteen minutes or so, they finally get one lane open for traffic, but funneling five lanes into one will take forever. It’s not long before Rey wants to climb out of her skin, between the anxiety, and the claustrophobia from sitting in traffic.

Kylo is quiet, as though he senses that anything he says will irritate her. And she can’t stand how considerate he’s being. It’s completely irrational and knowing that makes her angrier.

Then, out of nowhere, he asks her if she’s renewed her lease.

“Not yet. Why?”

“I was just thinking that I could pay it. All up front for the next six months or year or however long.”

“What?”

“Then you won’t have to worry about it. And you won’t have to sublet it when you’re on tour.” He looks at her, but his eyes are shielded by his sunglasses. She takes hers off.

“Why would you offer something like that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”
“We’ve been together for six weeks.”

“Officially, but we started dating six months ago.”

“Yeah and we had three dates before we had sex, and we’ve barely even been in the same state most of that time. And when we were together all we did was fuck and order takeout. Which makes your offer to pay my fucking rent really fucking shady.”

“Rey that’s not what I meant at all and you know—”

“Why would you ask me this when I’m basically trapped in here with you?”

“I didn’t think it’d be such a repulsive concept. You’re always worried about money.”

“That doesn’t mean I want to depend on you for it! Stop offering to pay for things for me. I know you think you’re helping— “

“God forbid I—

“No, don’t you dare! Listen to me. As much as not having any money felt like being caught in a trap, the idea of you buying me big things or paying my rent makes me feel like I’m going from a snare to a cage.”

When he takes his sunglasses off, his eyes are shiny and sad, but become sharp as he looks over her shoulder.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“What?” Rey says, whipping around. The driver of the car next to them has a video camera pointed at their car. “Oh, hell no,” Rey says and rolls down the window.

“Rey, don’t, you’ll only make it worse.”

“I don’t fucking care,” she says to Kylo. She leans out the window, taking in a lung full of exhaust and smoke. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” she says to the girl with the camera.

The girl has the decency to look contrite for one second, but then her face hardens, and she laughs. “Maybe don’t fight in public if you don’t want people to see!”

“I’ll fucking show you a fight, bitch,” Rey says. She starts to open the door but Kylo hits the power locks and begins rolling up the window.

“Ow!” Rey says, ducking back into the car. She tries to roll the window down again, but he’s activated the child locks.

“Jesus Christ, Rey, you can’t do that!”

The tears come, hot and fat, before she can stop them. She turns away from the window, blocking as much of the interior of the car from view as she can. “Why can’t they leave us alone?”

He doesn’t have an answer, so he reaches out and puts his hand on her knee. The traffic in their lane speeds up minutely and he passes the car that was filming them.

Rey jerks her leg away from him. “At the next exit can you just get off? I don’t care where we are I just can’t do this anymore.”
“If I can get into the right lane,” he says, putting on the blinker and checking the mirror.

Rey props her feet up on the dash and leans her seat back, letting the a/c blow straight up her skirt. She doesn’t really want to get out of the car because when she does she’ll be in the wind again. She just wants to be on a surface street, any surface street.

Another ten minutes pass, but he manages to merge into the right lane in time for the next exit, and pulls into the first gas station. She leaps out of the car to go to the bathroom and buy a juice. When she gets out, he’s leaning against the car and smoking a cigarette.

“I’ll take surface streets to your house. It’ll still take forever, but at least we’ll be moving.”

“Whatever,” she says and gets in. This morning, she’d been optimistic, and let herself imagine a sunnier version of their time in New York, because what’s wrong with fucking and ordering take out for a few days? Which is ridiculous considering her vow to tell him the truth as soon as possible, but that hadn’t stopped her flights of fancy. Now, whatever romance she could have eked out of it is spoiled, because no matter how nice everything will be once they get to her house, she’s going to have all of this hanging over her head. His hurt at her not accepting his gift, and panic over what those girls are going to do with that video and her lack of courage to just tell him the fucking truth. It keeps nagging at her, like when you’ve got an assignment due on Monday and it’s Sunday and you haven’t started it.

“Do you want to go up the coast instead?” he asks. “You can drive once we get on the PCH.”

It’s almost too much, the ache in her chest, because he knows exactly what she needs.

“Yes. Please.”

They get back in the car and he puts in the new Mariah Carey CD.

“I would ask how you have this already, but of course you have it already.”

He smiles and turns the volume up. It’s the perfect choice to help break some of the tension, and once they’re on the PCH and traffic thins out some, Kylo pulls over at a roadside fruit stand to switch seats.

They settle into the drive, and after about thirty miles of silence, Rey turns the radio down.

“I’m twenty years old.”

“I know.”

“I just…I know maybe sometimes you forget. Sometimes I forget. But I’m twenty years old and my life has changed so much in the last six months, and you’re my first boyfriend and I don’t know a lot, but I know that letting a man pay my rent is a really fucking inappropriate thing to accept at this stage, no matter how much extra money you have.” It’s nice, having to concentrate on the road while she says this. To not have to see his face.

“Okay,” he says, and turns the volume back up, as Mariah sings about how grateful she is to have found love.

They stop for dinner in Santa Barbara and, since they don’t have plans for the next two days, Kylo asks if she wants to stay the night. Mikey has a house in the mountains, and Kylo has a key.

She’s been grateful at first that she might get to tell him everything in a neutral location, but when
she sees how remote the house is, it seemed foolish, considering she doesn’t have a way to get home.

“Don’t you need to call him?” she says as they walk up the steep path from the driveway to the house.

“Of course. When we get inside.”

The home is ostensibly a log cabin, if you can call something that’s at least three thousand square feet a cabin.

“It’s gorgeous,” she says as they enter the foyer. “This is Mikey’s?”

“He’s got a good decorator,” Kylo sniffs.

Rey wanders through the kitchen to the back of the house, where a deck runs the entire width, looking out over the coast.

“This is insane. This is just his extra house, and it’s only two hours away from his other house.”

“It is kind of dumb,” he says, standing behind her and wrapping his arms around her. “I have something for you.” He goes to his bag and comes back with an envelope.

Rey’s hands tremble as she opens it, praying it’s not something extravagant, but it’s a photo. It’s a photo of her mother, sitting on a bench at Disneyland, holding a toddler on her lap. A toddler with a mop of black hair and ears that stick out like jug handles. She turns it over.

Lila and Ben, November 1974.

“When you told me everything, I kept trying to remember anything I could, but I don’t remember ever meeting your mom. Then I put together her name and this photo. You look like her.”

Every scrap of anger and frustration Rey felt about him melts and she throws herself into his arms.

“This is the single best thing anyone has ever given me, you big lug. Why are you so good to me?”

“Because I love you.”

When he says it, Rey pulls back to look up at him. He looks like he’s confessed to a crime, and she feels like she’s committed a murder. Her dismay must show on her face, because he lets go of her and takes a step back.


Rey thinks that if she moves too quickly, or thinks too quickly, she’ll fall into a million pieces. There’s absolutely no way she can tell him, now. No way she can answer an “I love you,” with “I used you.”

In all of this, realizing she loves him, resolving to confess, to let the chips fall after that, she somehow never considered that he might love her back.

She can’t breathe, and she’s floating about six inches above her body, watching herself watch him. He turns around. He must have heard her gasping, because he comes over and puts his hands on her shoulders and looks into her face. He’s right in her face telling her to breathe deeply, but his voice sounds like it’s coming from across the mountains and the only thought racing through her brain is What have I done?
When she starts seeing spots in front of her eyes, she sits down on the ground. He kneels in front of her, putting her hand on his chest and telling her to breathe with him. She looks at him stupidly, but she tries, and it’s still shallow, but not as much as before, and the next one is deeper, as she focuses on his hand covering hers, and the beat of his heart and the slow movement of his chest.

“I’m sorry,” she hiccups.

“Shh,” he says. “Don’t be sorry. I’m an idiot.”

She shakes her head. “No, I am.”

“Never. Should I go get you some water?”

She nods, and he gives her a kiss on the top of her head before he goes. She stays put, sitting, looking through the timber railing at the sun dipping low in the horizon, hyper aware of the world moving on as if she hadn’t just lost her mind for a few minutes over hearing the words thousands of girls would kill to hear from this man.

He comes back with a bottle of Evian and she holds it against her forehead for a few seconds before opening it.

“I love you, too, you know,” she says, before taking a long drink. She may as well give him that bit of truth, for all the good it’ll do him.

He holds out his hand and helps her up, and when she’s standing again, and the head rush passes, she’s pressed against him and he takes a deep breath before dipping his head toward her. And she does the only thing she can do; she accepts his kiss. Demands his kiss. And when he tries to lead her inside she shakes her head and pushes him down onto a chaise lounge. She banishes every thought that isn’t about this moment, and his body, and they still have on most of their clothes when she sinks down onto him, so that she’s got a fist full of his shirt in either hand and her skirt tears on a side seam as she’s riding him. In the moment before her orgasm, one coherent thought makes its way through, but it’s obliterated by pleasure before it can take hold.

_Why am I sad? Why is he?_

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Late at Night" by Buffalo Tom
They lay on the chaise, wrapped in a blanket as the sun disappears. The chaise is made for two people, but it’s a tight fit, so Kylo turns on his side so he can watch her watching the sunset, her face soft and her cheeks flushed. As the sky darkens, the porch lights come on, low and warm like candles.

“We had some beautiful sunsets in New Mexico, but that was insane. I’ve never seen the sun so red.”

“It’s the wild fires,” he says. “Beauty from tragedy and all that.”

“I should call my album that. Or would it be presumptuous to call it beautiful?”

“You shouldn’t release it if you don’t think it’s beautiful.”

“Oh, really? You’ve thought everything you’ve released is beautiful?”

“There’s always something, in every song, even if it’s a single line or a guitar riff.

She reaches over him, picking up the photo from the side table, and runs her finger over it, outlining her mother’s face, and then his.

“This is so weird,” she says. “She looks so happy. But her life is going to be so different in only a few years.”

“Are you glad you found out what you did?”

“I think so. I mean, it really, really sucks in a lot of ways, because I keep thinking about what she could have or should have done, but I also don’t know who I would be if things were different, or if I would want to be that person. If that makes sense.”

“Yeah. I thought about it, too. What it would have been like if I’d known you growing up, and how fucking weird it is that we met like we did.”

“So weird!” She shifts so she can look at him. “I had this weird fantasy one night, about losing my virginity to you—not at the same age I actually was though. Like, later.”

“You know I don’t care about any of that, right?”

“Yeah, of course. I know it’s silly. The thing is, I kind of realized that it doesn’t matter because you were the first person I did it with that I really cared about, and cared about me, and that’s more important.”

He can’t think of anything to say, and doesn’t know if he could speak if he could, so he kisses the top of her head.

She looks back at the photo and smiles. “Those ears. Did people tell your mom that you would grow into them?”

“I’m sure if she did she asked them if they would ever grow into their gaping assholes.”
Laughing, Rey puts the photo back and pulls the blanket higher, so that only her head is sticking out.

“Do you want to go inside?”

“Not yet.”

“Do you mind if I smoke?”

“Yes. It makes my hair smell awful.”

He picks up a lock of her hair and sniffs it. It smells like strawberries and sweat. It’s a strange combination of innocence and earthiness.

Fuck. He shouldn’t have done this. The email she sent about her family stuff had freaked him out and made him second guess his decision to tell her everything. Then he’d decided to give her the photo first, so she’d at least have something out of all this bullshit. Telling her he loved her had been completely unplanned, but he could have recovered from that. He could have said, “I love you, but I have to tell you this before we can move forward.” It wouldn’t have been ideal, but it would have been something. Instead, he’d had sex with her and cemented his status as the biggest asshole in the galaxy, or at least California.

And the fact that she’d said it back to him makes everything exponentially worse.

“Are you okay?” she asks. “Your heart started racing again.”

“Yeah. I was just thinking about work shit. Tell me about your shoot.”

“Oh my God,” she says, hiding her face in his chest. “I may have punched the photographer.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah,” she says, showing him her hand. Looking closely, he can see some bruising around her knuckles.

“I’ve been doing this for almost ten years and I’ve never punched a photographer. I’m impressed.”

He places a kiss on each of her knuckles. “So, what lead to this?”

Rey starts to answer, but the faint sound of Kylo’s cellphone ringing comes from inside the house.

“Fuck,” he says. “She wasn’t supposed to pack that. Hold on.”

He extricates himself, leaving the blanket for Rey.

“Hello?”

“Kylo, big news!” It’s Hux, sounding happy, which isn’t always something that bodes well for Kylo.

“What is it?” he says.

Rey comes into the house, blanket wrapped around her shoulders, and goes to the fireplace, where she starts making a fire.

“South America,” Hux says.
“What about it?”

“Well, since you didn’t do a South American leg on the last tour, the label is worried your numbers there will suffer. So, they’ve set up a little album preview tour. Intimate fan events. All acoustic, preview some of the new stuff and play some favorites. You should be home by Thanksgiving.”

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

“Have I ever been kidding when you’ve asked me that? Even once?”

“No. When do they want this to happen?”

“You fly out the day after tomorrow, first event is Saturday night. We’ve booked a rehearsal space in Rio.”

“What the fuck? Why do we have to rehearse there?”

“Why not? It’s Rio. Some people like to have fun there.”

“So, we’re all just supposed to drop out of our lives for 5 weeks at the drop of a hat?

“This is your life, in case you’ve forgotten. You know how this works. They pay you enough money to buy another house and ten cars, and they own you until they’ve made that money back. What did you really have planned, anyway, other than playing house with your girlfriend?”

“That’s not the point.”

“Bring her with you, or break up with her and go back to taking girls back to your dressing room to ‘talk.’ I don’t care. But make sure your vaccinations are in order and show up at the airport.”

“Why is this just coming up now?”

“It’s been in the works since before you left for Europe, but said you didn’t want any distractions.”

“I meant, like, not calling me about stupid shit. Like that time you called to tell me I was invited to the Men in Black premiere.”

“That was my assistant, if you’ll remember. Former assistant. I’ll send Lorna the itinerary.”

“Sure. Whatever.”

When Kylo hangs up, he swings his arm, ready to throw the phone. It would shatter beautifully, broken into useless components. But he would have to clean it up. And have Lorna replace it. And throwing it would scare Rey. So he stops short and sets it gently on the counter.

“Fucking dickhead,” he says.

He doesn’t believe for a second that Snoke is genuinely worried about their South American sales, and even if he were, a mini tour is overkill, at least this far out. Normally, it would be a bunch of radio and television appearances a week or two before or after the album release.

This is Snoke reminding Kylo that he owns him.

“Bad news?” Rey says.

He turns around. The fire is burning well, and she’s spread her blanket out on the floor. He hasn’t
encountered many things more appealing than the way she looks, dressed in only her tank top and panties, hair tumbling over her shoulders in tangles.

“If you consider a month-long trip to South America bad news.”

“I think that’s the opposite of bad news, even if it’s for work.”

“It’s not great when they give you two days’ notice.”

“Can they do that?”

“It’s probably somewhere in the contract, but there’s always been way more notice, or we at least know they’re cooking something up. Fuck.”

She pats the floor, and he shuffles over and sits down, facing her.

“It’s probably best for you, anyway,” he says. “You’ve got a lot of work to do and I won’t be around to distract you.”

“I do have a scary schedule, but this still sucks.”

“Yeah.”

Though maybe it truly is for the best. He can’t keep his resolve when he’s around her. He does stupid shit like offering to pay her rent, a decision purely motivated by his own guilt, as if making sure she had a place to live would make up for what he’s allowed to happen. What he’s allowing to happen.

The bravado he felt in London, and the subsequent shoring up of his resolve during panicked moments in Sweden, feels so naïve, with her in front of him. He is everything Snoke thinks he is. Cowardly, foolish, weak, vain, and selfish.

He won’t fool himself anymore into thinking he can’t tell her, but he also won’t fool himself into thinking he can. So, he does what he’s always done, and makes the same mistake again, reaching for her, pulling her into his lap and making quick work of removing her shirt. Holding onto her hips, running his hands up the curve of her waist to the swell of her breasts, none of it erases it this time.

He is a coward, and a fool, and he can’t hide it in her body anymore, but that won’t stop him from trying.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Down About It" by the Lemonheads
From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Saturday, October 23, 1999 at 11:32 AM

Subject: Guess what!

Hey! Great news!!! Leia made the tape go away! I can’t believe that I have people who can make embarrassing things go away. It’s so weird. I guess those girls sold the tape to one of those tv tabloid shows, with an exclusive arrangement, but Leia has a contact there who told her about it and offered to not use it, and give it to her to destroy, if another show from the same company (a more reputable one) could do an exclusive backstage thing at my video shoot. I can’t believe it’s actually gone. I was making myself sick over it. I did get reprimanded by like, everyone on my team pretty much because I didn’t give anyone a heads up. I was just too embarrassed. I still am. I didn’t ask if they watched it or not once they got it but I’m sure they did. Finn’s assistant Robyn said the girls went on one of your message boards talking about it but then when it never aired most people stopped believing them. I don’t want to know what they all said about me before. I would probably agree, though.

All week I’ve been going out and meeting pretty much every top 40 DJ in southern California. It’s so tiring, and some of the morning DJs are total assholes. They all think they’re the first person who’s ever “jokingly” asked what I’m going to give them for playing my single when it comes out and I have to put on this whole innocent act and be all “Well I hope I can come back and be on your show!” God I hope I don’t have to. I will though, won’t I? Shit. Shit shit shit. I guess I can’t really complain, though because there are worse jobs.

It still sucks though.

Hey if we had gotten to spend Halloween together, what would you have wanted to go as? I’m going to a party with Finn and Poe, and they’re doing a couples costume, but they won’t tell me what. I have no idea what I’m doing yet. I think we would make an amazing Vincent Vega and Mrs. Mia Wallace. What do you think?

xxxxxxx

Rey

From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

Date: Sunday, October 24, 1999 at 10:21 PM

RE: Guess what!

I think we’d make a killer Sid and Nancy. (See what I did there?) but yeah Vince and Mia is good. The question is, before or after the overdose?

Whatever you do, send pictures. Go to my house and use my scanner if you have to.
I don’t have much advice on the DJs except to remember they are just boring nerds who can’t think of any other way to be interesting than to say stupid shit. They want to rile you up. It’s a point of pride with them. Sometimes I just repeat back what they said and then say hmmm and nothing else. Most of them fucking hate me and don’t want me on now so it all works out. But if they don’t already have you doing media training then ask your manager or someone at the label about it. It’ll help out a lot.

And I have to say that having people whose job it is to make things go away for you is the best part of this business. Just make sure that you keep up with who you owe favors to, also, because people may call in that favor any time they want. (That’s not a warning about Leia. I mean, she does that obviously or she wouldn’t have gotten where she is, but one thing I’ll say is that she only calls in favors when she needs to and only to help other people.)

Love, Kylo

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Monday, November 1, 1999 at 10:56 PM

Subject: Halloween

Finn and Poe ended up going as Kirk and Spock! And they finally took pity on me and told me a couple of days before, so I could go along with the theme. I was Nurse Chapel. It was fun, especially the blonde wig, but you won’t believe how many guys think “Hey baby, beam me UP!” is a good pickup line. But whatever. I met some cool people. Probably the coolest was Melissa Etheridge. I’m still kind of shaking about that, actually. Since there were a shit ton of musicians at the party, toward the end of the night a jam session kind of broke out and she encouraged me and I sang “Come to My Window” while she played guitar. It seriously feels like a dream. Finn said the party was a success for me in terms of networking and I’m just like, it was a success in terms of MY ENTIRE LIFE.

Anyway I attached some pictures. Tell me what you think.

I miss you.

Love,

Rey

From: Kylo Ren <bensoloney@yahoo.com>

Date: Tuesday, November 2, 1999 at 5:16 AM

RE: Halloween

Hey so, please tell me that costume wasn’t a rental.

Love,

Kylo
From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Wednesday, November 3, 1999 at 7:05 AM

RE: Halloween

It wasn’t a rental. I totally bought it and it’s hanging in my closet right now.

xo
Rey

From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

Date: Friday, November 5, 1999 at 6:29 PM

Subject: Question

Hey so I know we got distracted when I called you the other day but I forgot to ask if you’re allergic to alpaca.

Love,

Kylo

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Saturday, November 6, 1999 at 12:21 PM

Re: Question

Not that I know of?????

Love,

Rey

From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

Date: Monday, November 8, 1999 at 4:07 PM

Subject: Hola from Peru

I went surfing today. It’s been a long time. Way too long. So long it was embarrassing and I’m glad as fuck I was by myself and no one recognized me. I wiped out again and again and again and I thought about how not long ago I would have blamed it on the rented board. But it was a really fucking good board. I’m just out of practice. The only reason I stuck with it when I was younger even though it was hard, was because I wanted to be better than my dad. And then somewhere along the way I
started to love it, and then I got pissed off about that. And then I got busy and I’ve seen a ton of beaches all over the world but haven’t gone out. But I’m in Peru. And there’s no way I could leave this time without doing it, even if I sucked. I’m going out tomorrow morning, too.

Anyway, you should try it now that you live near the ocean. The surfer kids will love your car.

I love you.

Kylo

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>
On: Tuesday, November 9, 1999 at 4:30 PM
RE: Hola from Peru

If I’m going to learn how to surf, I need to learn how to do more than dog paddle. But I would totally do it. I think. Maybe next summer. I’m kind of afraid of the ocean to be honest. It’s big and powerful and I don’t think there’s anything in the world that finds individual humans less significant than the ocean does. It could sweep me away never to be seen again on the smallest of currents. Like if we could kill a person with one molecule of our breath and then just go about our day.

Sorry. That was so morbid. I’m tired and I smoked a little when I got home.

Maz suggested to me today that I start seeing a therapist about my anxiety. I was just like isn’t everyone anxious? And then she pointed to the napkin I’d been shredding while we were talking, and all we were talking about was a few parties I’m going to next week. And she mentioned that I’d had a panic attack in her presence at least twice. And how I was so afraid to tell anyone about the video. And some of the things I’ve told her that I worry about (like drowning in the ocean. Though I didn’t tell her about that one, apparently people don’t actually go around worrying about that as much as I do.)

