Primum Nil Nocere

by MalevolentReverie

Summary

Rey Kenobi is a freshly graduated doctor with an eager and perceiving mind. She meets the enigmatic neurosurgeon Kylo Ren who is hiding more than a few secrets, and soon her curiosity leads her to making dangerous connections. More than her career will be at stake when she stumbles upon the ugly truth.

This story connects to the "Something Wicked" multiverse w/Seth Morrow & Genevieve Nichols (a.k.a. Genny, Gen).

Notes

Okay so I am hardcore into serial killers and have written many, many stories about them. They all have a personality that fits with Kylo Ren so I'm going to upload them with some names and situations changed. WHY NOT. This is already finished original fiction but I'm uploading it here as a Reylo fic.

THIS. IS. REALLY. FUCKED. UP. DO NOT FUCKING READ THIS IF YOU CAN'T HANDLE NON-CON. DO NOT READ THIS IF YOU CAN'T HANDLE GRAPHIC VIOLENCE. KYLO REN IS NOT NICE. NOT. NICE. HE WILL NOT SUDDENLY TURN NICE. THIS IS DARK. YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.
The story is fairly tame up to chapter 19. There are 35 chapters.
Graduation

After eight years of endless work, today was the day I became a licensed physician.

Well, technically I would only have the diploma in hand. There were still a few more hurdles to jump before I could even sit down to take the final licensing exam to practice medicine on my own. But the extra four years to complete my internship and residency felt like dust in the wind; time was sort of folding in on itself in my head. I couldn’t believe it—I was going to be a doctor.

Wriggling with excitement, I sprang out of bed and promptly collapsed on my dorm floor in an ungraceful pile of limbs. I groaned and slowly got up, wincing and rubbing my head. Dammit. It was a good thing I’d taken dad’s advice and steered clear of a surgery subspecialty. With my luck I’d wind up slicing through a major artery and watching in horror as my patient bled out on the table.

One of my four roommates pounded on my door while I carefully picked my way through the clothes strewn across my floor. They were all fairly organized but I was so obsessed with studying that I hardly bothered to keep my part of our townhouse looking pretty. I braced myself on the wall and yanked open the door to greet whatever one of my friends wanted to share in the excitement.

Rose was on me in a flash of green pajamas and she hoisted me off the floor, whirling me around in a bear-hug. “We’re doctors, Rey! We’re all gonna be doctors today!”

I’d been friends with Rose since day one of undergrad, when we both awkwardly shuffled into our biology 101 class. It was an opposites attract sort of friendship—she was short and boisterous while I was short and much more... ‘unassuming’. That was what dad called it, but I couldn’t decide if it was an insult.

“I know!” I squealed, hopping up and down in place when she set me back on the floor. “Where’s everyone else? Starting to get ready? I got my gown and everything prepped weeks ago.”

It was black with three green stripes on the arms and a green scarf I had to drape around my neck. Nevada State University had a strange color scheme that I wasn’t entirely fond of. I’d winced the entire time I ironed the gown and hung it up in my closet for safekeeping with my hat and tassels.

Rose stepped back and dramatically flipped her black hair over her shoulder. “From now on everyone will address me as Dr. Rose Tico. When waitresses ask what name to put my reservation under, I’ll proudly tell them ‘Oh, that would be Doctor Rose Tico.’”

“You’re so humble,” I laughed, leaning on my doorframe. “We’re not out of the woods yet, so be careful throwing that title around.”

“Four more years, Rey! You’ll be an internist and I’ll be a pediatrician.”

We chatted for a while about our plans like we had done a thousand times before. Rose and I were the only two in our townhouse who were staying in the area and interning at a local hospital: St. Luke’s. It was a modern place that took in complicated cases from all over Nevada and even a few from out of state. We’d be together for the first year during our internship but after that she would go on to shadow for her specialty and I would go on to my own.

Rose skipped off to clean up her room and I slipped back inside mine to do the same. Dad was
going to bring me straight home after the ceremony so I had to make sure everything was packed and ready within a couple of hours. I ran a hand through my long auburn hair and turned in circles, intimidated by the mess around me. Maybe dad could help me out.

Thankfully, Rose finished packing and came back to help me fifteen minutes after she left. We laughed over memories and talked about how exciting our internship would be until I got a little too emotional and had to stop before I burst into tears. It was tiny but it held so many great moments: the first time I had sex, for instance. That had been more of a miss than a hit.

Our three other roommates, Kayla, Astrid, and Naomi, came home an hour after Rose and I had started on my room. They had all come from New York City together and intended on returning to finish their internships and residencies. We shared more memories and at that moment, I was happy enough to burst. I knew the final stretch would be hard but I couldn’t wait to begin.

Everything was said and done by one o’clock and we got dressed. There were giggles and nervous practiced handshakes and we double-checked each other’s gowns a hundred times. We got a group picture before we left and piled into Rose’s SUV, chucking all of my belongings in the trunk that would return to Sparks with me.

NSU was an enormous school and the graduation ceremony was taking place in a rented auditorium about ten minutes from the main campus. The place was already crawling with people when we got there and it took me another twenty minutes to find a parking spot. It was surprisingly balmy for a May afternoon in Nevada and I hurried after the girls, a bit warm in my gown, to find my dad.

The man who had single-handedly raised me was waiting outside the main doors with his hands in his pockets. Dad was 60 but he hardly looked it—we had a running joke where I asked him who he bought his immortal potion from. He had some grey in his hair but aging had thusfar been kind to him. He beamed proudly when I leapt on him, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“The day is finally here, Rey,” he said, embracing me tightly. “Your mother would be so happy.”

“I’ve cried enough today, daddy,” I muttered. I held his hands and took a deep breath. “I bet she wouldn’t be happy if she saw the student loans I have.”

Dad chuckled, shrugging. “The price you pay for greatness. Besides, your residency should pay you.”

“Probably minimum wage… We’ve got another decade before I’m making any kind of money.”

We reconnected with the girls and I hugged Rose’s parents fiercely, ecstatic to see them. It was perfect. All of my friends had graduated and soon, we’d all be saving lives.

The ceremony was a blur. It was kind of dark in the auditorium and I was so petrified that I couldn’t focus on what the speaker was saying. Fans whirred around us, trying to keep the place from turning into a stifling deathtrap, and Rose kept cracking her knuckles. I vaguely remembered stumbling out on stage to take my diploma and managing a smile for the quick picture they snapped.

And that was that. I trembled when Rose took some pictures of me with dad, and I started crying again when all five of us girls gathered together with our diplomas. Dr. Rey Kenobi wasn’t officially in business, but in four more years she would be diagnosing and treating her own patients.

It was the last time I would see my other three friends, but Rose and I were set to move into our
apartment just outside Spring Valley in a month. I’d saved enough from working odd jobs during school for the first month or two of rent but after that I would depend on my internship.

I stared blankly out the window of dad’s truck on the long drive back to Sparks. Jesus Christ, I was actually a doctor. I kept looking at my diploma like the name or title might change but there it was in elegant script: *Dr. Rey Noelle Kenobi*. Eventually they would let me take care of people and I would be on my own with only some liability insurance to protect me.

We moved all my things back into our small house in the middle of Sparks where I had been born and raised. In another month I would leave again and I didn’t know if I would come back.

Dad hugged me again and congratulated me for the millionth time. He left to tell his friends from work about my graduation and to let our family in Pennsylvania know the good news as well. I stood alone in my childhood bedroom with all my belongings around me and folded my arms over my chest. I’d left the same room eight years ago, bright-eyed and bushy tailed with my heart set on helping people.

I swallowed hard. “First, do no harm.”
Move-in day came all too soon for Rose and I. We packed up her SUV and headed to our little apartment on the outskirts of the Vegas strip, where we were within walking distance of St. Luke’s. I shoved all of my junk back in the car and gave dad another teary-eyed hug before Rose and I headed out. He stood at the end of our driveway with his hands in his pockets, watching me disappear over the horizon.