I didn’t exactly agree but I told her I would think about it, and she said she would have her assistant get back to me with some names. I don’t have any experience with anything like this other than seeing the school counselor a few times after Ginny died. It wasn’t very helpful, so I don’t know. I’ll deal with it when I get the list of doctors. I guess I can afford it now.

I miss you so much.

Love,

Rey

PS Are you ever going to explain about the alpaca??

From: Kylo Ren <bensoloney@yahoo.com>
Date: Tuesday, November 9, 1999 at 11:21 PM
RE: Hola from Peru
I don’t know if therapy helped me but I’m also an asshole who won’t meet them halfway and uses sarcasm to deflect so I’m probably not the right person to ask about it. But I’ll say it’s worth a shot. Maybe you’ll find someone you click with, because after watching you have a panic attack, it doesn’t seem like fun and if you can figure out a way to stop them you should try.

If we can ever be in the same place long enough I’ll teach you to swim. Then we’ll talk about surfing.

There was a record store here that had so much New Wave that you would have died. I would have had to drag you out. I don’t know your collection that well, so I only picked up one thing for you because it was an import. Well, an import for us. As in I’ll be importing it. You know what I mean.

I’ve been floating through this whole trip feeling like I’m partly here and partly home, and I got called out by Derek for half assing our show today. And don’t fucking tell a soul I admitted this, but he’s right. I still think we have every right to be pissed off about having to do this but it’s not the fans’ fault. And they take me looking like I don’t want to be there personally. This job is more about acting than anyone will ever tell you, even the ones who try to be honest with you.

Hey, you said video shoot. Does that mean you finally nailed down your single?

Love,

Kylo

PS The alpaca is a surprise.

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From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Thursday, November 11, 1999 at 3:39 AM

RE: Hola from Peru

Shit I really forgot to tell you but yes we did! Luke finally wore me down and we’re going with “Windrider.” Which wasn’t even on any of our lists, but during the last meeting, Finn was all “Hear me out…” and started talking about how great it sounded in the car and that it’s the one that’s been in his head the most since he first heard the tracks. Luke was on speaker and he was quiet for so long after Finn asked what he thought that we were afraid we’d lost the call but then he just said “Finn, I’m so glad you’re on our team.”

The song has come so far since that day I started it at your house, and even since you heard it live. Luke and I fiddled with it a bit and now it’s less about an actual home but more about how a person can be a home, and we kicked up the tempo.

So it’s going out to radio right before Thanksgiving still, but since we’re behind, the discs won’t be in stores until December. The video shoot is next week, and we got Astrid to direct. She’s the one that ended up doing my photos, remember? Maz and Leia are trying to work some magic and get me on TRL for the video debut but it’s all going to depend on how well it does on the radio before they’ll get an answer for sure.

Love,

Rey
From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

Date: Thursday, November 11, 1999 at 2:18 PM

RE: Hola from Peru

Don’t tell him I said this, but Finn’s a fucking genius. I just picked the song out on my guitar with a faster tempo and it kills. Especially the chorus. And there’s not enough pop rock from women on the radio right now so it’s going to be a breath of fresh air.

Love,

Kylo

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Friday, November 12, 1999 at 9:21 PM

Subject: Video

I may be out of pocket for a while after I leave for my shoot on Sunday. The video location is out in the middle of nowhere. Worse than Truth or Consequences middle of nowhere. And I think the crew might be smaller than the one I had for the photo shoot. Though there will also be the people from the entertainment show there.

I’m so nervous about the whole thing. I barely know what to do in front of a still camera what the hell am I going to do in a video?

From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

Date: Saturday, November 13, 1999 at 1:01 AM

RE: Video

You’ll do what you always do. Listen and learn and do your best. You’d never been in a real recording studio before, and you managed to bang out an album roughly on schedule. And remember that you’re in charge. Leia always said you can’t be afraid of people thinking you’re a bitch, because someone will no matter what.

I’m sending a messenger over with our tracks. I had Lorna do two CDs. One is what the album would be if I chose all the tracks and the other is what will probably be on the album. You can listen to them on the plane or whatever.

Break a leg.

I love you.
From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Saturday, November 13, 1999 at 9:15 PM

RE: Video

I got the CDs, and they’re packed in my carry on! It was hard not to listen to them right away but I really want to save them for on the plane. It’s a pretty long flight to Pittsburgh and then an hour or so drive to Pleasant Valley, WV. So I’ll be a captive audience. I can’t wait to listen.

I have to go to bed now since my flight is at the butt crack of dawn but I need you to know that I’m going to lay there awhile, thinking about what I want you to do to me when we see each other again.

Love,

Rey

From: Kylo Ren <bensolonely@yahoo.com>

Date: Saturday, November 14, 1999 at 8:57 AM

RE: Video

Fuck, you’re already gone.

I think every damned night about everything you’ve done to me and will do to me, and not just when we’re fucking.

I love you, be safe.

Kylo

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Saturday, November 18, 1999 at 5:42 PM

Subject: Hellooo!

Kylouuuuuuu!

I’m back in LA and there’s just so much. So so so so so much. I don’t know where to start.

First of all, no offense but it was so good to be around regular people again. That was one of the things I liked best in Wyoming. I really need to go home and visit for a bit after my album comes out.

And the shoot was so fucking cool. It feels like even in just a few weeks, Astrid just blossomed
into this totally confident whiz kid. She was so great under pressure and figured out how to solve problems so fast, but she was never mean to anyone. And she knows how to talk to the crew guys so they don’t get pissed about taking direction from a woman. I think the whole thing is going to be so gorgeous.

Speaking of gorgeous, I listened to the Knights songs. And I loved everything on the album you want to put out and I’ll get to that in a second, but there was some good stuff on the other disc, too. I think you’re way too hard on yourself. I know it’s not exactly what you want to be doing but your bandmates are good players and your fans are going to love those songs. And I’m sure some of these other songs will make killer B sides.

This one, though…”Your Name.” Oh my god. You have to fight to get that one on the album, even if it’s a secret track.

And also…about that one….

Thank you.

I love you, too.

Rey

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**KyloBen:** Hey guess what?

**ReyOLight79:** ??

**KyloBen:** The last gig was cancelled so I’ll be home for Thanksgiving. I can make us a reservation somewhere.

**ReyOLight79:** I can’t.

**KyloBen:** Why?

**ReyOLight79:** I thought you were going to be gone so I accepted another invitation. To your mother’s house.

**KyloBen:** Cancel it.

**ReyOLight79:** No!

**KyloBen:** Why not?

**ReyOLight79:** She’s my boss?

**KyloBen:** Come on. It won’t matter.

**ReyOLight79:** I have a single coming out this week and she has the final word on my marketing budget.

**KyloBen:** She’s not that petty.
ReyOLight79: It’s rude! You wouldn’t cancel on Snoke at the last minute would you?

KyloBen: It’s not last minute it’s 3 whole days

ReyOLight79: Would you, cancel on him though?

KyloBen: No

ReyOLight79: You could come with me

KyloBen: Fuck no

ReyOLight79: Why not?

KyloBen: I can’t imagine anything more awkward

ReyOLight79: Please?

KyloBen: I’ll go on one condition.

ReyOLight79: What?

KyloBen: You come spend the holidays with me in New York

ReyOLight79: Are you serious?

KyloBen: As fucking cancer

ReyOLight79: I’ll probably have work stuff

KyloBen: Do work stuff in New York. First Order throws a huge New Year’s Eve party on both coasts. The New York party is always better though, mainly because Snoke doesn’t come.

ReyOLight79: I can’t make any promises until after the single drops

KyloBen: Hanukkah starts December 4

ReyOLight79: What if I can’t come for the whole time?

KyloBen: It’ll be OK

ReyOLight79: So, I’ll pick you up at the airport on Thursday?

KyloBen: Uggggghhhhh

KyloBen: Ok

KyloBen: But you have to go get my car

ReyOLight79: It’s a deal

Chapter End Notes
Thanksgiving, for Rey, has been many things over the years. The three she spent with Ginny, when viewed through a haze of nostalgia—and when compared to the ones that came after—were the best, even when it was the two of them eating turkey and dressing TV dinners.

Sometimes Thanksgiving was a car trip to visit relatives of her foster parents, people she’d never met. Often, those relatives treated her like an outsider, or as nothing more than extra help in the kitchen. Once, she was left at home with a frozen pizza while her foster family went to Arizona.

The last two years, she attended Ahsoka’s free anti-Thanksgiving dinner at the Sacred Song.

In her daydreams, Thanksgiving was exactly how it looks in Family Circle magazine, or maybe in heartwarming movies, where even if everything goes wrong, everyone is together and that’s all that matters.

From the looks of Kylo, hunched in the passenger’s seat like he’s on his way to his own execution, her hopes of a perfect Thanksgiving are going to remain firmly in fantasy land.

Kylo told her once that he sometimes has trouble eating enough when he’s on tour, and it shows. He’s lost weight, and his tan can’t hide the dark circles under his eyes.

He’s also been bouncing his knee and compulsively tugging on his seatbelt, then letting it retract, since they left the airport, and has been speaking in one-word responses.

“I didn’t expect it to be this cold,” she says, flailing for something to talk about.

“That’s LA.”

Two words. That’s an improvement.

“So, the sweater you brought back, it’s perfect. Because I was a dummy and wore a t-shirt.”

“You’re not a dummy.”

“And it’s beautiful. The sweater.”

“I know.”

“Okay,” she says, and pulls over. The house they’re in front of is dark, and in between street lights. A giant oak tree throws further shadow over it, and the houses on either side are dark, too. There are lights on at the house across the street, but only three cars in the driveway.

“Leia’s house is like, another mile.”

“I know,” she says, and leans over to unbuckle his seatbelt.

“What are you doing?” he asks as she lifts up his shirt and unzips his pants.

“I’m going to suck your dick, idiot,” she says. He makes a sound that’s somewhere between a grunt and a moan as she takes his dick out. She has him hard within seconds.
“Rey, this isn’t a good idea.”

“It’s the best idea,” she says, leaning down and flicking her tongue on the underside of the tip.

“Fuck, it is” he says leaning his head back.

As she takes him into her mouth, gently swirling her tongue around the head as she sucks, she admits to herself that this isn’t merely about getting him to relax. She’s wanted to jump on him ever since she saw him at the airport, and hadn’t given a fuck about the paps, kissing him openly in the middle of baggage claim. His flight was late, so they had to go straight to Leia’s, and while the idea of lingering looks over the turkey and playing footsie under the table is appealing, she wants him now.

She wraps her hand around the bottom of his dick, stroking as she sucks. She stops when puts his hand on the top of her head, but he only strokes her hair, moving it over one shoulder and gently rubbing her back with his other hand.

It’s unbelievable how much she enjoys doing this with him. And it’s not just the way he reacts, the soft way he sighs her name and runs his fingers along her ear and jaw. She likes the feel of him in her mouth, and he way his lips slide over his skin, and the sensation of sucking on something.

She takes her mouth off him and looks up. His head is still thrown back, and his Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows hard. She licks him from the base all the way up to the head, watching him as she does.

“Christ, Rey,” he says, looking down at her.

“Do you want to fuck me?”

“Yes.”

She sits back to take off her underwear as he reaches down to move his seat the rest of the way back, then she climbs into his lap. There’s plenty of room between Kylo and the dashboard, but her left calf is pressed up hard against the door. It’s not comfortable, but this shouldn’t take long, for either of them. Reaching down, she gets him in position and sinks down all at once.

“Fuck,” she sighs.

Kylo runs his hands up her arms, then cups her face. “Are we really doing this?”

“Yes,” she says, leaning in to kiss him as she starts to move. The car has cooled down enough that their breath comes out in clouds, mingling together and fogging up the windows. She takes her sweater off and tosses it into the driver’s seat. His hands are on her immediately, cupping her breasts, squeezing her nipples, and leaning in to lick and suck them. The cool air stings her wet skin when he pulls away, but his hands are on her again, so warm, and other than the callused fingertips, softer than her own.

“I’ve never had sex in a car,” he says.

“I’ve never liked it in a car before.”

She holds onto the handle above the door as she bounces, and grabs her by the back of her neck, pulling her in and kissing her. These kisses are frantic, artless, but it doesn’t matter.

“I’ve wanted you,” he gasps. “Every day. All the time.”
“Yes,” she says. “Every minute.”

Her orgasm hits sooner than she expects, moments after the first signs that she’s close, and he follows soon after, one hand locked in her hair and the other still on her breast. They continue to rock together for a few more seconds as their breathing slows. When they come to a stop, she rests her head on his shoulder and he folds his arms around her.

“Now I just want to sleep,” she says.

His laugh rumbles in his chest and throat, and he kisses her on the temple. “It’s not too late to skip it.”

“It’s definitely too late. We’re already late,” she murmurs. “I shouldn’t have roped you into this. We could have met up afterwards and gone out for pie. I just didn’t want you to be alone.”

“I’ll survive.”

She kisses him, loving how soft and pliant he is after he comes.

She doesn’t love how sticky she is, or how cold it is now that her sweat is drying. She grabs her sweater and puts it back on before easing off him and back into the driver’s seat.

“Ew. We should have used a condom.” Putting her panties back on isn’t the best idea, but neither is leaving them off.

Kylo opens the glove box and pulls out a stack of napkins, handing them over with a sheepish expression. “Sorry,” he says.

“Oh, the glamorous life of a rock star,” she sighs.

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They pull into Leia’s driveway twenty minutes late. The house is huge, but not as big as Rey imagined, and a lot more like a normal family home than expected. There’s even a white picket fence and ivy growing on the chimney. In addition to Han’s Thunderbird and Leia’s Mercedes, there’s a VW bus and a 1960 Porsche Spyder parked in the driveway.

“Fabulous,” Kylo says.

“What?”

“The Porsche belongs to Amilyn.”

“Amilyn Holdo?!”

“You’ve heard of her?”

“Of course, I have! Skyfarer changed my life.”

“This is going to be interesting.”
“Fill me in. What’s it going to be like in there?”

“Well, it’s almost 7:30, so Leia will be pouring her second glass of wine. Han will be in the kitchen muttering over the turkey, while Auntie Ammi sits at the table reading his cards and teasing him with stories about when she and Leia used to date.”

“Are you kidding?”

“No. They’ve known each other way longer than Leia’s known Han.”

“So, he’s just cool with having her ex around?”

“She was the witness at their wedding.”

“Do you have any idea how bizarre your life is?”

“Sometimes, but the same could be said about you.”

“Really?”

“Write it all down sometime and read it like you’re a stranger.”

When he puts it like that, her life story probably is on the weird side, at least for the past six months. Maybe before, too, when compared to the average American kid.

“Come on,” she says. “I’m starving.”

He groans but gets out and leads her to a side door. It enters onto a screened in porch, crowded with wicker furniture, floor pillows, and Oriental rugs. Another door leads into the kitchen, where Han is indeed examining an enormous turkey, and Amilyn Holdo sits at the table, tarot cards spread in front of her. Kylo looks back at Rey with a cocked eyebrow before opening the door.

“After you.”

Rey ducks under his arm and into the room. Kylo follows, his hand on her back.

Kylo and Han stare at each other, but before it can get awkward, Amilyn stands up and comes over to them, pulling Kylo into a hug.

“I swear, you’re taller than the last time I saw you. How long has it been?”

“It’s been a couple of years,” he says. “Ammi, this is my girlfriend, Rey.”

Amilyn turns her cool blue gaze on Rey and she is instantly enchanted. Rey wasn’t kidding when she told Kylo that Amilyn’s album changed her life. It not only came out at a time when she desperately needed its messages of empowerment and hope, but the laidback folk-rock style had influenced Rey’s music.

While she always had an ethereal air about her in photos and on film, up close, Amilyn is terrifyingly intense. But after Ahsoka, she’s the epitome of what Rey wants to be when she grows up. No one should be able to make purple hair look regal, but somehow, she achieves it, in spite of—or perhaps because of—the perfectly matched sheath dress and silver barrettes. She takes Rey by the forearms and looks into her eyes.

“His habits are going to rub off on you if you’re not careful. I swear, no one in this family knows anything about punctuality.”
“Oh,” Rey says. “The traffic. It was awful. The airport, you know.”

Amilyn smiles and hugs Rey. When she steps back, her brow is furrowed, and she steps in close again, this time taking a long sniff. She laughs and shakes her head. “Traffic. Of course. The best excuse this town has to offer. Shall we?”

She sweeps out of the room, and Rey follows, throwing a half-hearted wave at Han and a confused look at Kylo.

“She knows,” he whispers. “Can’t get anything past her.”

Rey catches a glimpse in a mirror in the hallway and freezes. “Oh my god,” she says. Her lips are swollen, her cheeks are flushed far more than can be blamed on the weather, and finger combing her hair had not done the trick.

“Where’s the bathroom?”

“You look fine.”

“I look like I’ve been fucking.”

“Look, Leia’s going to know, either by looking at you, or Ammi telling her. We need to get this part over with.”

“You mean you do. I want to look presentable in front of my boss.”

“You’re right. Come on.” He leads her upstairs. “Hey Aunt Ammi, slight detour. We’ll be there in a sec.”

Amilyn pokes her head around the corner. “If you’re not back down in ten minutes I’m coming up there!”

At the top of the stairs, he stops in front of a door with one of those souvenir street signs hung on it, the kind with your first name. She touches the name, and the glow in the dark stars stuck onto it. The closest Rey had ever come to finding her name were for boys named “Ray.” It’s not like anyone would have thought to buy one for her, but it would have been nice to know it was an option.

Kylo nods, and she opens the door. It’s not the room of a little kid, but it’s a time capsule all the same. With two dormer windows, a king size bed, and a massive entertainment center, there’s still plenty of room to walk around. He hasn’t occupied this room in almost ten years, but the sharp, animal scent of teenage boy still lingers, somehow.

The wall above the bed is plastered with show fliers, everything from Pat Benatar to N.W.A., and another wall is dedicated to photos of him with his parents and various artists, starting when he was a toddler. The largest one, in the center, shows him strapped to his mother’s back as she holds a sign that reads, “Fighting for Peace is like Fucking for Virginity.” She looks impossibly young, her long hair in braids, her mouth open, mid-yell. Baby Ben is obliviously munching on a daisy.

Underneath all the boyish clutter, there are the trappings of a tasteful room, in the blue plaid bedding and mahogany furniture. There’s a shelving unit like the big one in his New York loft, but it’s mostly empty, as are the book shelves. A stack of yearbooks sits on the desk, and she picks up the one from 1991.

Kylo takes it out of her hand before she can open it. “Amilyn wasn’t kidding about coming to find
us."

“Fine,” she says. “But I’m taking that when we leave.”

He holds the yearbook over his head. “Oh, really?”

“I’m not that short, you know.” But when she jumps to try to get it, he stand on his toes, keeping it out of reach. She hops on the bed, but when she reaches for it, he grabs her around the waist with one arm and lifts her, spinning her back to the floor. She kisses him, and like that, she wants him again, as badly as if he hadn’t been inside her half an hour ago. She runs her hands down his chest and back under his shirt, but he grabs her wrists.

“Rey, we have to go back down there.”

“I know,” she says, but doesn’t move.

“Rey,” he whispers. “In a few hours, we can finally fuck in my house. In my bed, on the deck, in the shower, in the studio—”

“Control room or live room?”

“Both. We can record it if you want. But we have to go downstairs now.”

“Okay, okay.” She goes into the tiny bathroom and pulls her hair up into a ponytail, powders her face and fixes her smudged eyes the best she can. There’s nothing she can do about her lips except throw on more lip gloss. He’s waiting on the landing when she comes out and kisses her forehead before taking her hand to head downstairs. His hand is sweaty and his grip a bit too strong.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah.”

At first, walking into the dining room is, while not exactly like a Rockwell painting, at least like something out of an advertisement. The table is lit with candles and loaded with all sorts of food. Han sits at one end, Amilyn and Chewbacca sit across from each other nearest him, leaving two spots open nearest a turkey the size of a small child. It’s so big that Leia is barely visible until she stands up. All conversation dies when she does, and Leia’s gaze bores into her son. They stare at each other, and Rey is struck by how much they resemble each other. She always thought he took after Han most, but Leia and her son have the same eyes.

Leia presses her lips together and takes a deep breath, then she sighs, eyes softening.

“We’re glad you made it. We were starting to worry it wasn’t just the chronic Solo lateness.”

“Hey!” Han says. “I think we know where he got that from, Princess.” He looks at Rey and Kylo. “She was late for her own wedding, and this one was two weeks late for his own birth.”

“Um, the traffic was terrible,” Rey says.

Han’s mouth twitches. “Amilyn filled us in.”

Rey’s face goes hot, despite the twinkle in his eye, and the waves of embarrassment radiating from Kylo are palpable. He helps her into her chair and goes to his, stopping to kiss his mother on the cheek on the way and throwing a glare at his father.

“Ben, I think it’s your turn to say Motzi this year,” Leia says when they’re all seated.
“Blessing over bread,” Chewbacca says to Rey while Leia and Kylo negotiate. “The joke is that it’s always Ben’s turn.”

“Ist is like saying grace?” Most of Rey’s foster parents had been religious at some level, though it was usually only surface level. One of them had the minister over for dinner often and that man could make a prayer over food into a full-blown sermon.

“Same but very short, with eyes open. And no Jesus.”

Kylo clears his throat, having clearly lost his argument with Leia, and starts the blessing.

“Baruch atah Adonai Eloheinu melech ha-olam, ha-motzi lechem min ha-aretz.” It’s not quite spoken, but not quite a song, and Kylo’s baritone makes it lovely.

Chewbacca translates as Kylo the rolls are passed around. “Blessed are you Lord, our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.”

“That’s beautiful,” Rey says, smiling at her boyfriend.

“He used to love it when he was little,” Leia says. “He insisted on saying it alone, even when other children were here.”