The apartment wasn’t anything special but it was inhabitable. We were sandwiched between two other tall buildings in some small dusty town where the lights from Vegas weren’t visible anymore. I went upstairs to check the place out before we started lugging things up three flights to stuff our rooms full, and I breezed past a few windows along the way. My key jangled in my trembling grasp and I almost dropped it before I managed to get it into the lock.

Rose had picked the place out because I’d bailed to study for my finals. It was small, and I suddenly didn’t feel like a doctor anymore. The floors were hardwood throughout and we had a small kitchen immediately to the right, then a living room straight in front of it. At least it was fully furnished.

It took all afternoon but we were moved in and organized by 7 o’clock when the sun was starting to set. I flopped down on our brown couch and heaved a sigh. Rose bustled around in the kitchen and was handing me a wine cooler five minutes later. I gratefully accepted it, exhausted to the core.

“Tomorrow’s day one,” Rose said, sitting beside me with her own drink. She shook her head and smiled ruefully. “Eight years have gone by but we’re still not quite done. Hopefully we meet some other nice interns; maybe we can all get drinks tomorrow night.”

“Yeah, maybe. I’ll probably be way too nervous.”

That night, I hardly slept. Our rooms were on opposite sides of the apartment and mine was a bit bigger than my dorm room, but I couldn’t relax. I got out of bed to pace back and forth and look on Facebook for some moral support. I’d lost touch with my friends from high school years ago but still had some of them as friends. I frowned and put my phone down, shaking my head. No, I’d get through it on my own.

The morning came too soon.

Rose was in the kitchen making breakfast already garbed in her blue scrubs. All of the interns had to wear them for the first year, but during residency you would have the garb of whatever your specialty was. I sat stiffly in the kitchen and hardly touched the eggs my roommate gave me. I was ready to puke.
“We’ll be together most of the time,” Roses aid as she wolfed down her breakfast. “And by the
time the year is up we’ll be so used to the hospital that being apart won’t mean a thing.”

I didn’t know what to say so I finished eating and got dressed, lingering in front of the bathroom
mirror to stare at my reflection. I’d worn scrubs a thousand times before throughout med school
but now it was the real deal. I took a deep breath and grabbed my backpack from the living room,
where I’d put my textbook, a change of clothes, and some food. Shifts could last 12 hours or
more.

We walked to our first day of interning together, with Rose chattering away and me getting more
and more nauseous by the second. She was always better with new experiences than I was;
always making friends in classes and inviting me to go out for drinks with all of them. I ground
my jaw, struggling to steady myself. All the other interns would be terrified, too. We’d all stick
together.

St. Luke’s was enormous. The building was all white outside and had only been built a few years
ago. Inside, we were bathed in fluorescent light and walking across spotless floors. People bustled
around us, some in long lab coats signifying they were full-fledged doctors and others in scrubs as
nurses and interns. I hurried after Zoe, afraid of being left behind in the flux, when she stopped
very suddenly.

“Gather ‘round, interns, gather round!”

Beside the big front desk was a tall, severe looking woman with blonde hair in a short bob. She
had glasses perched on the end of her nose and a chart under one arm of her long lab coat. Three
guys were already standing in front of her, wearing their blue scrubs as well, and Rose and I
joined the growing group. I twiddled my thumbs uncomfortably and Rose tapped on the shorter
guy’s shoulder to introduce herself. The doctor glanced at her watch irately.

Ultimately, it was only a group of ten people including Rose and I. There were six guys and four
girls, which didn’t add up considering the gender skewing in med school. I fingered my backpack.

“My name is Dr. Amilyn Holdo,” the woman said. “I am an attending oncologist at St. Luke’s
and I have been practicing medicine for 20 years. You will all answer to me until our year together
is through, after which time you will select your own specialties. Now, let’s get the hell off this
floor so I can show all of you to the barracks.”

“Rough welcome,” the shorter guy Rose had spoken to muttered as we headed to the elevators.

Dr. Holdo looked exhausted. We all stood silently in the elevator, too terrified to address her, and
followed her out onto the fifth floor where we would be carrying out our internships.

It was much quieter than the bottom floor. The nurse’s station was likewise fairly still and they
were all looking on their computers or glancing over charts as we passed by. The rooms were all
individual for the patients: it was oncology and hematology, which meant most of them had
cancer. It wasn’t the type of drama you would see in the cardiac or emergency units, but a stiff
sadness hung in the air.

A room at the end of the hall offered us a place to put our things in lockers. It had a refrigerator
and a small sitting area with a television to give doctors and nurses a place to relax if they were
stuck between shifts. I’d seen it before during my interning in med school. Another room in the
back held four bunk beds for doctors to catch some shut eye and we had our own bathroom as
well.

She left us to check on a patient, and everyone put their stuff away. I hung my stethoscope around
my neck and pinned my badge to the front of my scrubs before shoving my bookbag in my locker.

The short guy turned to shake my hand. He was smiling happily like Rose and looked much older than both of us. I blinked and awkwardly returned the gesture.

“My name’s Taylor,” he said.

“I’m Rey. Nice to meet you.”

We all went through our introductions. The six men were Taylor, Isaac, Peter, Henry, Jack, and Greg. The girls were Fiona and Maddie. All of us explained what college we had graduated from and I was surprised to find many of them were out of state residents. Fiona had come from Scotland, oddly enough, and Isaac was from Mexico.

Dr. Holdo returned and the first day of interning began.

It was only 6:30 in the morning, so none of the patients were particularly happy to see us. We went to check on all of them together but Dr. Holdo assured us that we would each have three by the end of the week. I listened and took notes while she talked and stood over the disoriented patients who were hooked up to machines by countless monitors and tubes.

I winced. Shit, I wasn’t thinking like a doctor. It was an IV and a feeding tube, and the man also had a catheter. A couple of leads kept track of his heartbeat and for whatever reason, his brainwaves.

We were turned loose to grab breakfast before morning report and grand rounds. Rose was ecstatic and shoveled even more food down her gullet while I continued to pick nervously at mine. She’d settled in well with Isaac and Maddie, while Fiona and sitting with Taylor at their own table. The cafeteria was huge and had all sorts of stations for whatever you were hungry for.

“I’ve gotta get on in that guy with the brain tumor,” Isaac said, picking at his bacon. He pushed back his sleeves and winked at me. “The one you were gawking at, Rey. You’re lucky he was unconscious.”

My cheeks burned with embarrassment. “I did all my interning in med school on a cardiology floor. It was a lot different than the people we saw today.”

“Sure was,” Rose agreed. “I can’t wait to get to pediatrics.”

Open discussion ran for three hours. First we had a catch-up with the on call team from the night before that was aptly named morning rounds. We discussed any interesting clinical cases with the incredibly tired residents and they were permitted to leave after. We moved on to grand rounds with another attending, Dr. Fields, who was an older man with a passion for gastroenterology. He spoke about celiac disease in patients with cancer and we all scribbled down notes in a rush.

Last came the final part of rounds with Dr. Holdo. Medical students would shadow and trail around after fellows and attending doctors, and they were expected to offer a presentation just like the specialist in grand rounds. We went to check on all the patients again and worked together to formulate plans and write orders. It was a cut and dry formula Dr. Holdo had done a thousand times.

We completed our progress notes, ceasing paperwork for most of the day. Regardless, there was never a dull moment. A couple of discharges were permitted and we took in even more patients, some who would go left to the oncology floor and some who would go right to hematology. Dr. Holdo sent me over to deal with lab draws and transfusions.
Around 4 o’clock I returned to the patient with a brain tumor. It was toward the end of my shift on most days but Dr. Holdo wanted all of us to stay until about 7:30 PM to see exactly how wrap-up would work. I yawned and swung into the room, rubbing my eyes tiredly.

That was the first time I saw him.

Surgeons didn’t wear the same thing medical staff did—they chose green scrubs so they would always be ready if an emergency surgery had to take place. He was leaning over Mr. Highland with his stethoscope hanging from his neck and a mask under his chin, delicately examining sutures along the elderly man’s skull. He was wearing a green cap so I couldn’t see his hair but I could see his dark eyebrows drawn together in annoyance as he checked the patient.

I wrung my hands. “Um… can I help you?”

Slowly, he turned away from the patient to fixate a particularly arctic glare on me. His eyes were incredibly dark brown and I instinctively stepped back. He looked to be at least a few years older than me and had a firm, serious expression.

The surgeon stood straight and his cold gaze swept down me and my intern scrubs. “Mr. Highland is your patient?” His voice was deep and penetrating.

“Uh… yeah, kind of.” I curled a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

He took off his gloves with a loud snap and cocked his head. “And you are…?”

I came to attention like a soldier and was pretty sure I would’ve saluted if I wasn’t so tired. “Sorry! I’m Dr. Rey Kenobi. I’m an intern.”

“Ah.” His gaze swept down me again as he tossed the gloves in the trash. “I’m Kylo Ren, an attending neurosurgeon on the seventh floor. I have a habit of checking on my patients when their surgeries are through—I didn’t mean to get in your way, Dr. Kenobi.”

“That’s okay,” I faltered.

Of course I’d stumbled across the highest paid doctor in the hospital. Dr. Ren smiled and glanced at the steady movement of Mr. Highland’s brain waves before he went to the sink near the door to wash his hands. Trembling, I unwound my stethoscope from my neck and skittered forward. Shit, was I sweating? It was terrifying having a surgeon watching what I was doing. What if I was wrong?

“Why exactly are you in here again, Dr. Kenobi?”

I yanked the buds out of my ears, hesitating. “Um… I was just checking his vitals.”

Dr. Ren dried his hands and jerked his head toward the door. “The nurses take care of that. If he’s been stable all day and you already recorded his status earlier, you have a rare pocket of free time. Amilyn loves when her interns read those ludicrous textbooks in the break area.” He smiled, icy countenance thawing. “Just a suggestion.”

The pager on his belt loop went off and he nodded politely to me before leaving. I stood in the dark room amidst the beeping of machines from the hall and looked down at Mr. Highland. It had been a long day… I could use the time to brush up on oncology. So at Dr. Ren’s behest I headed down the hall to the lounge and cracked open the heavy textbook I’d grown to treasure more than my own soul.
Things settled into a routine over the next couple of months, and I was halfway through my internship before I knew it. I’d worried about being hazed by residents or attendings but St. Luke’s operated as a team and no one wanted to see a coworker left behind. Established nurses helped newer doctors like Rose and I sink into a rhythm and I was confidently intubating patients before I knew it.

A couple of the other interns dropped out and there were only five of us left: Isaac, Taylor, Rose, me, and Maddie. It was sobering seeing the others throwing out all their hard work and heartbreaking that they figured out medicine wasn’t their calling when they had already finished their degrees.

It was my night to pass off the paperwork to our replacements. The hospital was nice and warm but I could see drifts of snow falling past the window, which meant I was walking home in the bitter cold. I sighed and organized my paperwork in my final patient’s room. Her name was Ms. Doherty and she was a middle-aged woman with stage three brain cancer. She was fast asleep from her chemo earlier.

The room was quiet as I scribbled and erased and gnawed my pen. Christ, it was such a pain passing patients off. I wished I had the energy and time to stay with them on a constant basis. Some of them could be horrible and rude but the nice people made my day.

Six months had passed without me hearing a single code and it seemed like it would never happen. I curled my hair behind my ear and puckered my lips while I finished up writing orders. Rose wanted to grab a late dinner or a drink with everyone else, but I’d probably—

The steady beep of Ms. Doherty’s heart became a shrieking flat line.

My head snapped up in an instant and my own heart felt like it was going to stop. I leapt out of my chair and scrambled to the phone to call in a code blue to the front desk, settling for letting the phone dangle from the line when I’d managed to say the dreaded words. I rushed to Ms. Doherty’s side and tried to mentally sift through my training while I began CPR with trembling hands.

Shit, the flat line was the most horrible sound I had ever heard, and I’d been in rooms with dying people plenty of times. I’d heard their death rattles when they couldn’t breathe anymore but I would never be accustomed to the ear-piercing ringing coming from the heart monitor. I tried to administer even pressure to Ms. Doherty’s chest as tears pricked the corners of my eyes.

“Doctor Kenobi, what’s the situation?”

Then the room was filled with other medical professionals and all of them were looking to me, including Dr. Ren. He stood close beside me as three RNs circled to the side of the bed to tear open the patient’s gown, giving us easier access for monitors and vital sign checks.
Everyone was flooding around her. A respiratory therapist was prepping an intubator while a lab tech drew blood from a site prepared by a nurse. Holy hell. I was supposed to be going home.

“She flat lined out of nowhere,” I said, struggling to compose myself. It was me. It was all on me. The physician ran the code to completion.

“What do you suggest?” Dr. Ren asked.

The respiratory therapist opened her airway in the blink of an eye and another took over chest compressions while they waited for me to make a decision. There wasn’t time to think, only act. Through the madness and the shouting and the beeping, I needed to think clearly.

“It’s v-tac,” I said with a quick glance at her heart rate. “Bring me the defibrillator!”

Ms. Doherty was strung up with leads and lines. Everyone stood back when I rubbed the paddles together before I even shouted “Clear!” and promptly sent a shock through the patient. The machine beeped a million times at me and her heart flat lined again before bouncing back to the same arrhythmia. The nurses administered more oxygen and I turned again.

“Clear!”

Unfortunately, her heart couldn’t come back from the brink. I lost my first patient.

“Time of death, 20:00 hours.”

The room was still dark as everyone packed up and left for the morgue to come in and collect Ms. Doherty. I stared at her peaceful expression, holding the defibrillator paddles limp in my hands, and ground my jaw to hold back tears. I’d lost her. She had been fast asleep ten feet away from me.

Dr. Ren remained beside me, holding the edge of the bed and gazing impassively at her. His eyes turned to me when I threw the paddles onto the cart and turned to wipe my eyes with my wrists. I peeled off my gloves and dropped them in the garbage. Everything was so quiet—still like death. Get a grip, Rey. You’re going to lose people thirty-three percent of the time.

What if I’d screwed up? What if I hadn’t been fast enough and she died because of me?

“Don’t second guess yourself,” Dr. Ren said.

I collected my papers from the floor near my chair, still teary-eyed. “I’m not. It happens.”

When I rose and turned around he was standing two feet in front of me with his hands on his hips. He wasn’t wearing his surgery cap and I hadn’t noticed his messy dark black hair during the code.

“It’s almost impossible to bring a patient back from a-fib,” he said. He glanced over his shoulder at Ms. Doherty. “She refused surgery to remove the tumor and at stage three, chemotherapy wasn’t helping her enough. You directed the code perfectly. Most interns hide in the broom closets.”

It was almost impossible to look him in the eyes. I focused on the door. “Thanks. My shift’s over so I’m going to hand these off to the night interns and finish Ms. Doherty’s paperwork up front. I appreciate your help, Dr. Ren.”

He didn’t stop me when I left the room.

The ICU nurses were at the front desk waiting for me to finish filling out the paperwork. Ms.
Doherty had no family so I didn’t have to break the news to anyone. They touched my shoulders and told me I performed very well like Dr. Ren had and I smiled at them and tried not to cry on the papers.

Emotionally spent, I went to the break room around nine to finish getting my stuff together. I didn’t want to text Rose to tell her what happened because I was afraid I’d lose it. I shrugged into my jacket and stuffed my stethoscope into my backpack. The other interns were already flitting around the floor checking on the other patients. I hoisted up my bookbag and turned to leave.

And he was there again. It was sort of like he never left my peripheral vision. This time he was wearing black coat like mine and he had a messenger bag slung over his shoulder. He smiled placidly and my heart fluttered. Damn, his eyes practically glowed in the dark.