The rest of the food is passed around, and she tries a little of everything, though one platter stays in place in front of Kylo. She hadn’t known what to expect when Kylo told her that he ate something called Tofurky, but it looks like a turkey breast that’s been turned into a loaf and stuffed with wild rice. Leia points out the vegan side dishes and he rolls his eyes and reminds her that her menu hasn’t changed since the mid-eighties.

“Are we still doing the giving thanks thing?” Han asks, when everyone’s plate is full.

“Of course,” Leia says. “You can start.”

“Same as always. Glad to be alive, glad to have a roof over my head.” He winks at Leia. “And always glad the Falcon is still running.” Han raises his glass and knocks on the table at the same time. “Chewie?”

Chewbacca shrugs. “I’m happy to not be on tour, and for Ben to be joining us.”

Kylo, who’s been studying his plate, looks up. “Thank you.”

Chewbacca waves his hand. “It’s true. Now, Ammi?”

Amilyn leans back in her chair, wine glass in hand. “I got word yesterday that my foundation was approved for an enormous grant, so we’ll be able to do music camp in three new cities next summer. Leia?”

Leia looks around the table, her eyes landing on each person. “I’m thankful for my family, both blood, and found, and every artist at Resistance. I know I say the same thing every year, but it’s always true, because no matter what fleeting, ephemeral good things happen, the essence of what I’m thankful for will never change. Over the years, this table has been so crowded that you couldn’t take a bite without knocking someone’s fork out of their hand. Sometimes there have only been two, or three, though the configuration of those two or three was subject to change. But I have never sat alone at this table, and for that, I’m grateful.” She raises her glass and takes a sip before sitting down. “Ben?”
Kylo looks at Rey. “I’m thankful that I met someone who likes me in ways I never learned to like myself.”

Rey’s mouth opens with a small gasp, and though she can feel everyone’s eyes turn to her, she looks only at him, at those deep eyes with their beautiful shape. At the little tremble in his lip.

“I’m thankful… I’m just so glad… for everything.”

Leia raises her glass. “To everything.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from You Can Never Go Home by The Moody Blues

Special thanks to Zaf for her help with the Motzi.
The third glass of wine is a mistake. It takes the edge off the panic he’s been fighting since they arrived, but it loosens his control on other emotions. He was dead sober and still got all sappy about Rey in front of everyone. There’s no telling what he might say, now. But still, he drinks it. He’s never cared about the taste of wine, but his mother does, and whatever this is, she chose it with care. He takes a perverse pleasure in drinking it without appreciating it.

He slumps in his chair, picking at his food and only speaking when spoken to, grateful for the fact that everyone is so charmed by Rey that the conversation rarely focuses on him. The bonus being that he can sit back and watch her charm everyone. She’s currently talking with Han about his favorite subject.

“So,” Rey says to Han. “Which came first? The car name or the band name?”

“I didn’t name the car. It came with the name when I won it from Lando.”

“The band’s named after the car,” Kylo jumps in. “Original, right?”

“Hey, pal, you’re lucky *you’re* not named after that car,” Han shoots back, catching Leia’s eye. She shakes her head, eyes twinkling.

“Oh my God. May I be excused?”

“No!” Leia and Han say. He slumps back down and stabs a yam with his fork.

Amilyn puts her hand on his arm. “Ben, I don’t think I’ve heard how you two met.”

“What?”

“You and Rey, how did you meet?”

“At a show,” Kylo says.

“At a party,” Rey says, at the same time.

Amilyn laughs. “Which was it?”

“The first time we met was at one of my shows,” he says. “But that was last summer, right?”

Rey nods. “We ran into each other again at a party right after I moved here.”

“Is that so?” Amilyn says. “Seems like it was fated, then! Rey, I really should do a reading for you later.”

“That would be awesome,” Rey says, eyes wide.

“We have to leave pretty soon after dinner, though.”

“You have somewhere important to be on Thanksgiving night?” Han asks.
“I got off a plane like, an hour ago.”

Rey shrugs. “I can do it some other time.” She smiles, but she looks confused, and a bit hurt.

“No, you should do it tonight. Aunt Ammi’s got a full schedule, right? Might not be in the country again for months.”

“He’s got me, there,” Amilyn says.

“They’re all gone, all the time,” Kylo continues. “And then we get together at holidays and pretend.”

“Ben,” his mother cuts in. “Eat your tofurky. You’ve hardly touched anything.”

“I’m twenty-six years old.”

“Then act like it.”

The table falls silent, everyone looking at him. His head is swimming, and a part of him knows he should just shut up and eat, or go lie down somewhere, but a part of him is seven years old, being shuffled around at the whim of all these grownups.

“It’s too fucking late to start parenting me.”

“Don’t talk to her that way!”

“Oh, that’s fucking rich, Han.”

“Hey, we may have fought but I never talked to her like that and you know it.”

“Yeah because you always ran off!”

“Ben, please, calm down,” Chewbacca implores.

“You always take his side.”

“There are no sides here, but Rey is upset.”

Kylo freezes when he looks at Rey, his stomach lurching dangerously. She’s gone pale, hands fist ed around her napkin, knuckles white.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers into the silence, and tears start spilling from her eyes. The room is too hot, and he can’t look at her anymore. He shoves away from the table and stumbles out of the room through the kitchen and the porch and into the back yard. He has no idea why he came out here instead of going into the bathroom, because he has one need, and that need is to vomit, which he does into the hydrangeas that border the porch. When he stops heaving, he stumbles to one of the Adirondack chairs and sits down, head in his hands.

Not long after, the screen door opens, and someone comes down the steps. He doesn’t look up. He knows who it is.

“Trade you?” his mother says, holding out a glass of water.

“Trade for what?”

“A cigarette. I’m either out, or Han found my stash again.”
He looks up, eyebrow raised.

“I don’t think you have room to scold me.”

He sighs and fishes his pack out of his pocket.

Leia hands him the glass of water, and takes a cigarette. “Always hated Marlboros,” she says. “But it’s better than those cloves you used to smoke.”

“I still smoke those, sometimes.” He takes a sip of water. It stays down, so he takes a long drink, downing half the glass.

“Take it easy.”

“I’m fine,” he says, wiping his mouth. “Why did you let me drink so much?”

“You’re twenty-six years old.”

“Touché.”

He sips his water and she smokes her cigarette. Conversation has picked up again in the dining room, and the sound drifts out to them, faintly.

Kylo looks out over the lawn he used to play on. Down in the back-west corner, he used to have a playhouse. It had been built with the house in the 30s, in a similar style, with cedar shakes, a red door and little flower boxes on the windows. His senior year, his parents moved it closer to the pool and converted it into a cabana, but before that, he spent a ton of time out there. Even after he was technically too old for a playhouse, he went out there to write songs, smoked his first cigarette there and his first joint. Come to think of it, before he met the Dagobah guys, he spent most of his after-school time there. If it were still a playhouse, he would have shown it to Rey, but even the flower boxes are gone, since they’d taken out the whole front wall to put in a sliding door.

“What’s going on with you and Rey?” Leia asks, lighting a cigarette off the end of hers and handing it to him.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, that as happy as you’re trying to be, I see the way you look at her when she isn’t looking. There’s love, of course, but there’s something else. Something getting between you. Sadness. And fear. And you can’t tell me that display out there was all about us.”

If there’s one person who could come close to fixing this situation with Rey, it’s his mother. She has a knack for speaking to people, for understanding what they truly want to hear, that he could never dream of mastering, and she’s vastly connected. She always knows the exact person to help with any question or situation, whether it was the best place to buy flowers, or pushing through citizenship for a Czech drummer.

He wants to hand off this burden, the same way he’d been able to hand off his jacket or skateboard when he came through the door as a kid. But if he tells her about the beginning of his relationship with Rey, he’ll have to tell her what Snoke has on him, which means she’ll find out that even the things he’s done that she’s proud of are a lie.

“It’s nothing,” he says. “I’m exhausted, and we’ve been apart more than we’ve been together.”

“That’s the life you chose.”
“Don’t remind me.”

“I wanted you to get an English degree.”

“Maybe I should have.”

Leia lights another cigarette, this time or herself. “You should talk to Han, you know. Alone. Like this. Sort things out.”

“Is that what we’re doing?”

“It’s a start. A first step.”

“It’s going to take a lot of steps and I don’t even know if I want to take that journey.”

“Ben—”

“I’m drunk, and I’m tired, and I’m sorry I let her talk me into this. Tell her I’ll be in the car.”

It’s a bit of a struggle to stand, but he does it without stumbling, and it’s only when he gets to his car that he notices he’s still got his mother’s glass in his hand.

And she’s still got his cigarettes.

“Fuck,” he says, and puts the glass in the mailbox.

The car still smells faintly of sex, which is both arousing and depressing. He finds an old pack of cigarettes shoved in the map pocket on the driver’s side. The taste is bad enough to make his stomach heave again, but he soldiers on, and by the fourth drag it’s tolerable.

There are vestiges of the full to bursting warmth he’d experienced sitting across from Rey, but mostly it’s cooled, and he’s left feeling every bit of the last month of travel along with the shame and frustration of the last hour.

“Why am I such a fucking dick,” he says,

“Because you can get away with it.”

Rey is on the sidewalk, holding a box. She looks like an orphan out of a Dickens novel, in her long skirt and sweater, a beanie pulled down over her hair.

“Nice hat.”

“Amilyn randomly had it She heard me mention how cold it is, and then she reached in her bag and there it was. Is she Mary Poppins?”

“Maybe.” He takes another drag and she shifts the box to her other hand. “Get in if you’re cold.”

She comes around to the driver’s side. “There’s no way you’re driving. Move over.” She doesn’t bother stifling her giggles as he struggles to slide into the other seat. When he’s settled, she and hands him the box before climbing in. “It’s your pie. Vegan pumpkin.”

Of course it is. He swallows the lump in his throat and opens it. Perfectly golden crust, the right amount of caramelization on top, coconut whip piped around the edge.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “About all of that inside. I know they’re teasing, but they just get under my
“I can feel you doing it right now. You think I’m an ungrateful brat.” She doesn’t say anything, staring straight ahead as she turns the key and puts the car in gear. “You think I should fall on my knees in front of her because she didn’t give me away? You saw that photo of her carrying me on her back at that anti-war rally?”

“Yes.”

“You know how many other photos there are of me with my mother from the time I was a year old until the war ended?”

“How could I know that?”

“There’s four. The world needed saving and she paused long enough to have me and make sure I knew how to walk and then she was off again. From what I hear, if she could have, she would have chartered a jet herself to help with the evacuation of Saigon.”

“Kylo—”

“Oh, I fucking know. It was important, and bigger than one little kid and Halloween or Hanukkah. That’s what everyone’s always told me. Even after the war was over, there was always another cause, and I’ve never been allowed to be mad about it.”

Rey stops at a stop sign and puts the car in park.

“I wasn’t going to say you can’t be mad about it. What I’m saying is that you need to forgive her.”

“I don’t have to do anything,” he says.

“I didn’t say you have to. No one can make you. But you need to let it go, because all holding onto
it has ever done is hurt you, right? It’s like you’re so mad at her for not being there when you
needed her, but you’re obsessed with proving you don’t need her anyway.”

“No, I—”

“Shut up!”

“What?”

“Shh!” she says and jabs at the volume button on the radio. “Holy shit.”

He listens. Rey's voice comes out of the speakers. From the radio. It’s her single.

“Wow.”

“Shut up!”

He closes his mouth and they sit and listen. One car pulls up behind them, and after honking once,
pulls around. They yell something crude as they pass, but neither of them acknowledges it.
Sometime around the end of the second verse, her hand sneaks into his. By the end of the bridge,
she’s crying. As the final chords fade out, the DJ comes in, identifying the song, giving Rey’s
name. She turns to him.

“Is it real, isn’t it?” she whispers. He’s never seen someone look so scared, and happy, and
beautiful.

“Yeah,” he says. “It is.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Take on Me" by a-ha There's a really beautiful unplugged version
of this song here.
Rey’s first view of Manhattan had been through the window of a tour van, just before dawn, rolling in from New Jersey across the George Washington Bridge. She’d been sleeping when Jess poked her in the ribs.

“The view is better from the Queensboro,” she said. “But I don’t want you to miss this.”

Rey remembers her heart leaping, despite her exhaustion, despite the skyline being shrouded in fog. More than any other land mark she saw on tour, seeing New York for the first time made her feel the most like she’d made it. Seeing it from the air as the plane circled the island before heading towards Queens, Rey experiences a similar jolt of joy, not just at the scope of the city and its seeming serenity from the air, but because she has memories here now, all of them living on this little island, all with the man who is waiting for her at the airport.

He’s there to meet her at the gate, and though it’s only been a few days since she’s seen him, she runs into his arms with the same enthusiasm as if it had been a month.

“How was your flight?” he asks when they break apart.

“My seatmate kept looking at me like she was trying to figure out who I am but didn’t want to ask, so I pretended to go to sleep and ended up actually falling asleep for the whole flight. I even missed the meal.”

“You, Rey Kenobi, missed a meal?”

“I did.”

“Hungry?”

“Starving.”

“It’s a long drive so I brought you a snack,” he says as they get in the waiting town car. He hands her a brown bakery box with six pastries inside. They’re kind of like donuts, but without holes, covered in powdered sugar with a dollop of red jam on top. They smell like funnel cakes, but lighter, as though someone had actually changed the oil in the fryer in the last decade.

“Holy fuck,” she whispers.

“Wait until you taste one.”

She takes one out—it’s almost the size of her hand—and when she bites it, discovers that the jam isn’t just on top, it’s filled with it. It’s one of the best things she’s ever tasted.

“Are these all for me?” she asks, powdered sugar wafting from her lips.

He laughs and swipes a bit of jelly from her cheek with his thumb. “I’ve got some at the loft. I’ve been eating them all week.”

Rey grabs his hand and licks the jelly from his thumb. He sucks in a breath and says her name.
“What? You don’t want it. There might be gelatin in it.”

He pays close attention to her mouth as she finishes the donut. She grabs another one and giggles, holding it up.

“What?”

“It reminds me of your mouth; the red jelly against the powdered sugar.”

“Here I was thinking they reminded me of your tits.”

“My nipples aren’t red.”

“Not yet.”

“Now that’s just weird.”

“You’re right,” he says, and kisses her. She drops the donut back in the box and sets it aside as she climbs into his lap. “We can’t do it in this car.”

“Do what?”

“Fuck,” he says, as she rolls her hips, and she doesn’t know if it’s an answer or an exclamation.

“Who says we’re going to fuck? We can make out and not fuck, right?”

“I think we’ve only managed that one time.”

It’s true. In the week between Thanksgiving and Kylo leaving for New York, they’d fallen into a rhythm that was almost like a normal couple. They both did work things during the day, sometimes they had work things at night, and some nights they stayed in. But no matter how exhausted she was, she always found a reserve of energy for lovemaking, and they’d made good on his promise to fuck in every room of his house, adding a few times at her house for good measure.

But Kylo is right. They shouldn’t fuck in this car. A limo driver after an awards show could expect some sexual shenanigans behind the partition, but it’s probably a less common occurrence during airport runs on a Thursday afternoon. She slides off his lap and picks up the bakery box.

“I’ve been studying,” she says. “Things about Hanukkah. I haven’t gotten to these yet, though.”

“Sufganiyah. Plural, sufganiyot. From the best Israeli bakery in the city.”

“I have a feeling you’re not going to have nearly as many questions about Christmas.”

“It’s not your fault your religion was shoved in my face my entire school career.”

“It’s not even really my religion,” she says. “I don’t really believe any of it.”

“Does that mean we aren’t getting a tree? Because I’ve kind of been excited about having an excuse to get a tree.”

“Really?”

“Fuck yes. They’re cool looking.”

“I guess we have to get one, then.”
Despite everything, Rey does have a few good Christmas memories, because there were always organizations willing to help out. She got her fair share of hats and mittens, but also books and cassettes and a few Barbie dolls. Something about the holiday made all but the worst of her foster parents at least try to be nicer to her, but she’d always felt disconnected from it. Even sitting through the most beautiful midnight mass, she could appreciate the beauty of the candlelit church and the music, but she got the same feeling from watching a sunset or when her voice hit its sweet spot during a song. She feels a sort of freedom, now, to do what she wants with Christmas, with him, to make it hers and theirs.

But first, Hanukkah. This is the sixth night, but he assures her she can dive right in. “It’s just been me all week, and now it’ll just be us.” He’s been here for work, but he told her before he left that he enjoys the holidays more in New York because they feel more real.

They make one stop not far from his loft. He bounds into the tiny deli and comes back with two big white bags, placing them on the seat between them. She peeks inside, but the containers don’t give any clue of their contents other than the smell, which is delicious.

“Do you think you got enough?”

“Should I get more? They’ve got a pretty long waiting list.”

“As if you ever let a waiting list stop you.”

“They wouldn’t let me get away with it in there. They remember when I couldn’t see over the counter.”

She smiles at the thought of him being that small. He told her once that he used to insist on wearing outfits that were all one color, so she imagines him dressed all in blue, standing beside his mother as she ordered. It’s so hard to wrap her head around the idea of him ever being shorter than a shop counter. It’s hard enough to imagine him being shorter than his mother.

“I think we have more than enough.”

At the loft, frost rims the windows, and the view is gray and stark, with splashes of color from blinking Christmas lights, but otherwise it’s exactly the same as when they left in September. She warms her hands on a radiator as he puts out the food.

“We’ve got latkes, honey puffs, and challah. And later there’s brisket for you and kugel for me.”

“What if I want the kugel?”

“Do you even know what it is?”

“That’s the lasagna one?”

“Mmm, close. More like the casserole one. But don’t ever call it that around Leia. Who’s been tutoring you?”

“My landlords, mostly. And Lindsay.”

“Lindsay’s Jewish?”

“How could you not know that?”

“We don’t all know each other.”
“Not what I meant. She works for you.”

“And I’m pretty sure it’s illegal for me to ask her religion.”

“But what about holidays? Doesn’t she ask for them off?”

“That’s all Lorna’s business. But now that you say that, I haven’t seen her around on the holidays and Lorna told me Lindsay would be available on Christmas. Hmm.” He shakes his head.

“Anyway, eat these before they get cold.”

There’s applesauce and sour cream to dip the latkes in. She’s wary of both but tries it anyway.

“Holy shit. This is so fucking good. How have I gone my whole life without eating one?”

They fall silent, and it’s clear they’re both thinking she could have tried one sooner if she’d grown up with his family in her life.

“You’d have hated me,” he says. “I was such a little asshole.”

She picks up on of the honey balls. It’s like a donut hole, but sticky and dense. She pops the whole thing in her mouth. The sweetness is overwhelming in its pureness, and it makes her head swim, but she reaches for another one right away.

Rey has a gift for him, in her bag, but she can’t figure out when she’s supposed to give it to him and she doesn’t want to ask. She’s not even sure if she should stay while he lights the candles, but as the sun sets, he takes her over to a table by a window, where the menorah sits. It’s made of silver and very old, but well cared for, shaped like a tree with a gracefully twisting trunk and nine branches. He gives her a box of blue taper candles.

“What? I can’t.”

“Of course you can. I’m inviting you to. I’ll light them, but you can put them in.”

“You said this holiday isn’t that big a deal, but it feels like it.”

“It’s just because you aren’t used to it, and don’t worry, nothing bad is going to happen if you do it wrong. Lightning won’t strike you down or whatever. I hardly ever do anything I’m supposed to do. Now, start from the right, put six candles in, and I’ll do the rest.”

Hands shaking, she places the candles in their holders. When she’s finished, he takes a seventh candle from the box and lights it, saying a prayer in Hebrew before using it to light the others. She’s not sure if it’s disrespectful to think about how beautiful he looks, or that him speaking Hebrew is kind of hot. When he’s finished, he translates for her.

“So, basically,” he finishes as he puts the candle in the middle slot, “First one is hey thanks for being awesome and the second is thanks for doing us a solid that time.”

In the building across the street, some of the windows glow with little points of light. Does that light offer him a sense of belonging, or of isolation, celebrating the holiday as he is, away from his family with a girl who was raised sort-of-Christian? He’s always come across as casual about his faith but seeing him take things seriously—or seriously for him—makes her feel like an intruder.

But the look he gives her, gazing over the flames, is enough to assure her that he very much wants her here.
“Come on,” he says, taking her hand. Instead of leading her back to the kitchen, though, he takes her to the sofa and fishes his rolling tray out from underneath.

“Seriously?”

“100% kosher.”

“Yeah, but—”

“I swear, it’s no different than having a glass of wine. Except I won’t cause a scene at the dinner table.”

Rey smiles. “Speaking of, you know I had lunch with Amilyn the other day?”

“Oh, God.”

“What? It was fun. Well, intense, but fun, too. And she read my cards.”

He lights the joint, which he’d rolled in about sixty seconds, and hands it to her. “Yeah?”

“Nothing elaborate. This three-card thing, past, present, future.”

“What’s the verdict?”

Rey stalls, taking an enormous hit from the joint. The first card was fine, the six of cups, all about her naivete, all that time waiting for her mom to come back. And even though she’d drawn the Sun for the future, which was hopeful, before that, Rey had been shaken when Amilyn turned over the Seven of Swords for her present. She had gone through a brief phase when she begged Ahsoka to teach her how to read, and thought she never became an expert, but she knew what that card meant. Betrayal and deception. Her face had grown hot when she saw it, and Amilyn looked concerned, but instead of accusing Rey of being a liar, she insisted that Rey take a second look at all of her contracts.

If she tells Kylo, he’ll either brush it all off as hippie nonsense, or agree that it’s about her career, but she’s still afraid to bring it up. She’s gotten to the point where she hardly thinks about that anymore. Maybe someday she won’t think of it at all.

Out of breath, she exhales and waves away the smoke. “I don’t remember the details, really. You know how tarot is. It was all pretty general.”

“Watch out, though. Every once in a while, she hits on something.” He takes the joint back from her and kisses her on the forehead. “Let’s eat.”

When the candles have burned down and they’ve eaten and smoked and eaten again, she gets his present from her bag. The wrapping paper is plain white, but the blue ribbon is embossed with silver dreidels.

“It’s okay for me to give you a gift, right?”

“Always.”

“I mean, now.”

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid you won’t like it.”
He smiles and holds out his hand. “It’s fine.”

“You haven’t seen it yet.”

“It’s fine.”

The woman at the shop suggested a cook book or fancy cooking oil, but Kylo isn’t much of a cook, so they’d settled on a bar of olive oil soap. The scent—bergamot and clary sage—fills the room as he opens the box.

“It’s okay?”

“It’s perfect,” he says. “I got you something, too.” He pulls a box wrapped in silver paper from behind a sofa cushion. It’s slender, only an inch thick and the size of a piece of paper. Inside, there’s a package of Elixir guitar strings and a sheet of paper. She reads it and looks at him.

“Kylo, what is this?”

“You helped me with the chorus for ‘Silencer,’ and it made the album, so you get a writing credit. 10%. If we ship platinum, you’ll clear about ten grand.”

“I changed one line and I was half kidding when I said it.”

He shrugs. “It saved the song though. But that’s how it works.”

She can’t comprehend it, and she has to excuse herself, so she can sit down on the bathroom floor and try not to hyperventilate. She’s gone from a life where working forty hours a week might not be enough to get by, to one where she can make ten thousand dollars from an offhand comment.

Kylo knocks on the door. “Hey, are you alright in there?”

“I’m fine!”

“Can I come in?”

“If you want.”

He eases the door open and smiles softly when he sees her. “I had a feeling you were freaking out.” He sits on the floor next to her. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have sprung that on you like that.”

“I think it would have been a shock no matter what.”

“You can’t be afraid of being successful.”

“It’s hard to feel like I’m not worth it.”

“Well, you need to get over that before you go on TRL.”

“Not the best time to bring that up!”

“Sorry. Shit. Yeah. I’m sorry.” He takes her hands in his and starts rubbing them. “Do you want me to go with you?”

“Well, yeah. I assumed you were.”

“I thought you might want it to be your thing. I might pull focus.”
“I want you there. I don’t think I can do it if you’re not there.”

“Have you seen the video yet?”

She smiles. “Yes! Astrid flew out and I watched a couple of different cuts she had. She let me choose. It’s so dreamy. Watching myself was weird but not as bad as I thought it would be.”

It had been so surreal, and she’d kind of wished that Kylo had been there to watch it with her, but she also loves that he’ll see the video for the first time when it airs. But right now, the thought of any of it makes her stomach churn.

“Can we talk about something else?”

“Yes. But can we do that on the couch. Or in the kitchen. Or in bed. Or anywhere else?”

“I guess.”

He stands up and grabs her hands to help her up. “Hey,” he says, stopping at the door. “Who’s hosting on Monday?”

“Carson Daly. You still going to come?”

He frowns and loops his finger through her belt loop, pulling her toward him. “Fuck yes. And I’ll even be nice to him. Just don’t ever doubt how much I love you, okay?”

“Never,” she says, closing the distance between them.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen

I don't think the term is used much anymore but in the Soundscan era, if an album or single shipped gold or platinum it meant that it had achieved that status based on first week retailer orders.

Big big big big shoutout to Zaf again for help with this one.
“‘Dear Kylo, I’ve never written a fan letter before. I know that sounds really cheesy, but it’s true. I always thought it was lame before, because who even knows if the person will see it, much less answer it. So if there’s an assistant reading this, hi, I guess? Maybe at least let Kylo see this one because it’s not creepy or weird? If Kylo is reading this, then HI! And please don’t think I’m weird.’ Kylo, do you think she’s weird?

“It’s too early to tell,” Kylo says as he spoons coffee into the machine. “Did she give any instructions for what to do if I let my girlfriend reads it?” He looks over at her, and loses count of the number of spoonfuls he’s put in.

She’s lying on her stomach on the bed, surrounded by stacks of fan letters, wearing his shirt and nothing else, her feet in the air and crossed at the ankle. The shirt is hiked up so that a hint of the curve of her ass peeks out.

There are times when he feels like a dirty old man, the way he loves her body. It feels obscene.

“I think those instructions would be for me to fuck off,” Rey says. “She goes on to say that Starkiller changed her life and begs you guys to play Salt Lake City on the next tour.”

“Salt Lake City,” he says, still staring at her ass and those impossible legs.

“Yeah.”

“In Utah.”

“That’s the one.”

“Put that one in the ‘answer’ pile and I’ll take a look at it. I’ll need to let her down gently.”

The shirt hikes up even higher as Rey reaches out to put the letter in the stack. She hums softly as she chooses another letter and unfolds it. He gives up on the coffee and goes to the bed.

“This one’s in sparkly gel pen, three different colors.”

He kneels on the bed and straddles her legs, sitting back on her thighs and sliding his hands up her shirt. “How old is she?”

“Nineteen,” she says, breath hitching as he pushes the shirt up and plants a kiss in the middle of her back.

“What does she have to say?”

“She says—a—and I break off as Kylo’s hands slide down her back and to her ass. “She says that you have the most beautiful eyes she’s ever seen.”

“What else?”

Rey sucks in a huge breath as his thumb grazes her pussy. She’s so wet already that he easily slides his index finger inside her. She tightens around him, and her fist tightens around the letter.
“Um, she also likes your hands. And I’m 100% with her on that.”

He adds another finger and Rey raises her hips, pushing back every so lightly against his hand.

“Read it, verbatim,” he says as he stretches out, pressing against her back and snaking his hand under her. Her clit is swollen and slick like the rest of her and she squirms as he puts pressure on it.

“What I wouldn’t give to have those hands all over my body. I know you’re taken right now but it doesn’t keep a girl from fantasizing, you know?” She stops reading and looks over her shoulder at him. “Wait, I thought they screened your mail?”

“Only the gross or violent stuff.” He kisses her on her perfect mouth. “I think they figured the sexy stuff might encourage me to act like other rock stars.”

“H-how’s that?” she asks as he applies more pressure to her clit and grinds against her. “Fucking groupies.”

“Some of your fans call me a groupie.”

“They’re fucking nuts. What else does she say?” It would be so easy to just fuck her right now. All he needs to do is push down his pants and he can be inside her in seconds, but it’s more fun watching, feeling her squirm as she clutches the fan letter, desperately trying to focus on the words.”

“My friend dared me to write that last part, but I’m leaving it because I don’t want to start over, and it’s kind of true anyway.’ *Fuck.* Will you please just fuck me?”

“Is that what the letter says? She’s bold.”

“No. I want you to fuck me.”

“You’ve already showered,” he says. He pushes her hair to the side and whispers in her ear, “Do you want to go on national television with my cum inside you?”

At that, she wiggles out from underneath him and rolls over on her back. “I can take another shower. And you can come on my tits.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” he says, placing a kiss on her navel, and working his way down.

Going to MTV as a guest of an artist is a new experience for Kylo. It’s especially surreal to be going as part of someone else’s entourage.

“Don’t call it an entourage,” she hisses at him on the way down to the car. “I didn’t ask for all these people; they just want to make sure it goes smoothly.”

“A bunch of people whose job it is to make your life easier. There should be a word for that.”

“It’s just Maz, and Finn, and a label publicist and the stylist and an assistant. And Robyn’s not even my assistant, she’s Finn’s.”

“Okay. So, like, an entourage.”

“If you say so,” she concedes. “At least we have our own car, though.”
“Small favors,” he says.

As they step out into the sun, the light bounces off Rey’s hair in new ways. She’s had it highlighted, for one, and it’s healthier overall than it was when they first made this trip. There’s a polish to her that wasn’t there before—even after Kare’ worked her magic for the VMAs—from her brows to her nails and the ease with which she wears clothes that don’t belong to her. The purple velvet flares—cut so low she had to give in and visit a waxer—and a yellow cropped sweater cost more combined than the coat he gave her, which she’d thrown on as casually as a jean jacket on their way out the door.

If he met her for the first time today, he might be too intimidated to talk to her.

She chatters at him during the car ride, the brightness of her tone not quite masking her nervousness. He responds when needed, holding her hand, rubbing her thigh when necessary. Her anxiety is understandable. He’d been a seasoned musician, with a ton of television appearances under his belt by the time he went on the show the first time, and he’d thrown up seconds before going on. And he hadn’t had to go up there alone. Having your work put up to be judged by an entire nation of picky, fickle teens and young adults is like being thrown to the wolves.

“You know,” she says, “I think I’m more nervous about this stunt they’re having me do than I am about the video.”

“We had to do three-legged races with fans once. In the studio. They paired me with a girl who was four ten.”

“Well, I guess you win.”

They approach the studio the same way they did in September, and while there are fewer fans outside, the paparazzi presence is at least double.

“How do you want to handle it?” she asks.

“That’s up to you. It’s your day.”

“Just walk in, regular speed?”

“Sure.”

“Sunglasses?”

“Probably not.”

“God it’s so weird to have to have a conversation about how we’re going to walk into a building.”

“It’s the job you chose.”

She sighs and looks out the window, squaring her shoulders. “You’re right, and it’s silly to worry about it.”

The paps surge toward them when the driver opens their door, but studio security keeps them at bay as Kylo helps Rey out of the car.

Rey’s A&R guy leads the way through the crowd, with his assistant, Robyn, at his side. Finn always made him nervous, even at First Order. He’s handsome, charismatic, but also exudes innate integrity. A rare thing in the industry, and especially at the label. Today, for some reason, Finn
looks at him with something like sympathy, which is odd, and doesn’t make him feel any more at ease.

He avoids Maz Kanata completely. She’s always had a knack for seeing through people and he’s always felt particularly transparent around her.

There’s mild chaos in the hallway when they all file in, until Finn’s assistant starts corolling people.

“Let’s get Rey into hair and makeup,” Robyn says. “Kylo, you can wait in the green room.” It’s a statement, not a request, and she starts leading Rey away before he can answer.

“Um, I guess I’ll see you,” he says.

“Hold on,” Rey says to Robyn and comes over to him. She stands on her toes to kiss him. “I love you.”

“Same.”

“I’ll come find you before I go on.”

The green room is mercifully empty, and the intern leaves him alone after fetching him a bottled water. It’s the first time he’s been alone since Rey arrived, and while he’s always valued some level of solitude in the past, he finds it too quiet, too still. Rey isn’t the most boisterous person, but her presence is so alive that it sings. It’s idiotic, to miss her after five minutes, but it’s his reality in the moment, so he tumbles it over and over in his mind like he’s polishing a stone.

Twenty minutes later, she comes in alone and closes the door, sitting down next to him with her head on his shoulder. She’s shaking when he takes her in his arms. “Hey, you’re going to kill out there.”

“You haven’t even seen it.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“I don’t know if your blind faith is reassuring or just setting me up for disappointment.”

“It’s not blind faith. I’ve heard your music, you’ve talked about your vision and your art. It has to be good.”

She stands up and takes his hand. “Okay, you’re getting sappy. Let’s go.”

“I think I’m gonna watch on the monitor from here.”

“Why?”

“That way I don’t have to talk to Carson.” Her face falls and he stands up, taking her face in his hands. “I’m kidding. But it’s your moment, and I’ll be a distraction.”

“I need you out there.”

“No, you don’t. I promise. You’ve got yourself, and Finn is way more experienced with this kind of thing than I am.”

“You’ve been on the show so many times.”
“Yeah, but I’ve always been here for myself.” Her eyes are so big, and her lip is trembling, and he almost relents, but this moment needs to be hers alone. The whole day will already be wrapped up in memories of them, but no matter what happens between them, at least she’ll have this without him. “Those makeup ladies are going to be pissed if you start crying.”

“They already hate me.”

“What?”

“I snapped at one of them because she wanted to use Great Lash and it makes my eyes water.”

“Rey Kenobi, I am shocked.”

“Not as shocked as I am. But I apologized.”

The door opens, and the intern pops her head in. “Miss Kenobi, we’re live in two minutes.”

“Thank you, um, Rosanne?”

“Roxanne.”

“Right, sorry. Roxanne. I’m coming.” The door closes, and she looks up at him. “I’m such a shit.”

“You’re nervous. Now, rip the Band-Aid off and get the fuck out there.”

She kisses him one more time, hard, and is out the door. He turns on the monitor, which has the studio feed, and the television, which shows the broadcast, and sits back, keeping it muted until Rey comes on. Carson announces her right before the top five videos. She looks incredible on camera, but it’s so surreal seeing her there, in front of those big windows, Times Square behind her. He can tell she’s nervous, from the way she grips the microphone and stands with her toes turned inward, but it’s doubtful anyone who doesn’t know her can tell. She banters with Carson like a pro and manages to brush off his questions about her relationship without coming off like a bitch. Whoever has been coaching her is a genius. Probably that Robyn chick. She seems terrifyingly efficient in ways Lorna could only dream of.

Before a commercial break, Carson tells her that he heard she does her own car repairs.

“Nothing major, but yeah, all the basic maintenance. Brakes, oil changes, that kind of thing.”

“As you know, D’an from the Modal Nodes worked in an auto shop before the band had their break, and he’d like to challenge you to a friendly competition.”

“Um, sure!” Rey says, and they all pretend it hadn’t been planned a week in advance as they cut to commercial.

On the monitor, two compact cars are rolled into the studio, and a pair of producers help Rey into a pair of coveralls and pull her hair back. D’an comes out to greet Rey, wearing matching coveralls.

The Modal Nodes had come up with a lot of other band during the Swing resurgence, but unlike the others, had managed to stick around after the kids moved on to other things. He’s a nice enough guy, nerdy even for a musician, but he actually knows his shit, so Kylo has enjoyed the brief conversations they’ve had. They’d strictly talked music, though, so Kylo had no clue he was a former mechanic. He’s obviously a good sport, though, since he’s willing to risk getting his ass handed to him on television.
When they come back from break, Kylo thinks he’s prepared, but he had no idea that watching his girlfriend change the oil in a broken-down Ford Festiva while wearing grey coveralls would get him going like this. And it’s mostly about the look on her face; the same determined look she has when she’s working on a particularly hard guitar lick or trying to get through the Sunday Times crossword. It’s doubly impressive that she’s so collected, considering she’s doing it minutes before the biggest moment in her career so far.

D’an is a good competitor, but he’s not as small or fast, so Rey finishes up seconds before him. He’s a great sport about it, shaking her hand and complimenting her. To Carson’s credit, he doesn’t make any obnoxious jabs about being beaten by a girl.

Carson recaps the previous five videos, and the studio feed is a blur of activity as they get Rey out of her coveralls and touch up her hair and makeup. By the time they cut back to her, the only sign that the car stunt happened is a flush in her cheeks.

Kylo is mesmerized, and more than a little surprised that he isn’t rock hard.

While her appearance on the show was stunning, the video is something else entirely. Shot on Super 8, it has a dreamy, nostalgic quality, without the self-aware style of an old home video. The A reel is Rey at a small town bonfire party, surrounded by wholesome looking young people, doing what young people do at parties. It’s a little unclear what everyone is drinking and there’s a distinct lack of smoking, tobacco or otherwise, but the vibe is clear. Rey, however, is always slightly apart, never quite part of any group, floating on the periphery. The B reel shows Rey performing on a stage in a half burned social hall. As the song progresses, as Rey discovers what home really means, she becomes more a part of the gathering, and the party guests show up at her performance.

It’s deceptively simple, and absolutely perfect for the song and for the audience Rey wants to reach. He doesn’t know what’s greater; his pride at her performance, or envy that she gets to be exactly the artist she wants to be. He does know that he can’t sit in this room another second, and he gets to the studio just as she’s finishing her follow up with Carson. He doesn’t plan it this way, but the camera man happens to follow her through the crowd, capturing the moment she leaps into his arms, wrapping her legs and arms around him.

“Was it okay?” she whispers.

“It was perfect,” he says. “You were perfect.” They probably cut to commercial then. He doesn’t know or care.

The next afternoon, as they’re getting ready to watch the countdown, Rey tries to manage her expectations. Last night they’d had people over to celebrate, but today she wants it to be the two of them, so she doesn’t have to be disappointed in front of others.

“If I’m not eight, nine, or ten, I’m not going to be on there,” she says.

“Come the fuck on. Videos debut higher than that all the time.”

“Yes, people like you or the Backstreet Boys or Britney Spears. I was talking to Jessika and she said new artists rarely debut higher than seven. Though she said I’m kind of lucky because Christina’s the only one of the big four on there right now and Jessica Simpson’s barely holding on.”

“Jessika sure sounds encouraging.”
“She’s realistic, and honestly knows a lot more about it than you. Have you ever watched an episode you weren’t on?”

“I’ve never watched an episode I am on.”

“Exactly. Anyway, my single has only been out for three weeks and just cracked the top twenty. Which fuck, yes I know that’s insanely amazing and I can’t believe it, and I was lucky to even get a TRL premiere, but I’m not going to pretend that’s enough to get me on the countdown.”

“The video is amazing, though, and you were so fucking good yesterday.” Maz and the label publicist started getting calls within minutes of the video airing, and both had to skip Rey and Kylo’s afterparty so they could field them. Rey had to turn her phone off so she could manage conversation, there were so many people calling just to congratulate her.

“I’m just trying to be realistic. This way it’s not a disappointment if I don’t get on, and a surprise if I do.”

“Let’s make a bet, then.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. I bet your video is going to debut today. If it doesn’t, I’ll take out an ad in the Village Voice saying that Kid Greedo is a genius and the voice of his generation.”

“Holy shit. And if it does?”

“You tell me.”

She thinks about it, scrunching her face up in a way that made it impossible not to kiss her on the nose. “Stop it, you’re distracting me.”

“Sorry!”

“I’ll… let you choose my next single.”

“For real? No questions asked?”

“Poe and Leia will have to approve it but yeah, I’ll go to them with whatever you choose and fight as hard as if it was my first choice.”

“What if it is your first choice? Is this really that much of a risk for you?”

“You always try to push me out of my comfort zone, so yeah.”

“Deal,” he says, holding up his pinky. She locks hers with his and they shake, adding a kiss for good measure.

When the countdown starts, Rey is literally sitting on the edge of her seat, and watches through her hands every time a video is announced. When they get to eight without seeing her video, she declares her victory.

“Better start writing that ad,” she says as the commercial break begins.

“It’s not over yet.”

Kylo does have some doubts when she doesn’t come in at seven, but when Carson says that there’s
a debut on the countdown, Rey squeezes his hand and gasps. He can barely concentrate on what Carson is saying between the pain in his hand and Rey’s hyperventilating, but there’s no mistaking when he says her name and presents the video.

Rey leaps up, standing on the couch and pointing at the television. “Holy. Holy shit I’m on TRL! Fuck. Number six! Fuck.” Kylo jumps up and grabs her around the waist, spinning her around. She wraps her legs and arms around him and kisses him. “I’m never doubting you again.”

He smiles, but when she frowns, he’s sure it hasn’t reached his eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s dumb.”

“What?”

“It just hit me that you kind of belong to everyone now.”

She unfolds her legs and he eases her to the ground. “Are you saying I belonged to you, before?”

“That’s not what I meant. You’re just, out there, now, and so many more people are going to love you and want a piece of you.”

“They can’t have it.”

He kisses her again, but she can’t stop smiling.

“I can’t believe this is my fucking life,” she says. “We need to celebrate. My treat. I’m going to change clothes. You should, too. Something—”

She’s interrupted by her cell phone ringing.

“Right on schedule.” Kylo laughs.

“What?”

“You remember yesterday, after the show? That’s the first of those same hundred or so people calling to congratulate you.”

“I didn’t even know half those people. And half the ones I did know, I don’t even know how they got my number.”

“They all really want to get to know you better.”

“Well,” she says, as she holds down the power button. “It’s a good thing I’ve got voicemail. Go change. Something fancy.”

What on earth could he do but comply, when she put it like that?

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Everlong" by the Foo Fighters.
I got nostalgic about TRL again writing this one. What a time to be alive and unashamedly love pop music.
Strange Days Have Tracked Us Down

It snows New Year’s Eve morning, a fine white powder atop the dirty slush leftover from the Christmas Eve storm. Rey’s first white Christmas, and she hadn’t even gone outside, instead spending it in a state of bliss so rarified she kept catching herself holding her breath.

None of it had been extravagant. They hadn’t seen another soul, and the streets outside were more deeply quiet than she would have thought possible, so that even the trudge of a single pair of boots in the street below found its way up to them.

Tonight, the streets are loud and surging. Revelers have been staking claims in Times Square since yesterday, and the crowd spills into the streets around the Midtown hotel suite where Rey and Kylo are getting ready for the First Order party. They don’t plan to stay the night, but traffic is so insane already that even the few blocks from the hotel to the Hammerstein could take half an hour or more.

“It’ll clear out pretty quickly after midnight,” Kylo assured her. “It should be clear sailing getting back downtown.” Rey had badly wanted to wake up somewhere familiar.

“Wouldn’t it be faster just to walk to the party?”

“You know I don’t mind taking the subway or walking, but tonight is definitely not the night. Especially in those shoes.”

The shoes are a pair of silver Manolo Blahnik stilettos, purchased to celebrate her TRL debut, but only after a breathless phone call to her business manager.

“Rey, you’ve been ridiculously careful with your money,” Korr told her. “Treat yourself. Just don’t go crazy.”

She picked out a basic black pair first, though they were still so luxurious that she finally understood what people meant when they called leather “buttery.” But Kylo pointed her toward the silver ones.

“It’s not just because I think they’re sexier. I mean, they are. But if you get the black ones, before too long they’ll just be another pair of black shoes. But these, you’ll remember yesterday every time you look at them.”

Her hand only shook a little when she handed over her shiny new AmEx. All her anxiety fled when they were back at the loft and Kylo insisted she wear them while they fucked.

To be honest, her dress for tonight, a borrowed Anna Sui, isn’t the most practical choice for walking either. Black and sheer with subtle sparkle, the high neck is the only thing demure about it. It’s backless and requires double sided tape to prevent her ass crack from showing. The skirt barely covers said ass, though a layer of beaded fringe gives her a semblance of modesty. She’s not totally sure about it, yet, but Kare’ reminded her that she’s never going to be this beautiful again so she may as well go for it. A bit morbid, but it worked.