“The surgeon is set free?” I asked, smiling a bit back at him.

“They let me out on occasion, and I’m not on call this weekend. Another welcome surprise.” Dr. Ren cocked his head inquisitively. “Are you feeling any better?”

I sighed, fingering my backpack’s straps. “I guess… sort of. I’ll cry to Rose tonight.”

“Ah, Dr. Tico. What specialty is she aiming for?”

“Pediatrics. Psychiatry, maybe.”

“What about you?” he pressed. “I never discussed it with Amilyn and I’m very curious.”

Huh, random question. Most of the attendings were too busy with their own patients to ask us those kinds of things, and surgeons were especially busy.

“Internal medicine,” I said. “I like the pathology of it all.”

“I see.” A weird smirk touched the edges of Dr. Ren’s lips, like he knew something I didn’t. “I’ve always had steady hands and a keen eye, so surgery was my calling. Anyway, I’m sure you’d like to go home before the sun starts to come up. Do you want a ride?”

The offer jarred me. I blanched and he started laughing.

“It’s okay,” I said anxiously, “my apartment is right down the street. Five minutes, tops. I don’t want to inconvenience you or anything.”

Dr. Ren waved me off and continued to insist. I shut my locker and scurried after him to the elevators, praying no one would see us. A nurse peered around the corner as the doors shut and I noticed her but Dr. Ren was examining the ceiling. I spastically shook my head when her eyebrows rose in surprise. Uh oh. Hopefully rumors wouldn’t spread.

The looks followed us on our way out the main door. He didn’t seem bothered by it but I was cognizant of the open stares from the staff and not particularly happy with them. I hunched my shoulders.

We crossed the parking lot to get into his car and I wasn’t shocked to see it was a Porsche. I slipped in the passenger seat and looked out the window, paranoid by everyone’s reactions. I needed to read the employee handbook. Could I be fired if they thought I was involved with Dr. Ren?

“Don’t mind them.” The car came to life with a muted growl and Dr. Ren cast me a reassuring smile. “They’re far too vested in me. You should tune into the gossip sometimes, Dr. Kenobi.” He
frowned suddenly, shifting the car into gear. “May I call you Rey outside of work? The ‘doctor’ nonsense is a mouthful, and I like your name.”

The car was mercifully dark so he couldn’t see my cheeks redden. “Yeah, sure. So is it okay if I call you Kylo?” I stiffened. “Not that we’ll see each other outside of work a lot. I’m not trying to suggest anything like that, but maybe for right now—”

My phone started ringing and my humiliating word vomit stopped. I fumbled with my bookbag to check the caller ID to know who to call back when I got out of the car. Rose… she probably wanted to know why it took me almost three hours to pass on charts to the night interns.

“The wife calling?” Kylo asked teasingly.

“As always. I told her we could get drinks tonight but I’m spent. Looks like I’ll have to take her out for our weekly dinner date tomorrow.”

“The bonding of the interns.” His expression soured. “Speaking of which, I’m not a fan of that Isaac character. He’s requested to be transferred to my wing too many times to count and still persists. I wish I could like him for his doggedness but if I wanted to be nagged I would be married by now. It’s especially irritating after 12 hours of surgery.”

Right, I had to remember to tell Isaac to back off before he pissed Kylo off. I nodded emphatically like I completely understood how it felt to stand in place for half a day poking around in a person’s skull.

“I’m on 23 West Street,” I said.

He didn’t look away from the road. “I know. You told me earlier.”

Oh. Whatever; I must’ve just forgotten. I sank into my seat and twiddled my thumbs. “My bad. Dad and I thought my terrible memory would get my kicked out of med school.”

Kylo was pulling up in front of my apartment. “Hm. Coincidentally, my dissertation was on nootropics.”

“Seriously? Mine was on pheromones.” I rolled my eyes. “It was kind of lame but Rose put me up to it. I think that was the first time I fell asleep at my laptop.”

“Certainly not the last. What were your findings?”

“Nothing groundbreaking. We don’t have them as far as I’m concerned, unless you want to consider androgen steroids. But in the traditional animal sense? No, humans don’t have them. I think our complex mating rituals are the stand-in: dates and dinners and stuff like that.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Kylo murmured. “Social niceties are a bit of a bother, though.”

I laughed. Okay, he wasn’t that intimidating. “Isn’t that every man’s mantra?”

A timid knock on the window drew my gaze away from Kylo. I turned to see Rose standing right outside with her fist raised to knock again, staring at both of us. We stared back at her and she slowly lowered her hand to take a big step back from the Porsche without a word.

“A tad clingy, isn’t she?” Kylo asked with an edge in his voice.

“You have no idea. The guys who tried hooking up with me in med school could tell you all their tales of woe from her randomly barging in. Thanks a lot for the ride.”
He tore his eyes away from Rose and smiled at me. “No problem. You’re good company.”

“I’ll see you… Monday?”

“Monday. Have a good evening, Rey. Try to relax.”

That was easier said than done. I thanked him again and managed to get out of the car without tripping over myself. Rose teetered from the bushes to grab my arms when Kylo took off down the street, demanding to know what I’d been doing with ‘hot doctor’.

“You really are my wife!” I snapped at her on the way inside.
Having the weekend off gave me time to recover from losing Ms. Doherty. I went shopping with Rose and got some new clothes to wear for our vacation in Florida the next summer and we hung out at the apartment with our fellow interns. I tried to put the horrible shriek of her heart monitor out of my head, opting instead to focus on Dr. Ren’s words: I had done everything right.

I woke up Monday morning and shuffled out to the kitchen to have some cereal before work. Rose was sitting on the couch intently watching the news with her own bowl of corn flakes, black hair tossed on top of her head in a messy ponytail. I yawned profusely while I poured mine, half-conscious.

“Authorities in Las Vegas warn women to remain vigilant when walking around the city at night,” the newscaster said, a balding old guy with a serious expression. “They believe the discovery of Marlene Hardy’s body may have a connection to the women who have been found in Lake Mead over the past decade. We’ll have more on this story as it unfolds.”

Rose groaned dramatically. “Come on, don’t tell me we have to worry about some psychopath who hacks women up. I told you we should’ve moved east, Rey. The crazy people like the East Bumfuck towns like this because no one notices a damn thing until it’s too late.”

I rolled my eyes, adding milk to my cereal. “I don’t think you’re any serial killer’s type. You’d be too loud to be worth kidnapping and keeping around.”

“Oh, you’re so hilarious.” She glared at me over the back of the couch.

We finished getting ready and drove to work together. I was sort of nervous about seeing Kylo—er—Dr. Ren—but put on my best poker face. Rose didn’t leave me alone about him driving me home for hours and I knew she wanted to bring it up to our friends. I didn’t want to deal with any work drama.

A couple of nurses on the first floor gave me weird looks but I was able to shrug it off. I followed Rose into the elevator, pretending not to notice her staring at me, and stepped out onto our floor. We had a lot of patients admitted over the weekend so I needed to get started as soon as possible. I shouldered my backpack and passed the nurse’s station, trying to mentally plan out my day.

“Dr. Kenobi! Dr. Kenobi!”

I stopped in my tracks to see three nurses huddled together behind their station staring at me. The taller one, Betty, motioned for me to come over. I cautiously approached while she and the other two girls giggled to one another until they finally got a hold of themselves.

“Something funny?” I asked tersely.

Betty shook her head but was struggling to hold in her laughter. “Oh no, no; nothing at all. We heard you left Friday night with Dr. Ren and well… we wanted to know how things went.”
“He turns everyone from work down,” said Shae, the shortest and youngest one, “and he usually only ever goes out for drinks or dinner with the other surgeons.”

I blanched. “Excuse me?”

They all rolled their eyes at one another like they thought I was teasing them.

“We won’t tell a soul,” Betty said.

“Except maybe a few in the cardiac unit,” Shae admitted.