Heavy eye makeup. Messy updo. She looks in the mirror at a stranger, but that stranger is someone she’d be dying to know if she saw her.
“Holy shit!” Kylo says from behind her.

“Fuck, you aren’t supposed to see me yet! I’m not ready.”

“Sorry, you were singing to yourself and then you got quiet for a long time, so I was just checking in.”

“I’m okay, just seriously concentrating on my makeup. You won’t believe it, but I’m regretting deciding to do it myself.”

“Oh yeah?”

“After all the fittings for the dress and Kare’ getting me into it, I was tired of being touched and fussed over. What I should have done was order up some champagne and snacks for the Kare’ and the makeup artist and taken a half hour for myself instead of freaking out and sending them away.”

“Surely you didn’t actually freak out, though?”

She folds her arms and leans against the vanity. “Yeah, sort of. I mean, I didn’t yell or anything, but I wasn’t exactly nice about it. Kare’ looked so disappointed.”

“I can have Lorna send them flowers.”

“No,” she says. “I’ll call them tomorrow morning.”

He walks over to her and lays his hands on her shoulders. “You’re beautiful. And thoughtful and kind, and everyone has bad days. When’s the last time you ate?”

“Fuck. I had that slice of pizza at like, ten. I’m not used to going hungry anymore. Is there food at the party?”

“Yes, but there’s also food in the other room.”

“I love you so much,” she says.

They eat at the coffee table, Rey with a towel draped over her.

“You know the Backstreet Boys have a video premiering tonight, so I’m probably going to get pushed off again on Monday.” She’s been on and off the countdown since her debut, and gotten as high as number four.

“Not necessarily.”

“We’ll see. Hey, when are you going to shoot your video?”

He shrugs. “I don’t even know what the single is now, and the album release got pushed back again. It’s all fucked. The changes have come so fast that at this point it’s unclear if we’re getting a release at all in the first quarter.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Nope. I want to eat these fries and smoke a joint. Maybe go to this little party I heard about.”

“You don’t really want to go to this party, do you.”

“I’ll go anywhere if it’s with you, but no, not particularly.”
“We don’t have to, then. We can go somewhere else, or stay in.”

“I doesn’t matter if I want to go, I have to go. Besides, you’re gonna piss a lot of people off if there aren’t any pictures of you in that dress. And I really want to know what it’s like to walk into a room with you wearing it.”

“When did you become such a smooth talker?”

“When I found someone I could relax with.”

She laughs, and her heart feels about twelve sizes too big for her chest. “Okay, we’ll go. And we’ll make the most of it.”

It’s frigid outside, and Rey is grateful for her coat even for the short trip to the car. Someone at Burberry saw photos of her in her green coat and they’d sent her a formal black one. This, she gets to keep. She’s thinking of sending it to Soshanna when she gets back to California, since she doesn’t really need it.

Their hotel is crawling with celebrities, so it’s also surrounded by fans and photographers. The chaos means that none of them focus on Rey and Kylo for long, especially since their exit coincides with Mariah Carey’s departure. Rey is so distracted craning her neck to get a look at Mariah that she catches her heel in a sidewalk crack. Kylo catches her before she can stumble and a half-dozen lenses point in their direction.

“Great. I look like I’m smashed already and it’s not even 9.”

“They’re trying to get an upskirt shot,” he says in her ear.

“Are you kidding me?”

“No.” He stands by the door as she gets into the car, shielding her from view. A few of the more intrepid photographers crouch on the ground to get a better angle, but hotel security muscles them out of the way.

“Thank you,” she says, when Kylo climbs into the car. His face is tense, his jaw working back and forth as he stares ahead.

“I was this close to kicking one of those assholes in the face.”

“I’m sorry.”

He looks at her, suddenly softer. “What are you sorry about?”

“I should have buttoned my coat. Not worn this dress.”

“Those vultures would try to get a shot up Mother Teresa’s skirt if the money was right.”

“Gross,” Rey says. “Fucking gross.” It puts a lead weight in her stomach, the idea of being nothing but a payday for someone. Usually, she doesn’t care that much about the photographers other than being self-conscious about how she looks, and even that is starting to go away. But this is a different feeling, knowing that the more well-known she becomes, the less human she’ll be to them.

“Just take a deep breath and remind yourself what you could have been doing tonight.”

“Oh,” she sighs. New Year’s Eve the last few years had been lowkey and oddly relaxing, because it
was one of the best nights or babysitting. Making cookies with children and cuddling with them on the couch while they tried to stay awake to watch the ball drop wasn’t a bad way to spend an evening. Kylo’s suggestion was probably meant to remind her how fortunate she is, going to a fancy party with fancy people in a fancy dress, but it makes her feel better by simply bringing up some happy memories.

She looks at him and puts her hand on his cheek. Yeah, this might be fun, too, even if she’s most looking forward to getting home, out of this dress, and into bed. Driving him crazy for a few hours before hand sounds like a good idea in the meantime.

Outside the party, there’s a legitimate red carpet, where she poses without her coat, barely suppressing her shivers. The photographers beg for a back view of the dress, and she obliges, tossing a smile over her shoulder.

“They’re going to love you for at least a week for that,” Kylo says as they reach the door.

Inside, the Ballroom floor is completely transformed from how it looked when she played there in the Fall. Has it really only been three months? It feels like a lifetime ago.

The white tablecloths and decadent floral arrangements are much more in line with the room’s elaborate fresco ceiling. Instead of going the futuristic route, the event designers were apparently paying homage to the turn of the previous century.

Like the VMAs, the room is teeming with gorgeous people. Rey doesn’t recognize all of them, because First Order is a huge company, and this is only one of their parties, but she recognizes enough people to leave her momentarily starstruck. Kylo, for his part, never seems to experience this. It’s either total arrogance, or a symptom of growing up surrounded by famous people. Maybe both. Whatever it is, it means he doesn’t hesitate to introduce her to as many people as possible. She’s dumbfounded at how many of the have seen her video or heard her single. She ends up making three lunch dates and two coffee dates. One artist’s wife is a designer who would love to have Rey down to her atelier to look at her spring line. Someone else wants Rey to write her a song. Someone else wants her to sing a hook. But as nice as everyone is, she can’t shake the knowledge that none of these people would give her the time of day if she didn’t have a hit single, if she wasn’t in the room with this particular man.

As they work the room, Kylo keeps a drink in his hand, but nurses it slowly and drinks a glass of sparkling water immediately after. The champagne starts flowing early (they break out the good stuff at midnight, according to Kylo) and she has enough to make her face feel warm, but not completely tipsy. Combined with the weed they smoked, she’s generally mellow. A few minutes before midnight, hey notice that their sparklers and noisemakers have disappeared from their table, so Kylo goes to hunt some down. He leaves her his tux jacket. Despite the crowd, she’s essentially half dressed and can’t stop shivering.

Hux, whom Kylo had been avoiding all night, stumbles over and sits down in the chair next to her. She looks in the direction where Kylo headed, but he’s deep in conversation with a tall, blonde woman.

“That’s Phasma,” Hux says. “Our head of A&R. Probably breaking the news about another delay. Snoke’s really turning the screws on this one.”

“Why do they keep pushing it back?”

Hux smiles. “Because your boyfriend won’t toe the fucking line.”
“What?” she asks, but he waves the question off, squinting at her as though she were twenty feet away rather than two.

“I’ve seen what they’re doing with your marketing, pushing the ‘rags to riches’ angle. But you didn’t have it that bad, did you? Graduated high school. Never homeless. Hopefully not too much trouble with your foster fathers.”

What the hell does this guy have against her? She has never had anything resembling a pleasant interaction with her.

“I’m aware that it could have been worse,” she says, hoping her voice is as icy as she feels. “What’s your point?”

“My point is you’re a smug little bitch considering where you came from and the reason you’re here.”

Rey’s face gets hot, and it’s a monumental feat, resisting the urge to punch him in the face like she had that awful video director. “The reason I’m here? Other than being on a date?”

Hux scoots his chair closer to her. She looks over his shoulder but Kylo has only moved a few feet closer to his destination and has been stopped by another person.

“You used to frequent the Groupie Central boards, did you not?”

“How did—I wasn’t—what does that have to do with anything?”

“Surely, after your first little encounter that went nowhere, you read up on him. How he always takes girls backstage to talk, then actually talks to them? How he’d only had one girlfriend in his life? Ring a bell?”

“Yeah but, he’s—”

“Picky? Maybe.” He looks Rey up and down as if that can’t possibly be the case. “I don’t know. I don’t care. What matters is what the press and his fans think, and it was leaning heavily toward gay.”

“He’s not. And why would that even matter?”

Hux waves his hand again and Rey resists the urge to bite it. “I know he’s not. You know he’s not, but no one else knew, and no matter what our bleeding hearts may think, it matters when your fans are mostly teenage girls. So, we decided that image problem needed a fix, and you’re the fix.”

“The fix?”

“Are you really that dim? Kylo always talks about you like you’re the bright center of the universe.”

The ball of lead is sitting in Rey’s stomach again. She thinks she knows what he’s getting at, but it would be too absurd, too perfectly ironic, to be true. It must be something else, or Hux has somehow found out her secret and is taunting her.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Let me put it to you simply. He asked you out so people would stop saying he’s gay.”

“That’s—that’s stupid,” she stutters, panic setting in. “He wouldn’t care what people think.”
“How much time have you actually spent with him, outside his bed? I think, once you really get to
know him, you’ll find he cares far too much about what people think. My real question in this, was
why you stuck around, but now I think it’s obvious you’re just a stupid, fame hungry little girl.”

“Get the fuck away from me,” she says.

“Of course,” he says, standing up and checking his watch. “Countdown’s about to start. Happy
New Year.

The music stops, and the house lights come up as Hux saunters away, doing that careful walk
people do when they don’t want anyone to think they’re drunk. He grabs a random girl as he goes,
ignoring her protests.

Her ears ring and the brief silence is filled with the noise of conversations all around her. All the
people who haven’t paired off are desperately searching for someone. Everything is lurid, too
bright, as though the lights have been thrown on after last call at a seedy bar instead of a swanky
party. The DJ announces thirty seconds to midnight.

She gets, up, though there’s an odd detachment between her brain and her legs, and pushes through
the crowd, avoiding eye contact until she sees Kylo, still deep in conversation. He spots her and
walks toward her as the countdown starts.

“Ten! Nine! Eight!” the crowd chants as he kisses her on the cheek.

“Sorry, I didn’t make it over there—what’s wrong?”

She stares at him, unable to speak, or move. She doesn’t know if he looks different or if she feels
so different that the whole world has become unknown territory.

“Five! Four! Three!”

He reaches for her hand.

“Two! One! Happy New Year!”

As the east coast slides into the next century, a thousand noise makers and blowouts clatter and
squeal, and the spell is broken. She slaps him across the face.

They freeze again, his hand on his face and Rey clutching her aching hand. No one notices, too
busy in their own revelry. He stares at her, crestfallen. He knows. He knows that she knows. It’s all
the confirmation she needs that Hux wasn’t lying, and as the band kicks into “It’s the End of the
World as We Know It,” Rey runs for the door.

He follows, but she’s smaller and cuts through the crowd more quickly.

The street is chaos. Traffic is stopped, and people are climbing on top of cars and mailboxes, even
climbing lampposts to celebrate. She looks up and down the street, tears freezing on her face. No
taxis, of course, and she can’t wait for the car without Kylo catching up to her.

Kylo bursts out of the doors and she walks south, as fast as she can in these damned shoes,
desperately scanning for a taxi. When she gets to the next cross street, traffic is moving, albeit
slowly, but none of the cabs are free.

And of course, it starts to snow.
“Rey, please wait!” Kylo finally catches up to her. He tries reaching for her again, but she jerks her arm away. Partiers file past, all wishing them a happy new year. A college kid blows a noisemaker right in Kylo’s face and he shoves him away.

“Who told you?”

“It’s true, then?” He doesn’t answer. “Is it true?”

“Rey I can explain. I was going to tell you—“

“How the fuck do you explain this? You started dating me because your record company doesn’t want people to think you’re gay. Do you realize how fucking stupid that is?”

“Rey—

She turns toward the street, holding her arm up in desperation.

“Rey, stop. Yes! It started out that way but then it became real.”

“Before or after you fucked me?”

“Rey. Before. Of course, before.”

She gives up on the taxi but won’t face him. Closing her eyes, she breathes in, the smell of the snow mixed with the putrid muck of the city. Traffic and laughter and church bells ringing. Music thumping from car windows.

“Was it worth it?” she says. He doesn’t answer, just stands there with the snow falling on his beautiful hair.

All she wants is to be at home. Her real home. She’d probably be babysitting Paulo and Dolores tonight, in their comfortable little house, both of them asleep on her shoulders. It’s not the future yet back home.

“I don’t know how to answer that. I’d burn down the world for you.”

She turns to look at him, swiping the tears from her eyes. “Why would I believe that? Why should anybody believe anything about you? Your whole career is based on a lie.”

A cab pulls up and she gets in, giving the driver Kylo’s address. On the way, she thinks about the first time she made this drive, with him, that little flutter in her stomach every time she looked at him, or when his thigh brushed up against hers, when she got a whiff of him. That anticipation. Wondering if she had misread his signals, wondering if hers were clear.

She tries not to think about how they were supposed to make this trip together tonight.

At the loft, she packs like she’s escaping a flood, throwing things randomly into her suitcase and duffel. She’s zipping up the suitcase when she hears him on the stairs.

“A decent person would wait until they’re pretty sure the other person is gone.”

“We both know I’m not a decent person. I just want to explain.”

“Go ahead. This should be good.”

“Rey, listen none of that other stuff is even important.”
She scoffs and goes back to filling her duffel bag.

“No, I mean, it is important, but I can’t fix that and it’s not the most urgent thing. He found out that you were originally going to sign with First Order, and when he found out I was dating you, he wanted me to convince you to come back. He said if I didn’t, he’d stop your album.”

She stares at him for a good five seconds before she can speak. “Were you ever planning on telling me any of this?”

“I wanted to, but Snoke threatened to expose me if I didn’t go along with it. And then he said he was going to fuck up your album no matter what.”

“He threatened to expose you for something wrong, that you actually did. So you did something else wrong? Something that’s arguably a lot fucking worse?”

“I fucked up, I’m sorry. I was afraid. I thought I could figure something out, and I didn’t—I didn’t want you to hate me.” He puts his hand over his eyes as if he realizes how utterly stupid and childish he sounds.

“You didn’t want me to hate you, and you thought everything would just magically fall into place, because it’s always worked out that way for you. Did it ever occur to you that I was inevitably going to hate you at some point? Did it ever occur to you that I don’t have millions of dollars and a trust fund to fall back on?”

“Every fucking day. Rey, we can still fix this, at least save your album. Come to First Order. You wouldn’t even have to do it over. First Order could buy out your contract. We could convince Snoke to let you release it. Would it be so bad to be with First Order?”

“Yes! Finn risked everything to leave and get me out of there. He told me what goes on there, and I saw for myself how fake it all is.” She stops, exhausted and deflated, her rage burning out. Because really, how much better is she than him, than any of those people? “Fuck, maybe you’re right. I’d probably fit right in.”

“Rey, no.”

“Yes. I really don’t even have that much of a right to be mad at you. Maybe this is what I deserve.”

“You don’t deserve this. You don’t deserve anything bad happening to you.”

“Really? Did you ever wonder why I went out with you? Why I agreed to go out that second time?”

“All the time,” he says, eyes wary.

“You know Robyn, right? Finn’s assistant? Well, she had this really amazing idea. She said if I went out with you a couple of times it might help get my name out there.”

“What?” He’s very still, fists clenched.

“Yeah. I thought you were a whiny, pathetic, spoiled asshole but she said hey go on a few dates with him, get papped, then dump him.”

“Oh,” he says, looking down. “I knew you were too good to be true.”

“I guess we’re even then,” she says. “We’re both fools, and we’re both absolute pieces of shit.”

Kylo steps toward her and this time she lets him.
“When did it become real for you?” he asks.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“When?”

“Why do you care?”

“Because one of the things that made me fall for you is how real you always were with me. How you never let me get away with anything. And I just want to know how much of that was a lie.”

“At the diner, when you gave me that mixtape. And you?”

“In my studio, when you started writing ‘Windrider.”

The silence is thick, swirling with memories, all tainted, and fresh regrets. She never even told him how good he looked tonight. She’d never seen him in a tux before.

He steps toward her and she lets him. Lets him cup her face in his hands and lean in and take her lips with his.  It’s slow and burning and every bit of an apology. She could accept it and stay. Fall into his bed and let him fuck her until she can’t think straight and then wake up together in the year 2000.

But she can’t.

“No,” she says, pushing him away. “Just because we’re both pieces of shit doesn’t mean we should be that way together.”

“Rey, please. We both fucked up, but we love each other, right? We’ve loved each other longer than we were ever pretending.”

“No. I don’t feel like I know you anymore. I don’t know myself anymore. I started lying from almost the second I moved to California and I’ve already become someone I don’t really recognize. I didn’t even treat you like a person.”

“Rey you do know me. You know my deepest secrets. You know what I’m afraid of.”

“Not really. I know that you’ll do anything to maintain your image, and that you’re going to let a mistake you made when you were eighteen haunt you for the rest of your life. I don’t know if anything about you is real.”

“Rey, please. Please. Just stay until tomorrow. Sleep in the guest room. I’ll leave you alone. If you feel the same way tomorrow, you can go, and I won’t ever bother you again.”

“I can’t,” she says.

She picks up her bag and goes back downstairs. It’s a good hour-long drive to the airport and she doesn’t even know if she can get her flight changed yet, but she can’t stay here. He follows her down the stairs, calling her name. Thankful that her cab is still waiting, she jumps in, cutting off Kylo’s shouting, and directs the driver to the airport.

She tells herself not to look back, but she does anyway. He’s standing on the sidewalk, coatless, directionless. She looks way.

As the cab pulls away from the curb, “Windrider” comes on the radio and the driver turns it up.
“I like this song,” he says. “I usually don’t dig this kind of music, but there’s something about this girl’s voice.”

Rey leans her forehead on the cold window and squeezes her eyes shut. “Yeah,” she says. “That girl is so talented.” And like a perfectly edited music video, the tears come when the chorus drops.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Strange Days" by the Doors
On the fourth day of what is supposed to be Lorna’s vacation, Kylo wakes up before noon and takes a shower. It’s the first time either of those things have happened since he’s been back in L.A.

While he’s in there, Lorna lays out clothes, throws his filthy sweats and t-shirt in the laundry room, and sets out some food on the kitchen counter. She knocks on the bathroom door every fifteen minutes, not stopping until she gets a verbal response. Sometimes it’s a grunt, sometimes an “Okay,” and once, a “Fuck off.”

“I could be in Ecuador right now, you know,” she says.

“Why aren’t you?”

“Obviously I’m a masochist,” she says.

All of this, the twenty-four-hour babysitting and the micromanaging of basic tasks, is not strictly in her job description, but he’s gotten like this a few times over the years, and he tends to come out of it more quickly if there’s someone around. Maybe if she was the personal assistant to a hedge fund manager or a Senator, she wouldn’t have to be so involved, but she would likely have to put up with more abuse. Kylo can be thoughtless at times, but he’s not cruel, by nature or in action. She wouldn’t forgive herself if something ever happened to him.

Kylo hasn’t told her anything about what happened between Rey and him. She showed up New Year’s morning with breakfast to find him sitting on the couch alone in his clothes from the night before. All she could get out of him was that Rey had left and wasn’t coming back. She pieced some of it together from his publicist, and later, from the weeklies. The breakup made the cover of Us, and a two-page spread in People, complete with the standard "ripped down the middle" photo graphic. While all those sources gave details about the event itself, none of them could provide a reason. Kylo is definitely not talking, and Lorna hasn’t tried contacting Rey.

She’s cutting up strawberries when he comes down to the kitchen, sitting dutifully at the counter so she can inspect the stitches on his cheekbone.

“It’s looking good.” The stitches are minuscule, the work done by a cosmetic surgeon, of course. No matter how well he’s healing, though, he’s still pale, and his eyes are distant and sad.

“They stopped itching,” he says.

“Are you ever going to tell me what you got in a fight with Hux about?” The day after they got back, he’d slipped out of the house while she was running errands. He came back a few hours later with a black eye and a gash on his cheek. All he would say is that he had a meeting with his manager.

“I had a million things to fight Hux about. Take your pick.”

She purses her lips and squeezes some Vaseline on a Q-tip. “I’ve seen you do a lot of stupid shit but beating up your manager is a new low.” He winces as she dabs the Vaseline on his stitches.

“Yeah, well he reached a new low. And he’s not my manager anymore.”
“I wish you’d tell me what’s going on.”

“I don’t need anyone else hating me right now.”

“Okay, that’s cool, I just need to know if you--”

“Of course not. I would never hurt her.”

“I’m sorry, I know. She just looked so rough in those photos.”

“Yeah. I’m gonna go back to bed.”

“Are you going to eat something?”

He grabs a banana and an orange from the bowl and goes back up to his room. Lorna puts the rest of the food away and wipes down the counter. Showering is a good sign. So is eating, no matter how little.

The mail has piled up again. Fan letters have increased exponentially since news of the breakup hit. Some of it is sympathy, some of it outright filthy, and some of it nothing but a barrage of insults about Rey. She calls Lindsay and asks her to come over and help sort it, then pulls out Kylo’s calendar. It’s clear, for now, but the pressure will be back on soon, despite the weird hold ups with the single and the album. He’s already got things lined up for two days from now. Will he be functional by then?

“Fuck it,” she says, reaching for the phone. She’s only called Ms. Organa once since she started working for Kylo, when he’d been in a minor car accident and had to spend the night in the hospital for observation, so the concern in her voice when she answers is unsurprising.

“Is he okay?” she asks.

“Physically, yes, for the most part. But he won’t tell me what’s going on.”

Leia fills her in on everything she knows from Rey’s end of things. Lorna closes her eyes, the headache she’d been fighting all morning working its way past her meds.

“This is bad,” she says. “How’s Rey doing?”

“I haven’t seen much of her, but she’s holding up. I can’t say much about the legal issues but we’re working on that. Quietly.”

“I understand.”

“Lorna, you’ll continue to help him, won’t you?”

“Of course,” she says. And it’s not just because he pays her better than any other client she’s had. He may be a total dickhead, but he’s her dickhead.

She hangs up and sits, marveling at just how incredibly boneheaded her client is, then gets out her notebook. She writes “Action Plans” at the top and underlines it three times. She puts her pen down and closes the book.

This isn’t a case of skipping an interview or insulting a journalist. She can’t act as a fixer on this. This part is definitely not part of her job description, and third parties have done enough damage in this situation already.
Ultimately, no matter how deplorable Hux and Snoke are, Kylo got himself into this mess, so he’s going to have to be the one to get himself out. She grabs some bottled water, loads a tray with food, and heads upstairs.

He’s sitting on the rooftop deck, but instead of aimlessly staring out at the waves like he’s done every other day (when he’s gotten out of bed) he’s got his own notebook out, resting against his knees as he writes. She sets the tray down on the table and takes the other chaise.

“So—”

“You called my mother, didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Are you about to give me two weeks’ notice?”

“No. But I am going to insist that you eat something, and I’m going to help you brainstorm.”

“There’s no way out of this.”

Lorna uncaps her pen and opens her notebook. “There’s always a way.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Disarm" by the Smashing Pumpkins
It’s the end of a day that’s been so crazy that Leia looks at retirement as fondly as a glass of twenty-five-year-old single malt at the end of the day. As she hangs up the phone and looks at the guests in her office, however, retirement looks distressingly out of reach. Good thing the Scotch is waiting for her at home, with her husband there to pour it for her.

Poe, Finn, and Robyn are lined up in front of her desk like wayward preteens in the principal’s office. Normally, she’d laugh off the formality and tell them to relax. Today, however, is not that kind of day.

“Where were we?” she asks.

“The, um, the Rey situation,” Poe says.

“Right. Now, I do consider the legal problems to be a separate issue, and they likely would have come up regardless of the situation with my son, because Snoke is that much of a bastard. As difficult as that situation is, the silver-lining is that we might not have gotten wind of it with even this much warning if my son hadn’t been such a bonehead.”

Her three visitors try and fail to conceal smirks. She glares at them, and the smiles drop.

“Robyn, Finn. You’re new to Resistance Records, and considering what goes on at First Order, I can’t say I’m too surprised. This is fairly mild compared to what they usually get up to over there. But I want to emphasize, we don’t do things like that here. Our artists’ personal lives are personal. Their stories may be an important part of marketing, but we don’t manipulate those stories, especially without the consent of all parties. Understand?”

“Yes, Ms. Organa,” Robyn says.

“Yes, Leia,” Finn says.

She turns to Poe. Poe, who she had so much faith in. Has so much faith in. Whether he was blinded by the idea of increased record sales or drawn in by Finn’s dark eyes doesn’t matter. He should have nipped this idea in the bud.

Retirement has been on her mind more lately, even on slow days. Thoughts of getting that fishing boat Han always talked about. Or the house boat in Amsterdam. Or the RV to explore North America. One thing they’d always complained about is that, despite having so many stamps in their passports, they have so few memories of their travels that don’t involve tour buses, airports, and the loading docks of venues. And outside of the earliest years, they didn’t get to experience much of it together. They aren’t quite ready to settle down, they just want to wander at their own pace. Take cheesy photos. Eat street food. Stay in a place for more than a night or two. Get to know each other again.

But she can’t retire until she’s confident that Resistance will continue in the same spirit it was founded. Ben never had any interest in the business side of things, but Poe had always been passionate and competent. This incident is a startling reminder that her protégé still has a lot to learn.
“Is Kylo alright?” Finn asks.

“From what Lorna said, he may have climbed out of his hole enough to start thinking of solutions. She’s going to keep me posted.”

“If there’s anything I can do to help…”

“I think it’s time to go get Rey.” She holds up her hand as Finn starts to speak. “I know, we said we’d give her a week, but I think she needs to think about returning sooner. And don’t worry, I’m not going to reprimand her. I don’t think that’s necessary. Compared to her, you three are getting off lucky in terms of consequences.”

“Whatever we can do to make it up to you,” Poe says. “And you have my promise nothing like this will happen going forward.”

“You’re damned right it won’t. You and Finn will go without your expense accounts for two weeks. Robyn, you’re not my employee, but I’m sure Finn wouldn’t have a problem with you helping out the legal team this week?”

Finn looks at Robyn, who nods. “That would be perfect,” she says. “I’ll go check in with them now.”

“Leia,” Poe says when the door closes. “Do we approach this with Rey on a personal level or a professional level?”

“Since Finn is the one going, he can approach it however he wants. I’m sending you on a scouting trip. You need to get back in the trenches, remember what this company is about.”

“You’re sending me on a scouting trip without an expense account? And Finn to New Mexico for how knows long?”

“Yes. Your per diem is what, $200?”

“About that, yeah.”

“Resistance is getting billed $500 an hour to save Rey’s album. That part may not be entirely your fault, but let’s just say it’s a symbolic gesture.”

“Right. I’ll have Bebe start making arrangements.”

They take their leave, and Leia sinks into her chair. As worried as she is about Rey, as responsible as she feels—despite the fact that everyone involved is an adult—she’s as frantic as she can allow herself to be about her son. He was a child, still living under her roof, when he recorded “City in the Sky.” She had praised him so much for it. Of course, she had praised the entire album—it really was something special—but everyone had been crazy about “City in the Sky.” How must he have felt, and why didn’t he tell her? She could have helped him.

She laughs softly. When would he have told her is probably a better question. He was always closer to Han, but Han was on the big reunion tour that year. He barely made the album release party.

It’s useless to think in terms of “what if” now. She hadn’t noticed her child’s turmoil, or if she had, attributed it to teenage angst. She hadn’t been around for him to confide in, and neither had Han. They hadn’t been a safety net for their child. Those were things that happened, and she can’t change them. And she can’t rush in to save him.
What she will do, however, is be there for him, no matter what’s going on, as soon as he’s ready.

Tonight may be a two Scotch night.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Mother Mother" by Tracy Bonham
Finn finds her in the same place he first met her, the coffee shop in her home town. It’s early morning, the beginning of one of those spectacular New Mexico sunrises peeking over the horizon, painting the walls of the building pale pink. The shop has just opened, and the overhead lights aren’t on yet, so thin stark light pours in the window, illuminating Rey, sitting at a table with a mug and her notebook. She doesn’t look up when he pushes through the beaded curtain.

She’s been away from LA and her phone and email for three days, after cancelling all her appearances for a week. She told them that if she didn’t get away, she’d lose her mind.

His phone rang on New Year’s morning, while he was sitting on his balcony with Poe, reading the news about all the ways the world didn’t end. They’d agreed on no work stuff, but when the phone kept ringing, Poe told him he should answer.

It was Maz, asking if he’d heard from Rey. Someone at Us had called her with a tip that a photographer was shopping around photos of Rey at La Guardia around 3 in the morning, still in her party clothes, hair and makeup a mess. Finn rushed to her house, but she wasn’t home, and there were photographers at both the alley entrance and in front of the main house. Mun and Jashco were out of town, and the housekeeper hadn’t seen or heard from Rey.

He checked Kylo’s house, but there was no one there but a confused assistant and a bunch of photographers. He returned to Poe’s to find Rey asleep on the sofa.

“They broke up,” Poe said. “She wouldn’t tell me details, said she was too embarrassed. But she had to take a gazillion connecting flights to get back here. When she got to her house, she couldn’t face the paps. She got here about an hour after you left.”

She slept for ten hours, and after a shower, sitting at the table over a bowl of soup, she told them everything.

If it had happened in a movie, or he read about it happening to someone else, he might have laughed. But this was his friend, someone who had trusted him, so all he felt was sadness, and a huge amount of guilt.

As far as the Resistance legal team can tell, Kylo hasn’t told Snoke that Rey is aware of the plan to stop her record. They’re confident he won’t succeed now that they have a head start, so until Rey decided on her break, they’d proceeded with the release lead-up as planned.

Finn tried to warn people to tread softly, but the marketing team kept pushing her. A huge sticking point had been her radio appearances. The team was sure she could manage the interviews, if they forbid questions about the breakup, but Rey didn’t want to risk it. Finn backed her up, and they’d agreed to put them on hold. The final straw for Rey came in a meeting with Rey’s label publicist a few days ago, discussing the final push next month.

“Mr. Ren’s publicist called asking if there should be a statement. I think it would come off as presumptuous and may draw negative attention to Rey. The timing isn’t great. If it were closer to album release, we might be able to— “

“Excuse me?” Rey interrupted.
The publicist looked at her, blinking. “The timing isn’t the greatest to leverage, but it could look good for the follow up album, because everyone will assume it’s about him.”

“I’m sorry my broken heart wasn’t conveniently timed to boost album sales.”

“Rey— “Finn started.

“No, it’s okay,” the publicist said. She smiled sweetly at Rey. “I know that right now it seems like this is the worst thing that’s ever happened and ever will, but you’re barely out of your teens. Another one will come along. I could set you up with at least four different guys right now.”

“You’re fired,” Rey said.

“You can’t fire me.”

She turned to Finn. “Then find out who I need to talk to so that she’s not assigned to me anymore. How the hell is she supposed to help sell my album if she doesn’t even respect that my feelings are real?”

He spoke with Poe, who agreed to find her a new publicist, but before one could be put in place, Rey left for New Mexico. A week, she’d said, but Finn had to agree with Leia on this. The longer she stays away, the harder it’ll be to get her back. Because she’s not just running from a breakup, she’s running from all of it.

“Mr. Storm!” Ahsoka says, coming out from the kitchen. Rey looks up. Her face cycles through several expressions, including anger, and a flicker of relief, before landing on steely determination. She looks good, considering. Tired and sad, but her hair is brushed, and her clothes are clean.

“I’m not ready,” she says.

Finn sighs and takes the seat across from her. Ahsoka brings him a mug of coffee.

“I’m not here to force you to come home but I am here to ask. If you’re not ready yet, I just need to know when.”

“I told you, a week.”

“But you didn’t mean it. Resistance is going to release the album with or without you, but we need you to make it successful.”

“I don’t care. I still have most of the advance, and then some. I can give it back.”

“But Rey, I know you do. I know you care so much, and I know you’re in a lot of pain, but I don’t want you to hate yourself later for missing out on this opportunity. The way the single’s going, you’ll have a top ten debut. That’s huge. But we can’t lose momentum.”

“I don’t know. Is it bad that part of it is that I’m embarrassed? Everyone in the world knows I’m a failure.”

“Rey, you were in a relationship with Kylo Ren for four months. No one thinks you’re a failure. They’re amazed you lasted that long.”

“It’s not funny,” she says.

“I know it’s not. I’m sorry.”
She looks out the window, at the waking town, trucks trundling down the main road toward the highway. “I hurt him so much, too, you know. I didn’t have to tell him what I’d done.”

“It was only fair though, for him to know he wasn’t the only one in the wrong.”

“I didn’t do it for that, though. I only did it because I wanted to hurt him.”

“Rey, I know you feel like hell, but it’s not all your fault. I should have discouraged you. I should have discouraged Robyn. She was only trying to help but it was a terrible idea. And I should have pushed you to come clean when you started catching feelings.”

A tear slides down her face and she scrubs at her eyes. “I’ve never been the type of person who would do that to someone. Or I thought I wasn’t. Maybe it was just because I never had the opportunity before. That scares me so much.”

Finn reaches his hand out and she takes it. Her is hand rough, like when they first met. He turns it over to look at the callouses.

“I’ve been helping my old neighbors with some things on their property,” she says. “Engines make sense, no matter how old and stubborn they are.”

“Rey—” Finn starts, but his cell phone interrupts. “I should take this. But we’re not finished.”

“Okay,” she says, and looks back down at her notebook.

“Hello?”

“It’s Poe. Are you near a TV?”

Finn looks around the room. There’s a small set in the corner. “Yeah. What’s up?”

“MTV. Now.”

A spike of anxiety shoots through his stomach. “Rey, does that TV have cable?”

“I think so.”

“Yes,” Ahsoka says, coming over with the remote. What channel do you need?”

“MTV. I’ve got it, Poe. Call you back?”

“Yeah.” He hangs up and goes over to the television, Rey following.

The set takes a bit to warm up, but when the picture comes in, Kurt Loder is on screen with Special Report graphics. Finn looks at Rey, who’s leaning against Ahsoka and chewing her thumbnail. MTV rarely interrupts programming for anything less than a musician death. She exhales as they read the scroll. No one is dead. But Kylo Ren has an announcement.

Ahsoka turns up the volume as they cut to footage of a room set up for a press conference. Rey, standing between them now, takes their hands.

Kylo enters, steps behind the podium and reads a statement.

“In 1990, I inherited a number of my late grandfather’s personal possessions. This included several notebooks full of lyrics and notes for songs, many of them unrecorded. While writing the first Dagobah System EP, I created an arrangement for a song from one of these notebooks. This song
would become ‘City in the Sky.’ I took credit for this song, despite the lyrics and chord progression being the work of my grandfather. My bandmates had no knowledge of this at the time and have no knowledge to this day.” He pauses as the crowd murmurs, then looks back down. The paper shakes in his hands. “In 1993, I confessed this action to Alistair Snoke. He was briefly in possession of the notebook and made copies of the original song lyrics as evidence, using it to blackmail me into leaving my current label and band, and joining First Order. He has continued to hold this over my head to get me to do his bidding in my private and professional life.

What I did was wrong, and I cannot apologize enough to my family, my exes, former and current bandmates, and my fans for this deception. But I cannot sit around any longer while Snoke continues to manipulate other artists in a similar manner. I have provided the Los Angeles Police Department with evidence of this extortion, and I hope that my actions encourage other people who have been manipulated by this monster to come forward as well. Thank you.”

He leaves the room, ignoring the shouted questions, and his assistant steps in to say that he’s not accepting questions. Ahsoka mutes the television and they turn to Rey. Her eyes are locked on the screen, though it’s switched back to Kurt Loder, grimly recapping the events as though someone actually had died. Ahsoka turns the television off and touches Rey on the shoulder.

She turns to Ahsoka, then to Finn. “He did it,” she whispers. “He burned it all down.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "A Case of You" by Joni Mitchell
Ahsoka lives on a little ranch west of town, in a white adobe house with a Spanish tile roof and a painted tile courtyard. She keeps three horses, a handful of chickens and two goats. She’s lived alone, mostly, but she’s had partners over the years, relationships that lasted one to five years. The ranch is her refuge, both from the life she left behind and her life at her shop. Very few people have been there socially. She keeps an apartment above the store for late nights, or when musicians or other wanderers need to crash. Occasionally one of the parties she has afterhours expands up ward as well as outside. It’s tiny, similar to a hotel room with a kitchenette, but it’s warm and comfortable, with floor cushions and stacks of old books and a sound system that was state of the art in the early 80s. Currently, Rey is pacing the floor, cell phone in hand, while Joan Baez streams softly from the record player.

This is one of the few times Rey has been up here. Ahsoka has always had to be so, so careful when it comes to the kids who make the Sacred Song their second home. She wants to help them all, every young person who ends up here because they aren’t getting what they needed at home, either materially or emotionally, but she can’t have underage kids hanging out in her apartment. So many parents already think she’s a bad influence, for the simple fact that her shop is popular with middle and high schoolers. What they don’t realize is that there’s no wizardry involved, nothing shady. All it really takes is climate control, enough inexpensive items on the menu, and bottomless cups of soda and coffee. The open mic nights and the occasional touring musician help, making the kids feel like they’re living somewhere more exciting for a few hours.

Rey would tell her it’s not just the beanbag chairs or the dollar muffins that keep young people coming in. It’s Ahsoka. But Ahsoka would argue she’s just an old, tired woman who can provide a meal and a mic stand but doesn’t have the resources to make a real difference.

Finn knocks on the door and comes in, phone in hand. “Just got off with Poe. Kylo’s assistant tipped Leia off last night, gave her a copy of the evidence Kylo mentioned. Leia didn’t tell anyone but the legal team, last night but apparently, it’s solid. There’s audio.”

“He wore a wire?” Rey asks.

Finn shrugs. “Sounds like it. I can see Snoke being arrogant enough not to check, especially if he thought he had Kylo under his thumb. I knew this was how he’d fuck up some day. He always thought he was the smartest person in the room, no matter who else was in it. And someone like Kylo is easy to underestimate. No offense, Rey.”

“No,” she says. “You’re right. Everyone underestimates how smart he is.” She sits down next to Ahsoka on the sofa. “I called Leia. She said Kylo’s on his way to her house, because the press is crazy at his. She has to talk to the lawyers, but she says the legal situation with the plagiarism is murky, since she and Luke own the rights to Anakin’s music and the notebook was given to him. But he’ll definitely get kicked out of ASCAP, and BMI won’t take him. He’ll probably lose the sales awards, at least for the single, maybe for the album.”

“Sounds about right. And if he’s got any sponsorship deals going on they’ll revoke his deals and possibly sue him. His advance for this album is probably safe, though, since he’ll have grounds to sue Snoke.”
Finn’s phone rings again and he sighs. “I’ll take this downstairs. I’ll catch you again before I head back to LA.” He kisses Rey on the cheek and clasps Ahsoka’s hand before heading out.

They sit in silence until the record ends. Neither of them move to change it. There’s something soothing about the hum and scratch coming from the turntable. It reminds Ahsoka of lazy Sundays and nights winding down.

“I don’t know what to do,” Rey says. “I feel like I need to do something, but I don’t know what. I don’t know what I can do.”

Ahsoka puts her arm around Rey and the girl leans into her. “How much did you know about what he did?”

“He told me about the song right after we got together, but he never told me anything about the blackmail. Fucking Snoke. I can’t believe that vile asshole.”

“I can. I never told you why I left, did I? Why I quit recording and performing?”

“Not in much detail.”

Leaving LA was a defining moment, such that her life is clearly divided between “before” and “after,” yet she hasn’t talked about it much to anyone, afraid that saying it out loud will bring the trouble back to her door.

“The kinds of things Snoke did, and worse, have been going on for ages. I tried to ignore it, then I couldn’t anymore and thought I could at least make it better for the people I cared about, the people I mentored. But that wasn’t enough, and eventually I fought back. I uncovered some things. Young people’s lives absolutely ruined. But it can be hard to get the LAPD to go up against labels and studios unless you have irrefutable evidence, and I didn’t have that. Then the death threats started coming in and I ran away.”

“Oh, Ahsoka,” Rey says, squeezing her arm.

“If you’ve ever wondered why I didn’t hook you up with any connections, that’s why. I didn’t have any left, at least not any that would benefit you. You may think that people have short attention spans out there, but they also have long memories, and I didn’t want to risk you being associated with any of that. You were always so special, and I helped you in the ways I could, but I regret not preparing you more for the ugly side of things. I should know by now that hiding things isn’t the best way to protect someone.”

“Don’t be sorry,” Rey says, wrapping her in a hug. “I’m a stubborn kid, so it probably would have gone in one ear and out the other. I was so focused on making it. Too focused. Fuck. What am I going to do?”

Ahsoka returns the hug before getting up to make tea. There’s a tin of orange spice left from Christmas that still smells fresh, but the kettle seems to have run off somewhere. “Will you tell anyone if I heat the water in the microwave?”

“Boiled water is boiled water,” Rey says.

“That settles it.” She starts the microwave, scoops tea leaves into two infusers and sets them in mugs. One is an old happy face one with a chipped handle, the other from the Cafe du Monde. “What was your first instinct when you saw the news?”

“To get in my car and drive back to LA.”
“Then I think that’s what you need to do.”

“I can’t. What if he doesn’t want to see me?”

“That’s a definitely possibility you have to face. But it’s not a good reason to stay away.”

“And what if he does want to see me? It would just be too easy to fall back into something with him.”

“Would that be too bad, really?”

“No, if we can ever trust each other again. How is that going to happen?”

“The way couples and friends have learned to trust each other again for ages. By trying, and talking, and understanding. I know it’s not long in the grand scheme of things but think of those four months you had together. Was it good?”

“It was the best four months of my life.”

The microwave beeps and Ahsoka pours the water into the mugs. She offers Rey the happy face mug and she smiles as she inhales the tea’s aroma. Ahsoka curls up in the opposite corner of the couch and cradles her own mug. “So, how much of those four months were you faking your feelings for him?”

“ Barely any of it. I mean, I don’t even know if I ever disliked him, he was just irritating and confusing.”

“And he said the same thing?”

“Pretty much. About the time period. I don’t think he thought I was irritating. Maybe confusing.”

“So, there you both were, head over heels in love and hoping to god the other one never found out about how it started. If you really think about it, it’s hilarious, Rey.”

“Doesn’t feel hilarious”

“I know. But I want you to ask yourself something. What’s worse? What you did to each other, or the idea of living the rest of your life without him?”

Rey inhales sharply and Ahsoka smiles. “You know what that reaction tells me? That you’ve been thinking about this as a temporary setback, not a permanent breech. And that’s all you need to know.”

Rey nods and sips her tea, making a face before swishing the infuser around in the water. “You know what’s hilarious? Well, maybe not hilarious. But people always talk about how much heartbreak inspires people, and I’ve barely been able to string two lines together. It’s like there’s this last little bit of denial, and if I write about it, it’s all too real. And I can’t even stand looking at either of my guitars. The Taylor because it feels like it belonged to a totally different person, and I don’t deserve to keep the Gibson. I accepted it under false pretenses.”

“Did you really, though?”

“God, you’re such an enabler.”

“I’m serious. I can’t give you the answer to that question, but I can ask it, because I don’t want you to beat yourself up needlessly. That’s about as helpful as making you say a bunch of Hail Marys or
something.”

Setting her mug on the coffee table, Rey scoots over to Ahsoka’s end of the couch and lays her head on hers houlder. “I don’t want to do anything rash. I feel like leaving New York like I did was a mistake. But it felt like the only thing I could do at the time.”