Oh, hell no. I wasn’t going to be pegged as the cutesy, dopey intern who was taken advantage of by the more seasoned doctor. I bristled indignantly, prepared to unleash a firestorm of swear words and other unsavory things upon them, when I heard someone clear their throat behind me.

“That’s enough, ladies.”

It was Dr. Holdo and she didn’t look pleased. The nurses muttered but went back to their duties and I was set free to start my own business. I joined up with Dr. Holdo to head down the hall to the break room, thanking her profusely along the way. If I had to tolerate ten more seconds of being pigeonholed, I might have put my career in serious jeopardy.

She waved me off. “It isn’t just the nurses, Dr. Kenobi. Everyone talks in a hospital so I suggest you keep that in mind and be very cautious.” She glanced at a chart in her hand and peered at me over her glasses. “Dr. Ren told me you had your first code Friday night.”

We’d stopped in front of the break room. I tried not to grimace recalling it, settling for nodding stiffly.

“Yeah,” I said, “I did everything I could to bring her back.”

“Code blues may as well be called code corpse, considering most patients never make it. Hearts are stubborn things and shocking them from an arrhythmia is a gamble. Regardless of that, he told me you performed quite well given the circumstances and pressure. That’s good to hear coming from one of my colleagues. Keep it up, Dr. Kenobi.”

“Oh… thank you!” I called when Dr. Holdo headed back the way she came.

Okay, it was a decent day so far. I slipped into the break room to put my things away and went to the computers to print out my patient list for the day. Most of the interns were working so we had a more even spread between all of us. I rose to study the sheet, scanning it for any major changes.

Two of my patients were recovering from brain surgery, and one other had a surgery scheduled for later in the day. I cocked my head at this and flipped through the papers. Sometimes we would inherit post-op patients from neurology if they had some kind of tumor that warranted special care on the oncology floor, but it was rare to see two. Hm. At least they were all stable.

I set about my duties for the day. The first two patients were middle-aged men who were with their families and they had a few questions for me about post-operative care. I invited them to let the nurse know if they had any more questions for me and left them on a good note. My patient waiting to have his tumor removed was fast asleep and his partner also asked me some questions. Rounds and check-ups proceeded as normal. I went to have lunch with Rose and the others around 1:30 and was back in my pre-op patient’s room by two. I didn’t have to stay late that night—Taylor had the honor of passing off the patients to the night interns—so I couldn’t wait for 4:30. It was still grueling putting in 11 or 12 hour days and I wanted to get home to relax.
The door opened and Dr. Ren came in with his surgery scrubs on, blinding everyone in the room with a megawatt smile. He shook Mr. Farrah’s hand and turned to address the patient, Mr. Astor. I watched saliently from the other side of the room while I took notes.

“I know your surgery isn’t until tomorrow, Mr. Astor, but I wanted to introduce myself,” Dr. Ren said. “My name is Kylo Ren and I am a graduate of Johns Hopkins University. I wanted to dispel any concerns you might have about the procedure: people are understandably apprehensive about neurosurgery.”

The two men exchanged a glance and visibly relaxed before asking him some questions. The whole ‘Johns Hopkins graduate’ tended to help a lot of people feel better about having their skulls cut open. I smirked a little to myself and finished up the paperwork, quietly slipping from the room.

While I was going over a chart with Betty, I felt someone come up and stand close beside me. My spine prickled and I watched Betty’s glance flicker up before she started grinning again.

“Mr. Astor needs to be taken off his blood thinner,” Dr. Ren said, signing the chart. “I don’t want him bleeding out on the table tomorrow morning.” His eyes turned to me. I couldn’t see it, but I could definitely feel it. “What does your morning look like tomorrow, Dr. Kenobi?”

“Well I won’t know until—”

“Excellent, you can shadow my surgery.”

The nurses were all reduced to giggles when I blinked in shock. I handed off my chart and scurried after Dr. Ren, mildly terrified. I didn’t want to watch brain surgery! I didn’t even like neurology. I wanted to deal with everything below the neck, not slice their heads open.

“Dr. Ren,” I said, trying to keep my cool, “I appreciate your offer but I can’t accept it. I think Isaac—I mean, Dr. Vertis—would jump at the opportunity.”

He stopped and looked down at me, raising an eyebrow. “You should always try new things, Rey.” He smiled smugly. “Sorry—Dr. Kenobi. Perhaps you’ll like it, hm?”

I pressed my lips together. “I don’t want them to get any ideas about… us, or to think you’re giving me special treatment. Some of the nurses were talking this morning.”

We were alone in the hallway amidst the beeps from patient’s rooms. Dr. Ren kept smiling at me and gently touched the underside of my chin with his fingertip. I blinked stupidly at him. If someone saw us I would be the laughing stock of the whole hospital.

“I am giving you special treatment,” he murmured.

My pulse pounded and I couldn’t make any comprehensible words. Dr. Ren seemed pleased with himself and walked off down the hallway, disappearing around the corner to the elevators. I stared after him and reached up to touch my chin, bewildered. Was it sexual harassment? No, he hadn’t touched me inappropriately, and I hadn’t exactly resisted him.

I’d talk to him before I left to establish boundaries for us. I needed to focus on finishing out my internship and the next three years of my residency, not going gaga over a doctor I met a few months ago. I took a deep breath and went to check my patients before rounds.

Rose beamed at me when I arrived and I tried to smile back but I was too unnerved by my encounter with Dr. Ren. What if he started demanding things from me? I couldn’t tell Rose or
she’d intervene and make a scene. I needed to solve the problem on my own but tread softly. He was an attending neurosurgeon; he meant a lot more to the hospital than I did.

Around five o’clock I went back to the break room with Rose to get my things. She watched me suspiciously while I packed my bookbag and finally nudged me with her elbow.

“Something wrong, Rey?” she asked. “You were really quiet at rounds.”

“Hm? Oh, no, I’m just sort of tired today.” I shrugged, zipping my backpack. “No big deal. I’m glad we’re both out at the same time today. You want to get drinks after work?”

“…Sure.”

“Dr. Kenobi.”

Shit. Rose immediately looked up toward Dr. Ren and nudged me again when I didn’t. I squeezed my eyes shut to steady myself and turned to face him with my best poker face. He was wearing his jacket again and had taken his surgical cap off. His hands were in his pockets.

“Yes?” I asked in a clipped tone.

He smiled. “The surgery is at ten tomorrow morning. Be here at eight, please.”

I nodded and went back to organizing my stuff. Rose waved to him like a schoolgirl when he left and punched me in the arm. She was way too aggressive sometimes.

“You’re shadowing a brain surgery?!” she exclaimed. “Why didn’t you tell me? I thought you liked the diagnosing and disease studying. Are you sure you have steady enough hands for that?”

“I… I wanted to see what it’s like,” I said. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Gee, hot doctor must really like you.” Rose shut her locker, shaking her head. “I wonder why?”

“Yeah, me too,” I muttered.
The apartment was already empty when I woke up to get ready for the surgery. I was kind of disappointed because I wanted Rose around so I could tell her how incomprehensibly terrified I was. Duty called, however, and I ate my breakfast before getting dressed to be in by eight. Hopefully the MRIs would already be done and Dr. Ren would start the surgery a bit early.

His intense interest in me was flattering but uncomfortable at the same time. I’d no doubts that he had ulterior motives and resolved to be guarded around him, always vigilant and shrewd. I brushed my teeth before I headed out with my trusty backpack to make the short trek to the hospital.

The patient was still on the oncology floor so I went there to look for Dr. Ren. The nurses all waved to me and snickered amongst themselves and my cheeks burned. I hurried down the hall to Mr. Astor’s room, ducking my head a bit. Word was already spreading. Everyone knew I wanted to be an internist, so what was I doing shadowing a brain surgery that Isaac would’ve liked?

They were prepping Mr. Astor for surgery and Mr. Farrah was waiting outside, biting his nails. I approached cautiously and smiled when he cast a nervous glance my way. He relaxed a little.