“Do you think he would have done what he did today if you’d stayed?”

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know him, but I think, probably, he needed to face some consequences that didn’t exist in his head.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean that before, he could convince himself that as long as you didn’t find out, the only person being hurt was himself, and he’s more than used to that. When the truth came out, you were hurt, and that hurt him, and so did losing you.”

“I would have found out eventually.”

“I wonder if he was in denial about that, too. To be fair, you’d managed to tell yourself it was okay, and he’d never find out, right?”

“Yeah.”

“I think you’re right, though. The romantic in me loves the idea of you speeding away across the desert to see him, but I don’t know if just showing up is the right thing, even if it’s with your hat in your hand. You still have some atoning to do, too.”

“Yep.”

“Stay in town one more night. Really think about what you want to say to him, and how you want to say it.

“Okay.”

Ahsoka gets up to leave but stops at the door. “You should stay the night at the ranch. I don’t know when you’ll make it back to town and I’d love to show it to you. We can have a late dinner after closing.”

“Oh my God. I’d love that! Thank you.”

“I should have had you out a long time ago.”

Rey smiles and comes over to embrace her. “Everything happens when it needs to,” she says. “Right?”

“Right. Are you staying up here?”

“No way. You said you were making muffins and there’s no way I’m missing out on that.”

Ahsoka squeezes Rey’s hand and leads the way down the narrow stairs, Rey humming softly behind her. It sounds like a new song.
Chapter title from "You Suck" by the Murmurs, which is probably my favorite breakup song, because it contains the line "Right now there's dust on my guitar, you fuck."
The last time Kylo had been in this room before everything went down was Thanksgiving. He’d kissed Rey in here, the smell of him still clinging to her after they fucked in his car. If he thinks about that too long, it’s hard to breathe. So he doesn’t think about anything but the games on his old NES. He found it and the little television shoved in the back of the closet along with his case of cartridges. Playing is a step up from lying on his bed listening to The Cure and chain smoking.

When Dr. Ackbar comes in for a follow up, Kylo is lounging on the bed playing Duck Hunt.

There’s something comforting about the old man, with his gravelly voice and big, rheumy eyes. The first time he’d visited, Kylo had been zonked out on Xanax, sleeping soundly for the first time in days. Between the hushed tones of Dr. Ackbar and his mother, and the doctor’s somewhat clammy hand on his forehead, he didn’t know if he was a grown man hiding in his childhood bedroom or an actual child, waking up in the hospital after his adenoid surgery.

Now, the doctor sits down in the desk chair. Kylo shoots fruitlessly at the laughing dog after he misses his shot.

“There’s nothing physically wrong with me,” he says. “I don’t know why you’re here.”

“Your mother requested it. I told her that she can’t keep giving you her pills. If you’re still having trouble sleeping, I’ll write you your own.”

“I don’t need any more Xanax.”

“You don’t have to fill it.”

“I’ve got a cannabis rec. I’ll be fine.”

Kylo shoots at the screen again, and Dr. Ackbar picks up the other gun. “May I?”

“Sure.” He ends his current game—he’s one missed shot away from a “game over” anyway—and changes to two player.

Dr. Ackbar is a fantastic shot, even with the shitty electronic gun. Kylo almost asks where he learned to shoot before he remembers the old man is a veteran. It makes his own problem seem infinitesimal, considering what Ackbar had seen and done when he was even younger than Kylo is now.

“Do you remember when your father brought you in about your eating habits?”

“No. Han brought me in?”

“Yes, I believe your mother was out of town.”

Kylo snorts. “Surprising.”

“Your father brought you in because he was worried about whether you were getting enough calcium and protein. At the time you were subsisting on Eggos and fresh fruit.”
“Eggos have eggs in them.”

“You couldn’t read an ingredients list yet. Anyway, I referred you to a nutritionist and your parents learned everything they could about making sure you were eating what you needed, without forcing you to eat things you didn’t want to.”

“What’s the point of this? If you’re here to remind me that my parents love me, so I have no reason to be such an asshole and a fuckup, you’re not telling me anything new.”

Ackbar bags another pair of ducks, ending the round. He puts the gun down. “It was more along the lines of ‘Your parents love you in ways you don’t even know, and I think the first step in healing your spirit is to make amends with them.’”

“I came home.”

“Yes, but have you talked to them, yet? Really talked to them?”

“I haven’t exactly been in the right frame of mind. Or any frame of mind.”

Ackbar pats him on the shoulder. “Well, give it some thought. I think you’re right; you don’t need a new Xanax prescription. Go easy on the cannabis, though, even medicinally?”

“Got it. Thanks, Doctor.”

“I want to see you in my office in a week.”

Kylo nods and the doctor takes his leave. Kylo starts the game again, but when he hears his mother’s car in the driveway, he decides it’s the perfect time for another nap.

The next afternoon it’s Super Mario 2. This was always his favorite Mario game, because it’s so weird and beautiful. He’s almost finished with a difficult level when there’s a knock on the door, followed by Leia peeking her head in.

“You have a visitor.”

“Who?”

“Katya.”

“Did you call her?” he says, missing a jump and falling into a pit. “Fuck.”

“No. She said she was in town and decided to stop by after she saw the news.”

“Christ, did she come to gloat?”

“Ben, you know better than that.”

He does. That’s not the type of person Katya is.

“Do you want me to send her in?”

“Not up here. I’ll be downstairs in a few.”

“We’ll be in the den.”
Katya. Christ. How many years has it been since he saw her last? He ran into her in Ibiza not long before she started dating the football player. Before that he hadn’t seen her since she broke up with him.

Good thing he showered this morning. He hasn’t shaved but he’s not going that far for her. He’ll throw on jeans and comb his hair.

It’s not that he wants to look nice for her; he doesn’t want to give her any more reason to pity him than she already has.

Leia is absent when he enters the den, but Katya is speaking with Chewie in lively Russian, laughing at some joke he’s made. Kylo’s Russian has never been great but he thinks it was something about New Russians and a Porsche. He clears his throat.

“Ben!” Katya says, getting up and kissing him on both cheeks. “You look terrible.”

She looks incredible, and intimidatingly grownup. It’s got nothing to do how she’s aged—she doesn’t look over 25—she just looks assured, and peaceful. She tilts her head and looks him up and down.

“I take that back. You don’t look too bad considering.”

“Thank you?”

“Has it been so long that you’re surprised I don’t blow smoke up your ass like everyone else?”

Chewie laughs at this, slapping his knee for emphasis.

“Weren’t you helping Han with the Falcon or something else useful?” Kylo asks.

“I took a break to talk to an old friend.” He stands and takes Katya’s hand. “Goodbye, Katyusha. Don’t stay away so long next time.”

“I’ll call you next time I’m in town.”

They kiss each other on the cheek and Chewie leaves. When Kat and Kylo were dating, Kylo had always felt a bit threatened by the easy camaraderie that Chewie shared with his girlfriend. It feels stupid now, seeing as how their connection had been forged from a shared pain. He should have been glad they had each other. But he had been--still is--a selfish brat. He flops down onto the sofa and Kat sits in the chair opposite, leaning forward to peer at him again.

Katya had always booked more editorial and ad work than runway, and part of it was the way she used her big blue eyes. In photos, she looked as though she was daring you to buy the dress or perfume or diamonds, daring you to prove you could afford it and, by extension, a woman like her.

Having those eyes trained on you made you want to prove yourself, and coming up lacking could be devastating.

Now, looking at her, even though he doesn’t feel anything romantic toward her anymore, he’s struck by how much he’s always admired and respected her, and how much he misses her. Yet another person he threw away in his pursuit of…whatever the fuck it was he’d even been trying to prove about himself.

“I’m sorry,” he says.
She blinks. “Sorry for what?”

“For being such a dumbass. For taking you for granted. For being an ungrateful little shit.”

“We were kids,” Kat says, waving her hand and sitting back. “But you’ve definitely grown up. I think this is first time I’ve heard you apologize to anyone, much less me.”

Kylo winces. How the hell had she ever put up with him? He’s tempted to ask what she saw in him back then, but this shouldn’t be all about him. It should be about Rey. Not to mention, he’s a little afraid to hear the real answer, enhanced by years of hindsight.

“Did my mother tell you the whole story?” he asks instead.

“She said I should hear it from you.”

Knowing Leia, that wasn’t entirely out of respect for his privacy. She wants him to own his actions by telling the story. So, he tells it to Kat, starting from the show where he had Rey brought backstage. When he finishes, she doesn’t look at him like she hates him, or feels sorry for him. She’s…smiling.

“Oh Venechka, you make me laugh. I’m sorry. You fall for strong women, then you’re surprised when we don’t put up with your shit.”

“What am I going to do, Kat?”

Her smile fades as she walks over to him. She leans down and takes him by the shoulders. “You wait,” she says, giving him a shake. “You’ve done big deed. It’s up to her.”

That evening, he’s down in the den, sitting on the floor in front of the sofa, going through a pile of financial paperwork that Lorna dropped off. He pretty much can’t spend any money until there’s news on First Order’s next move. Snoke is out, but his contract is with the label. The lawyers are currently wrangling over which party was in breech. If it goes against him, he’ll have to pay back his advance. Hopefully the other Knights will come out of it without having to pay their advances back, though they still might decide to sue him anyway.

The label itself probably won’t survive the FBI investigation. Artists and staff are jumping ship like crazy, and most of them are being snapped up by other labels, as long as they aren’t being investigated, so even if he does have to pay the money back, it’s unclear who exactly he’d be paying it to.

He pushes the papers aside and pulls his mother’s rolling tray out from underneath the sofa. He’s trying to follow Dr. Ackbar’s orders, but the anxiety sits in his stomach like a roiling mass of bees, and the only way he can eat is to smoke first. He’s in the middle of sealing his joint when Rabbi Mothma walks in.

“Shit,” he says, and tucks the joint behind his ear, as though he doesn’t have a tray full of weed and paraphernalia in front of him on the coffee table. “Sorry.”

The rabbi only smiles and waves her hand before sitting in the arm chair across from him. “As long as you can wait a few minutes before indulging, we’re fine.”

He tucks the tray under the coffee table and hauls himself up onto the sofa. “Did Leia call you?”
“I called, when I heard the news. Your dad called me this morning and said you might be ready to see me. I can come another time if that’s not the case.”

“No, it’s fine. I should have called you a long time ago. Months ago.”

“When I heard what happened, I wasn't surprised. Well, what you did was surprising, but I had a feeling something was going on with you. I usually hear from you at least once during the High Holy Days. So when all I got was a much larger check than usual this year, and you didn’t return my thank you email, I was worried. I wish I had reached out again.”

“I kind of pretended Yom Kippur wasn’t a thing. Or that I didn’t care about it. I tried to break up with Rey, but I didn’t go about it the right way. I cut off contact instead of being honest, so I just hurt her more instead of actually atoning for anything.

“Oh, Ben.”

“I know, I know. I’m lucky she forgave me for that.”

“Ben, I know you’re sorry about what you did to her, and that you’re trying to fix it, but how do you feel about what she did?”

So his mother had told her about that. It’s the first time anyone has asked him how he feels about Rey using him.

“It sucked,” he says, lamely. “I mean, of course it sucked, but the weird thing is, I’m mad at her, but not about that. I pretty much deserved that.”

“I see. You’re not angry anymore about what she did, but because she was mad at you.”

“Yes, and I know that what I did was probably worse. Was worse. But I tried to fix it and she’s still angry. And I feel like I’m mad at her for all the wrong reasons and it's just this feedback loop that's driving me crazy.”

“How do you know she's still angry?”

“Because, look what I did!” he says, gesturing to the papers and the room around them. “And I haven’t heard a word from her.”

“Have you reached out to her?”

“What?”

“To apologize. Have you tried to apologize?”

“Isn’t that what I did?”

Rabbi Mothma gets up and comes to sit next to him, and he feels like a kid, stumbling over his Hebrew and asking her wild questions like whether E.T. could have been Jewish. “I think that you made an important step toward atoning, but have you actually told her you’re sorry and asked for forgiveness?”

He looks away. “No.”

“Ben, don’t be afraid. If she doesn’t forgive you, are you any worse off than you are now? Either way, you won't be together, but if you go to her, you have a chance. And if she says no, you can move on.”
“Maybe you’re right.”

“Perhaps. When you see her again, be clear with her. Say you’re sorry, ask for forgiveness, and try to accept whatever she says. It may be hard but it'll be worth it.”

“If I see her again.”

“Ben, you will.

Days pass following Rabbi Mothma’s visit, and he can’t bring himself to pick up the phone or look at his computer. He does pick up pen and paper, and tools around on his guitar, but nothing solid or serious comes out.

After a week, his mother drags him out of bed at eight in the morning and makes him come down for breakfast. The table is loaded with food, and Han sits at the end reading the paper and sipping on a mug of coffee.

“Oh, would you look at the time?” Leia says, grabbing a slice of toast and her travel mug. “I’ve got an A&R meeting in an hour.”

“It’s Sunday.”

“You know better than anyone this is a 24/7 business. Save me some of those strawberries, okay?” She kisses both men on the cheek and dashes out the door. Kylo had told his mother not to interfere with the Rey situation, so she’s decided to try to fix his relationships with everyone else instead. Han continues to read the paper and Kylo stares at him, waiting for an explanation. When it’s clear Han isn’t going to offer one, he turns to go.

“I kept telling her you’d talk to me when you wanted to,” Han says, setting the paper down.

Kylo stops in the doorway. “It’s not that I don’t want to. I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Just come and eat breakfast. She made that tofu scramble thing, and no one’s going to eat it if you don’t.”

He turns and sits. Han scoops an enormous helping of tofu scramble onto his plate. It’s delicious. He hasn’t cared about what food tastes like in days but this is amazing. Leia adds some kind of special salt that she says makes it taste like eggs. He told her it doesn’t matter because he doesn’t remember what eggs taste like. But it does taste better with than without it.

He finishes his plate and piles it high again. He hasn’t had this kind of appetite in ages, since before he first asked Rey out, now that he thinks about it. There are potatoes as well, and muffins, and freshly squeezed orange juice. His father works on the crossword in silence as Kylo stuffs his face. When he’s finished, he sits back, staring at his plate.

“You know how there are those Sundays that are so perfect that they seem like they’re out of a movie? Everyone is relaxed and doing exactly what they want to be doing, like Monday doesn’t even exist? And then the second you realize how amazing things are going you start to worry that it’s going to end?”

“Yeah,” Han says. “I’ve had a few of those.”
“Every Sunday I’ve spent in New York with Rey has been one of those. The Times crossword, coffee, sometimes brunch if we make it out of bed, listening to records, watching old movies, whatever. Every single one. And I figured it out, we’ve spent less than half the time we’ve been together even in the same state, so those Sundays were a pretty big chunk of that time. And I know people say this kind of shit after any breakup, but I know, there’s not ever going to be anyone else. And I know chances weren’t great we would stay together forever but I wish I would have had that for longer.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“I don’t even know. Katya told me to wait because I’ve done what I can, but Rabbi Mothma says I need to say I’m sorry, but I’m fucking scared. What do you think? And don’t tell me to show up at her house with a boombox.”

“No, son. That stuff’s for the movies. And besides, you’ve already had your boombox moment. Now it’s time to go home. Get your shit in order and start living your life as a free man. You’ve had this cloud over you for years and it’s gone. You’re afraid because you don’t think you deserve her. Become the kind of man who does.”

Chapter End Notes

There's a playlist for this chapter here. It's all the kind of sad sack songs Kylo has been listening to.

Chapter title from "Favorite T" by the Lemonheads
From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Tuesday, February 1, 2000 at 8:21 AM

Subject: Favor

Hi Robyn,

I need a favor, one that I hope will help us set things right. I need you to pull out that legendary Rolodex for me. And I probably need your organizational skills. I’m out of town on this radio station tour thing until Friday (but you probably knew that) I’ve got a hair appointment in Venice on Saturday at 10 but otherwise I’m free if you want to meet up.

Peace,

Rey

From: Robyn Reissman <rreissman@resistancerecords.com>

On: Tuesday, February 1, 2000 at 8:25 AM

Subject: Re: Favor

Rey,

Thank G-d. I asked Finn how I could make things up but of course he tried to take responsibility, and also told me to leave it alone for now. It seemed like a good time to listen to the boss for once. I cannot stress how terrible I feel about this situation. So, anything you need, I’m there for you.

I can meet at the Coffee Bean on Santa Monica at 1. I know the one on Venice Blvd is closer to where you’ll be, but they’re monsters there. Trust me.

See you then,

Robyn

PS Please tell me you aren’t going to Giorgio at CaliEnte. You’ll ask for a trim and come out with a pixie cut, I guarantee. Go to Denise at Le Bombe on Abbot Kinney.

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Tuesday, February 1, 2000 at 8:30 AM

Subject: Re: Favor
Robyn,

I’m a grown woman and I take full responsibility for my own actions. But think of it this way. If this all works out, you probably did me the best favor of my life, even if it was shady as hell.

I wasn’t seeing Giorgio, but I’ll change my appointment anyway, just in case.

Thank you so much. See you on Saturday.

Peace,

Rey

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>
On: Sunday, February 6, 2000 at 7:15 AM
Subject: This is Rey Kenobi please read for Ben’s sake

Hi!

You don’t know me, but you may have heard about me by now, if only because I’m sure the press has been bugging the shit out of you lately about Ben Solo. And here I am about to bug you about him, but in order to help him.

I’m sending this to both of you in the hopes at least one of you will get back to me. We can talk on the phone, or I can come up to Seattle.

Thank you,

Rey

From: Wesley Antilles <dagobahwes@yahoo.com>
On: Sunday, February 6, 2000 at 10:01 AM
Subject: Re: This is Rey Kenobi please read for Ben’s sake

Rey,

We heard about what went down and it sounds like a mess. I talked to Cor and we'd love to know what you have in mind. Ben can be a huge dick, but we can’t let him go out like this. Please give me a call tomorrow any time after noon.

(206) 555-2187

Sincerely,

Wes
chapter title from "Criminal" by Fiona Apple
When Love Makes a Sound

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

From: Rey Kenobi <reyolight79@hotmail.com>

On: Wednesday, February 9, 2000 at 9:42 PM

Subject: hey

Kylo,

Come to Varykino on Theed Blvd. This Saturday at 7pm.

Please.

Love,

Rey

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Second Chance" by .38 Special
When I Tried It I Could See You Fall

Chapter Notes

I want to start off by saying that the beautiful song lyrics that appear later in this chapter are not my work, but that of my best friend, Angie Atkinson, used with permission. It's an unreleased song, but you should absolutely check out her music on Spotify and give her Instagram a follow. I don't think I've ever seen anyone capture what it's like to navigate relationships while dealing with anxiety the way she does.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The air in Los Angeles may be choked with smog, but at street level, on a wet, almost spring day, the air can be so soft it’s like drifting through silk.

Rey walks down Theed Blvd on such a day, a year to the day after she handed her demo to Oola, who passed it on to Finn. Then, she had less than a hundred dollars to her name, a guitar, and a stack of vinyl records.

Today, she’s got a number five single, and on Tuesday, she’s predicted to have a top ten debut.

She’ll never know if the publicity from her relationship—the parts she orchestrated or the parts Kylo did—contributed to that success, but it is what it is. She’ll just have to debut at number one next time.

She shakes her head and laughs to herself. Here she is, thinking next album already, and she doesn’t even start touring this one until next month.

She turns off, down an alley, the fences lined with bougainvillea, and goes through a gate in the center of the block. Crammed between a vintage store and a music shop, there’s a converted auto shop, which now houses a performance space in the garage, and a lobby in the old showroom. No one knows who owns it, but according to Robyn, there’s a secret show here a few nights a week, and star-studded jam sessions most other nights.

The yard behind the space is a riot of morning glory and planters full of wild poppies, with lights strung from the roof to the fence. The two rolling garage doors are open, and when she goes inside, she finds the space unoccupied, other than a single sound technician running cables.

“I’m not ready for sound check yet,” the tech says.

“Sorry, yes. Can I check out the stage?”

“Whatever. I’m gonna grab a smoke.”

He leaves and she goes up on stage. It’s the smallest she’s been on since New Mexico, but the room is decent sized, with a high peaked ceiling with exposed steel rafters. It’s standing room only, with a long bar along the wall.

Kylo never answered her email, but she’s going on with her secret show, with her special guests, hoping he shows up. If he doesn’t, no one will ever know it’s not just a bit of last minute promo.
She doesn’t want to think about what she’ll do after that.

She sits down with her guitar—the Hummingbird, which she couldn’t bear to send back after all—and starts picking out the song, softly at first, getting a feel for the stage. The song is only about a week old, and she’s afraid she’ll forget the lyrics. She plays through it twice before the tech comes back. He looks impatient, so she packs up the guitar and goes to the front to find the manager in the box office.

At 7:05, she’s pacing in the green room. Finn hasn’t come back yet to let her know if Kylo has shown, and she can’t stall much longer. What if he’s got her email blocked, or he doesn’t check that account anymore, or if he just hates her so much he won’t even give her the courtesy of telling her to fuck off?

Rey is tempted to run for it, but Syal, the manager, comes into the green room and asks if they’re ready.

Rey looks at Wes and Cor. They look as nervous as Rey, and just as dubious that Kylo will show.

“Ready as we’ll ever be,” Cor says. He gives Rey a thumbs up and she has a momentary out of body experience, thinking about how she’s about to play with these guys, after one brief rehearsal and a very strong Jack and Coke.

Rey takes a last look in the full length mirror, at the new highlights in her hair, the new dress—a knee length scrap of green silk that she’d been scared to look at the price tag on before handing her card to Robyn to complete the transaction—and those stupid cowboy boots that Kylo hates. It feels like a final goodbye to her old life.

“Alright, then,” Syal says. “I’ll announce you, Rey, then you can bring the guys on. The audience is going to lose their minds.” She squeezes Rey’s hand and heads toward the stage.

Rey slings her guitar over her shoulder, guitar, takes a final swig of her drink, and follows. She waits offstage, chewing on her beaded necklace, as Syal takes the mic.