“I’m Dr. Kenobi,” I said, shaking his hand. “I’m going to be shadowing Mr. Astor’s surgery today.”

“I’m terrified,” he said suddenly. His whole body was trembling. “I mean, that’s his brain they’re going to be poking around in.” He looked to me and the dreaded words came tumbling out. “Do you know anything about brain surgery? Is he going to awake during it?”

And he was there as always, silent and imposing. I could smell his cologne before I felt three of his fingertips briefly touch the small of my back in a gesture that Mr. Farrah wouldn’t notice. My breath caught in my throat and I went stiff. Shit. Boundaries were being pushed.

“Why don’t we talk for a while in the break room, Mr. Farrah?” Dr. Ren asked coolly. “It’s much quieter than the cafeteria and I have a suspicion that the coffee is better. I’d like to put all your concerns to ease and proceed with what has become a routine surgery to myself and my coworkers.”

How did he know exactly what to say to them? I watched with wide eyes as Dr. Ren swept past me to escort Mr. Farrah down the hallway toward the break room. It was technically against the rules but I had an inkling that the rules didn’t matter much to Kylo Ren. They disappeared inside the break room and I awkwardly left for surgery to get scrubbed up.

Surgery wasn’t a one-man job. There were three other nurses and a second surgeon who would be standing in to assist Dr. Ren. They were all welcoming and showed me the proper technique to wash my hands and dress to avoid contamination. That was extremely important in any surgery but especially key when someone’s skull was cracked open.
We had to prep the OR and wait for Dr. Ren to arrive with the patient. It was enormous, much
different than the ones I’d seen for other surgeries. Everyone was perfectly calm—they’d done it a
hundred times—but I wrung my hands uncomfortably. He’d actually touched me. It was brief and
probably to get my attention, but he’d done it. Was that bad, though?

They wheeled in Mr. Astor around 9:30 AM. His head had been completely shaved. The nurses
gave him oxygen and began getting the anesthesia ready. He would be conscious during the
procedure so Dr. Ren could make sure he wasn’t affecting any important regions of the brain. We
all had our masks and clean scrubs on. The machines were ready to map Mr. Astor’s brain.

Dr. Ren came in a few minutes later in his own scrubs. Everyone straightened up and he circled
around to the front of Mr. Astor’s bed, taking a weird instrument that looked like a claw from one
of the nurses. They flocked closer to the patient to tell him there would be a pinch and burn.

“This slices through the skull,” Dr. Ren said toward me. He had a set of high-focus goggles on.
“It’s very important that Mr. Astor does not move even a millimeter during the procedure or the
brain mapping won’t be much help anymore. Keep him talking.”

It was hard to see from where I was standing, but they soon had the section of skull open and Mr.
Astor’s disease brain was on an overhead television screen. There was a dark mass that I assumed
was the tumor: an oligodendroglioma. I winced—they didn’t have the best life expectancies.

Everyone chatted with Mr. Astor throughout the surgery, asking him routine things like his
favorite band and where he was from. He was groggy but managed to answer them and moved
his arm when necessary, even making some somnolent jokes. Leads fed into the area around the
tumor and Dr. Ren proceeded slowly, eyeing the screen while a nurse flushed the area repeatedly.
The second surgeon helped him move aside the healthy brain tissue.

It was an excruciatingly long process. My feet hurt by the second hour into the surgery but I
marveled at Dr. Ren. He was like a machine. He didn’t hesitate or flinch in the slightest as the two
hours turned to three and eventually four. I couldn’t imagine standing in his shoes.

A big lump was taken from Mr. Astor and one of the nurses placed it in a small container. She
turned back to Mr. Astor to smile, though most of his face and body was underneath a blue sheet.

“About 95% of the tumor is out,” she said. “You’re doing well, so Dr. Ren would like to remove
the rest just to be safe.”

“…Shounds… shweet,” Mr. Astor slurred.

Dr. Ren stopped. “No, we’re too close to Broca’s area. I don’t like slurring.” He turned his arms a
bit, staring at the screen. “What was your favorite band again, Mr. Astor?”

The man laughed a little under the sheet. “I already told you… Queen.”

“We could leave the five percent,” the second surgeon suggested.

“Mr. Astor wanted his entire tumor removed, not 95% of it,” Dr. Ren replied.

They kept going and another 45 minutes later, Mr. Astor was officially tumor-free. The nurses all
sighed with relief while they began the process of putting his skull back together and stapling it.
That didn’t take very long and after clean-up was done the patient was ready to go to the ICU.
The nurses took him away and the second surgeon followed after them, praising Dr. Ren’s quick
thinking.

We left the OR and went back to the prep room to take off the gloves and masks. Dr. Ren’s hands
were a bit bloodstained and he calmly peeled the gloves off to toss them in the trash. I did the same and we quietly washed our hands together without saying a word. I didn’t know what to say—great job?

“You didn’t change my mind,” I said as I dried off my hands. “Good attempt, though.”

Dr. Ren smirked at me and shrugged. “I thought so, too. You can’t blame a man for trying.” He looked up at the clock. “Already two? I was a bit slow today. Would you like lunch, Dr. Kenobi?”

I stiffened. Uh oh.

“I should probably see what Dr. Tico is doing,” I said. “We usually get lunch together with the other interns in the cafeteria.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m certain your friend can survive an afternoon without you. All we have left to do for today is check on Mr. Astor when he wakes, so I’d like to kill some time.”

My stuttering didn’t help my case. Dr. Ren beckoned and I followed him back to the break room to get my jacket, cursing myself all the while. Fine, I’d get lunch with him once and then I’d never do it again. We’d only talk when I had a patient with a brain tumor, which were mercifully rare. He waited patiently for me to get my things and we left the hospital together.

It was early February so it was bitterly cold out. I shivered and wrapped my arms around myself while we walked quietly together toward the parking lot. Kylo didn’t seem bothered by the frigid wind, though. He kept his hands in his pockets and strolled along without a care in the world.

“I can’t believe you have an appetite after that,” I said teasingly.

“Blood and guts have never bothered me. I can think of worse things than tumors.”

“Such as?”

He puckered his lips, deep in thought. “Idle gossip. The Kardashian family makes me particularly nauseous. In that same vein, plastic surgery.”

“Those things make you lose your appetite?” I shook my head. “How do you ever eat?”

“Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

We arrived at a different car: a dark grey Audi with a sleek, modern design. Of course he had more than one vehicle. It tittered to tell us it was open and we slipped into our leather seats. The engine started with a low growl and I tugged on my seatbelt, heart pounding. No big deal. Keep cool.

I recollected myself. “So did you hear about the body they found in Lake Mead?”

“I didn’t. That’s unfortunate. Hopefully the authorities find whoever is responsible.”

We went to a small café about fifteen minutes from the hospital. It turned out Kylo was even easier to talk to than the first time and I shooed away my discomfort. He was friendly and open, not at all snooty like I thought he would be. His pager went off when we were finishing our food to tell him Mr. Astor had woken and was ready to be evaluated. I tried to pay and he laughed.

“Don’t insult me, Rey.”
It was another quiet drive back to work but the silence wasn’t deafening. I glanced at Dr. Ren saliently, still trying to figure him out. He was private: he never mentioned his family.

“Not a fan of my last name?” I asked.

“No. Rey is much better.” He came to a stop at a red light and a few people on the sidewalk outright stared, but he was looking at me. “Germanic, correct? You look Italian or French to me.”

I smiled sheepishly. “Nope, purebred American. I think my great grandparents came from France on my mom’s side. My dad is adopted so we don’t know anything about his family tree.”

“Ah. Are you close to your parents?”

My throat constricted and I rubbed the back of my neck. “With my dad, yeah. My mother died during childbirth so I never got to meet her. But I knew my grandparents on both sides and mom’s side of the family is pretty big. They all live on the East coast.”

“Do you see them often?” He started driving again, tearing away from the red light. “My family is small, hence my curiosity.”

“Sometimes. It’s kind of tough because dad doesn’t make a ton of money. What about your family?”

“Oh, they’re a delight.”

We went inside and checked on Mr. Astor, who was already recovering beautifully. Mr. Farrah thanked Kylo repeatedly, on the verge of tears, and he simply clapped the other man genially on the shoulder. I scurried after him out of the ICU and we ran into a familiar face on the elevator.

Rose looked frazzled. She ignored ‘hot doctor’ and dragged me onto the elevator to shove a chart in my arms. Dr. Ren picked the oncology floor while Rose stumbled over her words.

“You understand this internal stuff better than I do,” she complained. “My new patient is a total wreck, and it doesn’t help that she has diabetes. I hope you had fun standing around in surgery.”

Though I was studying the chart I could feel Kylo’s irritated glare settling on my friend.

I pointed to a section of interest. “She’s been out of the country?”

Rose nodded impatiently. “Yeah, she went to some South American country. Why?”

“There tend to be unpleasant parasites in less developed nations,” Dr. Ren cut in. He smiled flatly at Rose and regarded me again. “It was nice working with you, Dr. Kenobi. I’ll be in touch.”

The doors opened moments later and he stepped out onto the oncology floor, leaving me mulling over his words while Rose fumed. *I’ll be in touch.* He’d touched my back so lightly that I still wasn’t sure if it actually happened. Maybe I was imagining things. Wishful thinking?

Rose snapped her fingers in my face. “Earth to Rey, my patient needs help!”

Oh, she was such a pain sometimes.
Madness

Chapter Notes

this story will fulfill most of the tags beginning in chapter 19, just so everyone knows. there's a long plot leading up to it. you can honestly enjoy the story until that point and bail after 19, lmfao.

There were several diseases that weren’t endemic to the Midwest. The hospital wasn’t fully prepared to deal with them and most of the doctors would have been dumbfounded when presented with the symptoms. One in particular was poised to ravage St. Luke’s and leave terror in its wake.

Another month had gone by since I shadowed Dr. Ren in the OR. Isaac wasn’t happy with me and rumors circulated that he had chosen me because we were sleeping together. Thankfully none of the gossip came to fruition and reached the Director of Medicine, who would have investigated the matter and made things more complicated. Dr. Holdo didn’t treat me any differently, either.

I’d gone through a couple more codes and had one of the patients survive. The family was relieved and it was one of the first times I sat down with an actual family to discuss the after effects of a code. Unfortunately, I also had to break the news to the families of the two patients who passed away.

The hospital was beginning to shift us to places we wanted to be, like the OR or neurology or pediatrics. I was transferred to the ER most days where a lot of the brain work and rapid diagnoses were made. It was around 4 PM and steadily growing darker outside when Amanda Samuels came in to see me.

Drug addicts would pop up from Vegas on occasion and we were trained to spot them. It was my first thought when I saw Amanda: her blonde hair was matted and tangled, she was wearing torn clothing, and her eyes looked sunken. She kept scratching her forearm nervously and started when I entered the room, eyeing me like a cornered animal. I smiled placatingly.

“Hi, Miss Samuels,” I said. “My name is Dr. Kenobi. Do you want to tell me your symptoms?”

She wrung her hands. “I… I feel like I have the flu. But I can’t remember anything.” She squeezed her eyes shut, furiously shaking her head. “I can’t sleep and I can’t stop puking.”

It sounded like the flu but her memory loss was alarming. I glanced at the chart and noticed she had a 102 degree fever, which was inching toward a dangerous temperature. We tried not to admit people with a low-grade flu but something felt very off about Amanda. She was twitching; clearly agitated. That wasn’t a common sign of the flu. Sweat beaded on her forehead.

We did a small exam. Other things soon caught my attention, like the hair on her arms all standing ramrod straight. The hospital was kind of cold but not frigid enough for that. I pressed my fingers to either side of her throat and she couldn’t swallow properly.

“We’ll get you admitted to the ICU,” I said, writing down my findings. “I want to keep an eye on that fever and make sure no other symptoms develop, and you’ll feel better with some antiviral drugs.”
“Thank you,” she whispered.

The nurses escorted her from the room to get her ready for at least an overnight stay in the hospital and I went back to the station. There were people outside sniffing and coughing and retching but I was intently focused on Amanda’s symptoms. I scratched my head with a pen and frowned. Hm… maybe it was leptospirosis starting? No, that was rare in developed countries.

And all of a sudden, the symptoms clicked together. My heart fell through my stomach.

_Rabies._

I hurried out of the ER to see if I could catch Dr. Ren before he left for the night. Rabies was an acute attack on the nervous system so he would understand it better than anyone else. He could help me confirm the diagnosis and figure out a course of treatment for Amanda before the disease spread.

He was standing at the nurse’s station on the neurology floor filling out paperwork, looking a bit bored. He glanced up and did a double-take when he saw me rushing. His brow furrowed.

“Something wrong, Dr. Kenobi?” he asked.

I held up my chart. “I think the girl I just admitted has rabies.”

Dr. Ren's eyebrows rose in surprise and he took it from me to flip through the pages. The nurses looked around to one another, murmuring quietly. Rabies was only treatable if the patient was still in the incubation period and I had a horrible intuition that Amanda was nearly in the furious stage. I stood there and anxiously waited for Dr. Ren's input.

He nodded slowly. “Difficulty swallowing, agitation, hair standing up… You’re right. This poor girl has rabies.” Then he slapped his hand on the desk to startle the nurses back to attention. “Call down to the ICU and alert them. It’s rare for rabies to transmit between humans but I will take no risks. I want any contact numbers to speak with her family before we begin the Milwaukee protocol.”

The nurses carried out his orders and we started toward the elevator.

“What’s the Milwaukee protocol?” I pressed, stepping onto the elevator. “Is there anything we can do for her? I read that rabies is fatal when they become symptomatic.”

“We’re going to put her into a coma to protect her from her own brain’s malfunctioning, and pump her with antivirals until her immune system does its job.”

I gawked up at Dr. Ren. “Are you serious?! That could kill her!”

His jaw was set and he was glaring at the floors passing by. “If we keep her awake she’ll fall into a coma and die from heart or lung failure. This is the best course of action. We need to send out her blood to the laboratory before we can begin the process. I hope it isn’t too late by then.”

Amanda was separated from the other ICU patients in her own room, shivering miserably in bed. She had vomit on her mouth that a nurse was trying to wipe off but she would flinch from her touch. Dr. Ren went to the other side of the bed and took a small flashlight out of his pocket, roughly grasping Amanda’s chin to tilt her head up. He passed the light across her eyes several times.

“Have you been bitten by any wild animals, Miss Samuels?” Dr. Ren asked. “A bat, perhaps?”
She stared blankly at him and abruptly started screaming like a banshee.

This attracted a couple more nurses who managed to pin Amanda down while she thrashed desperately, shrieking at a decibel I couldn’t believe. Dr. Ren breezed past me again and I hurried after him with a sinking feeling in my gut. She was getting really bad really fast.

“What do we need to give her?” I queried, scurrying along.

He threw open the door to the stairs instead of taking the elevator, ascending them quickly. “Ketamine and midazolam will suppress her brain activity. She’ll need better antivirals: ribavirin and amantadine should work. I don’t understand why people feel the need to pick up wild animals.”

We were on the second floor and went to the pharmacy. It was rare for a doctor to directly visit and they got the medications he needed together as fast as possible. Amanda was beyond an emergency.

I bit my nails while we waited, afraid to offer my thoughts. “But… she doesn’t have any family. She might be a user. Did you see how unkempt she is? We should make sure there isn’t anything else in her system before we flush her with all these medications.”

“She’ll die either way,” he said flatly.

The coma ended up lasting for six days and Amanda was never able to fully recover. She passed away from heart failure at the end of the week and because I had admitted her, I had to call it. There was no family to alert—another lost soul with nowhere to go. The coroner took her away for autopsy and I was with Dr. Ren again like the first time I had lost a patient.