“What’s up, everyone?” Syal says. “Welcome to another Varykino Secret Show!” The audience cheers and adrenaline surges through Rey, cancelling out some of her dread. She can do this. It’s just a show, like any other. “I’m gonna cut right to the reason everyone’s here. Her debut, *Truth or Consequences*, drops this Tuesday. Give it up for Rey Kenobi!”

Rey takes a deep breath and walks out. She has no idea who Robyn and Finn sent invites to, but the crowd is pumped, and on her side. She scans the audience, her stomach sinking when she doesn’t see him.

She looks down, swallowing the lump in her throat, and looks up with a smile. She came to put on a show, and that’s what she’ll do.

“Thank you. This is amazing, and I’m so excited for Tuesday. I’m going to share some songs from the album, but I’m starting with a brand new—”

She stops. Her breath stops. Her heart stops.

He’s here. In the back, in a shadowy corner wearing a baseball cap pulled down low. He looks up when she stops talking. Their eyes meet, and the corner of his mouth turns up, so slightly, as he nods at her.

Rey clears her throat and beams, blinking to clear the tears from her eyes.
“Sorry. I’m a little overwhelmed. Um, this one’s new, and I’ve got some guests to help me debut it. I don’t know if you’ve heard of them. Just a couple of guys from The Dagobah System. Please put your hands together for Wes Antilles and Cor Darklighter!”

Syal was right. The crowd loses it as the guys come out, Wes picking up his bass and Cor sitting at the drums. But through the din, Rey is laser focused on Kylo. He stands up straight, takes his hat off and runs his hand through his hair before putting it back on.

“This one’s called ‘Ulysses Grant,’ and it’s for someone I love.” She looks at Kylo one more time before closing her eyes and hitting the opening chord.

Even though they’d only had one rehearsal, Wes and Cor are absolute pros and picked it up instantly. She relaxes into it as much as she can.

“Looking at Ulysses Grant sitting on the bedspread that was paid for with donations…”

She’d written that first line in her notebook years ago, and it hadn’t gone anywhere, just a momentary musing on her dependence on others’ kindness. Then she happened on it again and the rest of the song had flowed in one session.

Knowing I should know that I am knowingly pursuing doing everything I can.  
Still it’s so hard to accept that I’m exceptionally blessed despite the constant indications.  
And all because some so and so once told me I was nothing and silly me I believed him.

That first verse, an outpouring of her state of mind when she’d first come to California, when she was vulnerable enough to believe she needed to do anything to get ahead, even use another human being.

She takes a deep breath and launches into the chorus.

But I want to let go and just enjoy you.  
Just be right next to you and not look back or look ahead.  
And i want to just breathe and not expect or need or want for anything.

The greatest wish she’s ever had, what she glimpsed briefly in her time with him, when she managed to forget that it had started with a lie.

And the second verse, the page in her notebook stained with tears, a reminder to herself and to Kylo not to be their own worst enemies.

There is such an aching beauty to the wanton self destruction of your own fabrication.  
Shame is such a salty saboteur but she's a looker hooked on you.  
Your imaginative mind fills up the questions and the spaces let by lack of information.  
With the worst possible outcomes and you live to make your worst nightmares come true.  
Yes you do.

She opens her eyes, briefly, looking at the ceiling and blinking the tears away, a silent prayer to please let this work, before going on.

But me I'm going to let go and just enjoy you.  
Just walk right next to you and not fall back or jump ahead.  
And I'm gonna just breathe and not expect or need or want for anything.  
But me i'm going to let go and just enjoy you.  
In this moment here and now as we're lyin' in your bed.  
And i'm gonna just breathe and not expect or need or want for anything.
No I don't want for anything.
No I don't want for anything.
Anything.

No not me.

She doesn’t open her eyes until the last chord fades out and the cheering starts.

She looks to the back of the room, and Kylo is gone.

Fuck.

“Thank you,” she whispers to the crowd. She looks down at her guitar to cover her disappointment, fiddling with the tuning keys. “This next one--”

“Oh shit, is that Kylo Ren?” someone in the front says. Rey looks up, around, then down at the front of the crowd and there he is, the crowd parted around him. He must have wandered to the front while she was singing. Something between a laugh and a sob escapes her and she wipes her eyes.

“Hi,” she says.

“Hi.”

“Will you come up here, play with your band?”

He shrugs. “I’ve got nothing else going on tonight.”

Chapter End Notes

Again those beautiful lyrics are not my work, but that of my best friend, Angie Atkinson, used with permission. Check her out on Spotify and give her Instagram a follow.

Chapter title from "You Showed Me" by the Turtles
Rey watches Kylo from the same spot in the back of the room where he’d watched her. He’s so beautiful. Somehow, she’d forgotten. Or he just seems more beautiful to her now that she almost lost him.

When he came up on the stage, there was no big kiss like in the movies, or a hug. Rey handed him her guitar and stepped over to the second mic.

“Mirrorbright?” she asked, and he nodded.

The first verse was just the two of them, Kylo on guitar and vocals, Rey singing harmony. The way he handled her guitar took her back to the times they’d played around with music, switching off instruments and showing each other snippets of things they were working on. It was difficult not to stare at him, and finally she gave in, and found him looking at her. They sang to each other, and when Wes and Cor came in on the second verse, she hardly noticed.

When they finished, she took her guitar, and a tech brought out an electric for Kylo. She relinquished the stage to The Dagobah System, because that’s what tonight was really about. If Kylo decided to give her another chance, that was just a bonus.

That’s what she told herself, anyway.

Wesley, Cor, and Kylo conferred for less than a minute before they started. They were rusty as hell during the first song, mostly getting through it from sheer bravado and good will from the audience. Then, they’d fallen into their old rhythm, and Kylo would alternately call out songs to the other guys, or ask the audience for requests.

Everyone had the good sense to not suggest “City In the Sky.”

It’s not just the music that Kylo has fallen back into, either. With the Knights, it was all bravado, legs in a wide stance, everything technically perfect, showcasing his virtuosity. When he plays with Dagobah, he’s looser, slouchier, and there’s more bounce in his step. The way his hair falls in his face is especially appealing, and when he throws a smile her way, Rey absolutely aches looking at him.

After Finn left New Mexico, Rey had waited, as long as she could, spending more time on self reflection than she had ever done, even on the loneliest nights in her trailer when she thought she’d go crazy for anyone’s company but her own. She’d needed to be sure, of what she felt for him, what she wanted and needed from him, what she had to offer, and how she would begin to make everything up to him.

Still, the fear lingers, that even though he happily took the stage with his old band mates, he could still reject her. But she tries to take her own advice from her own lyrics and live in this moment, sharing this joy with Kylo and Wes and Cor and this audience.

At the end of the set, he talks for a bit with Wes and Cor, then jumps down off the stage, cutting through the crowd and ignoring all the well wishers as he makes his way to her. Without a word, he takes her hand and pulls her out the door, into the wet night.
“Can we have some privacy?” he barks at all the people standing around smoking, and, amazingly, they all scatter. Still, he takes her into a quiet corner of the yard and pulls her close, wrapping his arms around her. She buries her head in his chest, breathing him in, the sweat and smoke and everything. This big, strong man is shaking.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers. “I love you and I’m so fucking sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too,” she says. “And I love you so much.”

They pull apart, and he puts his hand on her face. “Will you forgive me?”

He looks so afraid, as if, after all this, she still might tell him no.

“Of course. Oh my God. You threw away your life for me.”

“It didn’t really fit me.”

“Can you forgive me?”

“Yes,” he whispers, pressing his forehead against hers.

She’s afraid, in a way she’s never been with him, even the first time they kissed. Because now it’s just him and there’s nothing hanging over them, and she’s missed him so much that just the heat coming off of him is making her dizzy with want.

But he doesn’t kiss her, yet.

He steps away and the air between them cools as she fights the urge to throw her arms around him and drag him back. They’re both skittish, like a child trying to get a deer to eat out of her hand, but she’s not sure who’s the deer and who’s the child. He takes out a cigarette, starts to light it, then tosses it away.

“How did you do all this, anyway?” he asks.

“I asked them. The only thing on their website was a contact form and I felt weird using that, so I got Finn’s assistant to work her magic and get their personal email addresses.”

“You just emailed them and they said sure, we’ll do a surprise reunion secret show where the reunion is a surprise to the lead singer?”

“Yeah, they were really into it. They wanted to help you.”

Rey steps to him and puts her hand on his chest. “They don’t know me. They’re pissed at you, and have been for years, but they care about you, and they were worried when they found out what happened. They said it finally all made sense.”

He smiles and starts bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Fuck, Rey, it felt so good up there. I haven’t felt like that on stage in so fucking long.”

She tries to smile, but her teeth are chattering. She hadn’t had a chance to grab her jacket.

“Oh, shit,” Kylo says, and takes off his hoodie to give to her. She puts it on, enveloping herself in a cloud of his scent and residual warmth. She fiddles with the sleeves, rolling them up above her hands. She still has the one she stole from him last year, but it’s packed away in a box in the back
of her closet. This one is just as warm and soft.

She puts the hood up and looks at him. “Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“Last week, I broke down crying because I found one of your hair ties in my car. I didn’t want to say yes just because I missed you so badly. I’ve been trying to figure out how to not be the kind of person who does horrible things to people, like I did to you, and I had to be sure. Otherwise I’m still just an asshole, but with a lot less money. And people are way less tolerant of broke assholes.”

“Are you really broke?”

He pulls her over to a bench and sits down, guiding her to stand between his legs. “I don’t even know, yet, but I’m probably at least Hollywood broke.”

“Which means?”

“By normal people standards I’m filthy rich, but by industry standards I’m poor.”

“This town is so weird.”

His grip tightens on her waist and he urges her closer.

“I saw you on Leno the other night.”

“And?”

“I probably went through the entire spectrum of human emotion in five minutes. But mostly, I was so fucking proud of you and I missed you so much. I’m sorry I wasn’t there for your first time.”

“I’m going on Letterman on Wednesday.”

“Is that an invitation?”

She nods. “It’s just me. Too expensive to fly the band out, so I’m playing with the house band. I’m sure they wouldn’t care if I brought a special guest on guitar.”

“Oh, so you’re putting me to work?”

His hands are underneath the sweatshirt, gripping her at the top of her hips, his thumbs tracing circles on her belly. It’s distracting, but she smiles and nods.

“Tell me where and when, and I’ll be there. Can I kiss you now?”

“God, please,” Rey breathes.

She meets him halfway, leaning in as he reaches up to grasp behind her neck.

The first time she ever kissed him had been impulsive, a frantic, desperate attempt at connection. This starts out slow and tentative, a careful rediscovery. Had she really forgotten how plush his lips are, how his hand on the small of her back makes her feel so safe? It’s all as new yet familiar as the hoodie she’s wearing, so perfect and right that she’s afraid she’s going to burst into tears, and when she pulls away, his eyes are shiny.

He stands and kisses her again, more deeply, all hesitance gone, his hands trailing up her thighs and under her dress. “Come home with me?” he asks.
This sends a shiver down her spine and a spike of heat through her core. “Yes, but we can’t leave now. You need to talk to the guys.”

“We’re doing a conference call on Monday,” he says as he places a series of kisses down her neck. It’s so good that her knees go weak, but she’s got to keep a clear head for a little while longer.

“I can’t just bail. I have an album coming out on Tuesday, and since I’m the only one of us with a record deal right now, I should probably work the crowd a bit.”

He sighs dramatically and stops kissing her, but doesn’t let her go. “You win, Moneybags. I’ll show you how to make the most of one trip around the room.”

He holds her hand as they go back inside, where they’re greeted with a burst of applause from the people nearest the door. Kylo blushes to the tips of his ears and puts his hat back on. “If the paps aren’t already here, we have about thirty seconds before they arrive,” he whispers in her ear.

Rey can’t handle the absurdity of it, and she starts to giggle, which sets him off as well.

“You know how many people are going to say this was a publicity stunt?” she says.

“Most of them,” he replies, and bursts out laughing again.

“Hey, lovebirds, what’s so funny?” Finn says. He hands a bottled water to Rey and shakes Kylo’s hand. “Great set, by the way.”

“Nothing, really,” Rey says. “But you should probably let all concerned parties know we’re back together so they don’t find out on the Internet.”

The sheer wattage of Finn’s smile could sustain the city in a blackout. “For real?” Rey nods and Finn lets out a whoop of joy before pulling out his phone. “I’m on it. Have fun.” He gives Rey a kiss on the cheek and Kylo a nod, and works his way out back, phone already at his ear.

Rey works the room, picking up on Kylo’s cues regarding who to talk to and how long to keep talking, and before she knows it, he’s guided her to the front. The lobby is quiet and dark. The shades are drawn on the windows, but through the door, Rey can see a small crowd gathered on the sidewalk, cameras at the ready.

“Where are you parked?” Kylo asks.

“Five blocks.”

“I’m up the block. We just have to make it to mine and I can drive you to yours.”

“Okay.” She takes a deep breath and throws a worried glance at the door.

“Hey, this is nothing, remember? Just hold my hand and look straight ahead. I’ve got you.”

She takes his hand and lets him pull her into one more kiss before they belong to the world again.

He opens the door and they step out together, into the flashing lights.

Chapter End Notes
Aaahhhh!
Just an epilogue to go!

Chapter title from "Lost In Your Eyes" by Debbie Gibson
A young woman waits near a blue steel door set into a 19th century factory building in Greenwich Village, but it is not the young woman I’m here to see. This one looks at me warily through black rimmed eyes, looking me up and down as she takes a drag on a cigarette.

“You here to see Ben or that Kenobi bitch?” she asks.

I don’t answer, and keep her in my field of vision as I press the buzzer and give my name. When the door unlocks, I squeeze through the smallest opening I can manage and pull it firmly closed behind me.

The woman I am here to see, Rey Kenobi, waits at the top of the stairs. As I climb, I take note of the walls, which are covered with doodles and autographs from some of the greatest names in film and music. When I reach the top, I tell her about the girl.

“Oh, yeah, she hangs out on Tuesday and Thursday mornings. I think she’s got afternoon classes though so she should be gone soon.”

She beckons me into the loft, which once belonged to her boyfriend Ben Solo’s rock legend parents. The apartment is a legend in its own right, but this slim upstart from New Mexico breezes through it, barefoot, in low cut jeans and cropped sweater, leading me to the sitting area as though she were born to this life. That could be a result of natural confidence, but likely has more to do with the two Grammys prominently displayed on the coffee table, flanking a stack of oversized books. They’re both from 2001, when Kenobi won Best New Artist for her debut album, Truth or Consequences, and Song of the Year for “Windrider,” off the same.

She admits to having mixed feelings when she accepted the former award, “You just have all of these people talking about the New Artist curse, how so many people are never heard from again after. But the other one felt strange, too, because it was literally my first single. I was so terrified of peaking early and was riddled with anxiety until I released Across the Stars.

That album came out last fall to strong reviews, and has outsold the previous one by over a million copies. It is expected to garner key nominations next year, but Kenobi refused to rest on her laurels. Rather than renew her contract with Resistance Records, she made the choice at the ripe age of 23 to strike out on her own. The floor below the loft, once retail space, has been converted into headquarters for her label, HeartSpark Records.

“I’d love to show it to you,” she says, “but it’s crazy down there right now and I don’t want anyone to get distracted.”

We’re six weeks out from the release of the label’s first album, with three more slated before the end of the year. The label’s debut happens to be the long anticipated comeback effort from The Dagobah System, with the original lineup of Ben Solo, Wes Antilles and Cor Darklighter. Kenobi
won’t divulge many details about the self-titled album, but says it’s as strong as the lead single, “It’s a Trap,” which at the time of our meeting sits at number seven on the Alternative chart and is on the verge of cracking the top twenty on the Hot 100.

“It’s been a long road,” she says, when I ask about the nearly four-year gap between the band getting back together and the album’s release. “They hadn’t seen each other in years, and they didn’t want to just hop back in the studio prematurely. Then Ben went on the road with me for awhile before they decided to do the reunion tour. That’s when they started writing songs again. By the time they were ready, I was striking out on my own and they were looking for a label, so it all came together in this whole mutually beneficial ball of kismet.”

She blushes after this and apologizes for rambling, and I’m reminded again that she’s only 24 years old. With record sales dwindling across the board, starting a label is a huge risk at any age. The pressure she’s under is likely tremendous, despite her plucky demeanor. I ask her if she’s concerned about leaks and pirating, in the new age of peer sharing.

“It’s always a concern,” she says. “Especially with an album this anticipated. We’re taking precautions, and we have faith that the fans have enough love for the band that they’ll pay for the music. But if it happens, we’ll figure it out, then.”

During this, Ben Solo walks in the front door. Ignoring me, he kisses Miss Kenobi on the forehead and goes back to the kitchen for a bowl of cereal. He stands at the counter to eat it, headphones in, a look of deep concentration on his face as he scrolls on his iPod.

Solo has kept a relatively low profile since January of 2000, when his shocking confession of plagiarism was only eclipsed by his immediately accusing former First Order Records founder Alistair Snoke of blackmailing him for it. Mr. Snoke is currently serving a twenty year sentence in a federal prison, while Solo has been reborn into the band and name he left behind when he became Kylo Ren of the Knights of Ren. Despite the recent end of his press embargo, my hopes that I would get at least one or two questions in for him are dwindling quickly. Kenobi rolls her eyes and goes over to him. She whispers some kind of magic in his ear and he comes over, shaking my hand and sitting down next to his girlfriend. He’s full of nervous energy, however, and I get the feeling I’m not going to have his attention for long.

With a deadline looming, he’s been listening to the album in order to finalize the track listing. He’s less forthcoming about the album than Kenobi, only telling me that it’s not a throwback, exactly, but that the Dagobah sound will be recognizable. “We’re ten years older now, so of course it’s going to be different. We’re not teenagers in a garage anymore.”

As early as their comeback shows in 2001 Solo, along with Antilles and Darklighter, displayed a musical maturity that brought new depth to their old tunes. Solo’s virtuosity on guitar is especially notable, having been honed during his tenure with the Knights, and it’s difficult not to speculate on where they would be had they not lost nearly ten years together.

“They don’t think about it,” Solo says with a shrug. “And there are some things I experienced in that period I wouldn’t trade.” A glance at the woman sitting next to him is the only indication of what those experiences are.

That woman has been a polarizing figure for Knights of Ren fans, to the point where she’s a banned topic on more than one online forum, causing other forums to pop up dedicated solely to maligning her and analyzing her relationship with Solo, more than a few calling her “Yoko.”

When I ask if this is a concern with the label and album, she waves it off. “Well it’s unoriginal, for one, but also, I’m just over it. For every girl waiting downstairs twice a week to call me a bitch,
there are plenty of fans who don’t care and aren’t mourning the Knights. And I’ve never been what they’re really mad at, before the band broke up or after.”

Before we can continue, Kenobi’s phone rings and she excuses herself to take it. Solo looks absolutely uninterested in continuing until she returns. Unfortunately, there’s an urgent issue downstairs that she has to attend, so she has to reschedule.

Kenobi rushes down the stairs and Solo accompanies me to the door. I start to ask if he’ll answer a few more questions, but he interrupts before I get the second word out.

“Not a chance,” he says, and closes the door.

continued on page 40

Rey stops reading and stares at him across the table. “So that’s how we’re selling records?”

“It’s bullshit. He actually did ask a question but conveniently left it out. He asked what I thought about my girlfriend being my boss.”

“What an asshole,” she says. “You know, when we met up again he was way more condescending than when you were around. I don’t even know if I want to read the second part.”

“Let me see.”

She slides the magazine across the table and he thumbs to the correct page. He narrates as he skims it. “He’s not too creepy about what you’re wearing...soundtrack at the photo shoot...stuff about the other releases...totally standard article but he definitely likes you. You should finish reading it.”

“Maybe later,” Rey says. She gets up and goes to the sofa, curling herself up in the corner.

Ben follows, sitting next to her and snuggling into her until she unfolds and he can lay his head in her lap. “You know, Tuesday is going to be fucking amazing. You’ve been telling me that every day for the past two weeks.”

“I know, but it’s starting to sink in and it’s this double whammy of nerves. Like, if this album fails we both fail.”

“I’d say failing together is the best way to do it.”

Rey laughs and starts raking her hands through his hair. He closes his eyes as the tingles run down his spine. After a bit, though, she slows down and her motions feel more methodical than absent minded.

“Are you looking for gray hairs again?”

“Yes,” she says.

“I’m thirty, not sixty.”

“Tell that to your scalp,” she says. Her voice sounds tight. He opens his eyes and finds tears in hers.

He grabs her hand, wrapping his fingers around her wrist, and she looks down at him. “Look, I refuse to believe I peaked at 26 and I sure as fuck refuse to believe you peaked at 23. And albums
with number one singles don’t flop.”

Rey weaves her fingers with his and brings his hand to her lips. “It had better not,” she says.

“Besides, one flop would never stop you.”

“That’s probably true, but let’s not go there.”

“We can go anywhere we want.”

Rey’s smile goes all the way to the deepest part of her eyes, a sight he’ll never get tired of and will never stop trying to elicit.

“You’re goddamned right.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter title from "Two of Us" by The Beatles

This was my third novel length fic and it never seems to get easier to finish them. I don’t know what to say except thank you, to people who’ve stuck with this one for three years and for those of you who just started reading recently.

When I first started writing this I thought it was going to be a funny 20k or so piece of fluff. I never imagined it would become what it has, and a large part of that has to do with all the encouragement I’ve gotten from your comments and enthusiasm.

Thank you thank you thank you, and I love you.

The master playlist for the story can be found here.
Update! (Not a new chapter)

Hello!
I wanted everyone to know that I'll be taking this story down on March 1, as I'm editing it so that I can begin querying it as an original novel. If you don't follow me on Twitter or Tumblr already, please do if you want to stay updated on the process or to find out how you can help support me on this journey! Feel free to download the story if you want to save it to reread.

Thank you again for all your support!

Twitter: enfysblessed
Tumblr: kylo-wouldnt-like-those-chips

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!