“How the hell did she get it?” I wondered aloud in a small voice. I touched the bed where she had laid without ever waking up. “Nothing bit her. How did she contract it?”

Kylo was leaning on the wall. “Saliva could have entered an open wound. I suppose we’ll find out when the coroner finishes the examination. The police will be out en force to find the rabid animal.”

The diagnosis came back positive for rabies. Amanda did not have any drugs in her system besides the ones we administered to induce her coma, meaning I had been wrong about her. I felt guilty for jumping to conclusions about a woman I’d never met. She was someone’s daughter and maybe someone’s girlfriend. We would never know. There wasn’t much information on her.

Two days later, Edward Klein arrived at the hospital already foaming at the mouth. He screamed like Amanda had and showed a greater fear of light and breezes, common when rabies advanced. It was too late to induce him into a coma and he died within two more days. No family.

Paranoia spread like wildfire when a third person arrived partially paralyzed from their rabies. Lena Hamm couldn’t speak but she was terrified by Dr. Ren. We attempted the coma treatment and she died after five days, faster than Amanda. I trembled while I tried to track down her family to tell them the news and for the third time, I couldn’t find a damn thing.

It seemed we had a rabies outbreak on our hands. The Director of Medicine was ready to alert the CDC when two more women arrived with hallucinations and aggression the likes of which I’d never seen before. They snapped at nurses and one almost bit Dr. Ren when he tried checking her pupils. Two more comas, two more deaths. There was nothing more we could do for them. When the symptoms presented, rabies was an efficient killer.

It stopped as suddenly as it had started. Everyone was waiting for the next frantic patient to
It stopped as suddenly as it had started. Everyone was waiting for the next frantic patient to stumble into the ER but it never happened. Broken bones and heart attacks continued but the rabies scare had faded away. I slumped against the wall in the break room to cry behind the lockers. I’d helped put five people in comas and they had all died. It was all I could do. Rabies did not have a magic cure.

“Hey, Rey.”

I peered through my tear-soaked fingers to see Rose kneeling in front of me. Her eyes were watery but she was trying to smile. I lunged forward to hug her fiercely, gritting my teeth.

“Don’t you ever pick up a wild animal,” I croaked. “I don’t care if it’s a cute baby bat. Run as fast as you can in the opposite direction and don’t look back.”

She rubbed my back gently. “I won’t. I promise.”

It was Friday night again and with my recent involvement in the rabies cases, the other interns were left to pass off the paperwork to the night crew. Exhausted, I gathered my things with Rose and wiped the tears from my eyes. Patients were always going to die so I just needed to know that I was doing what was best for them. I was constantly making connections between them to find the common denominator. How did they all contract rabies without a bite?

Rose smiled again. “Do you want to go grab drinks tonight with everyone? Maybe it’ll make you feel better. And hey, your birthday is in another couple of months!”

“I’m gonna walk home,” I said glumly. “Thanks, Rose. I just need some time alone.”

“Sure thing, Rey.” She shut her locker and shouldered her messenger bag. “All of us lose patients. I watched a little boy die from leukemia in front of his parents, and another little girl with a heart deformity code for two minutes before she was gone. It’s never going to get easier but you’ll always have your friends around to support you. Don’t forget that.”

She left without another word and I was alone in the darkness. I grimaced and shut my own locker before I headed out into the quiet hallway. I stared at the floor while I walked and stared at the buttons in the elevator. I thought I was ready to see people die—I’d watched it in med school. So why was it so much worse knowing their blood was on my hands?

I’d call dad in the morning to talk about it. He was always there for me with open arms, happy to listen to me jabber on about school or work. Maybe he could offer me some insight.

Snow fell in graceful drifts outside. I ruminated over each patient I had lost, struggling to connect the pieces. None of them had families and they all looked seriously frazzled. Knotted hair, exhaustion… most of them were afraid of Dr. Ren, too. I couldn’t blame them—I was still kind of scared of him.

Tires sloshing through the snow caught my attention and I glanced to my right. Dr. Ren had his Audi’s window down. He stopped when I stopped and blanched.

“You shouldn’t walk home alone,” he chastised.

“Rose wanted to go out with everyone and I wasn’t in the mood. I’m trying to keep my dark cloud from eclipsing everyone else’s sunny days.”

“I see.” He nodded toward the passenger seat. “Let’s go get a drink.”

I stood in the snow and broke a smile. “I could go for a drink.”
Visiting a bar wasn’t on the agenda for that evening. It didn’t surprise me because I couldn’t imagine Kylo sitting around in a seedy, dimly-lit place on the outskirts of Vegas chatting up another patron. We went down Route 95 a ways until we were in Henderson, another big city pushing towards Arizona. The snow had stopped quickly as it always did and we were one of the few cars driving down the dark roads.

I peered out the window at the passing buildings and the palm trees lining the divider between the opposite sides of the street. It was different than Sparks, where most people lived in small houses that looked a lot alike. These were mostly businesses trying to soak up customers on a drive outside of Vegas for the day. We didn’t get a ton of tourism further north.

Kylo was quiet and I wondered if the deaths of the five patients were weighing heavily on him, too. For all we knew the rabid animal could still be at large infecting people and we would both get paged at three in the morning to come in for the Milwaukee protocol again.

“So um… where are we going?” I asked meekly.

“My home.” Kylo glanced at me and smiled. “I’m a bit too old to be frequenting bars or night clubs.”

I raised an eyebrow. “It’s not like anyone would think you’re over 30.”

“You flatter me.”

Okay, we were going to his house. No big deal. I’d seen more than a few of the sprawling multimillion dollar homes in Sparks that overlooked the barren, dusty landscape. I twiddled my thumbs nervously.

We went down a series of dark streets illuminated by wrought iron lamps until we stopped toward the end of a road lined with privacy trees. Kylo pressed a button on the ceiling of his car and a bunch of lights lit up in front of us that spanned the length of another imposing black gate. There was a click and it slowly swung inward to allow us inside down a highly reflective black and brown driveway.

It circled around and I could see most of the house in front of us. We were far away from the others and a mountain loomed far in the background, creating the effect that we were utterly alone. Kylo left the car without a care in the world while I stared through the sun roof at the monstrosity of a home spread out in a semicircle around the curved driveway.

It was painted tan and a light shade of brown with stonework to accentuate a fountain beside the main gate. Some of the lights were on inside but all the windows were shut. The second half of the house was beyond a neatly trimmed hedge and tall palm trees adorned the sides of the garage and main gate.
My door opened and I almost fell out. Kylo offered me his hand to help me into the cool night and I shivered, looking around at the flowers and hedges lining the driveway. I’d never seen anything quite like it but I didn’t know why I expected anything less. He was a brain surgeon, after all.

“Nice place,” I faltered.

Kylo laughed and locked the Audi, leading me to the gate. His keys jangled as he unlocked it. “I’m hardly here so I can’t enjoy it as much as I’d like to. My housekeeper visits on Saturday and Sunday to keep things orderly and clean and I rarely catch sight of her. Until it’s time to pay her, of course.”

The gate opened up to a small courtyard outlined by more hedges and a few short trees. Kylo shut it again behind us and I turned in circles, mesmerized. In another decade I’d be able to buy my own house but I knew I’d never have something quite like Dr. Ren’s. A door was at the end of the shiny stone pathway and a balcony hung over it, framed by a bowed iron fence.

Kylo disarmed a security system and unlocked the second door that opened up into the kitchen. I stepped inside, stunned to silence, and awkwardly rubbed my arm. The floor was solid stone and the archway leading into the kitchen was constructed with grey and brown stones. The counters were the same shade of mottled granite and lights embedded in the ceiling lit up when they sensed our movement. There was an open gas range and a sink, and a window overlooked the courtyard.

To the right was a huge living room with a brown sectional that wound around a glass coffee table. A flat screen was built into a wooden stand in the wall and a fireplace burned with a fake fire beside it. A set of enormous windows showed the entirety of the mountainside and Lake Las Vegas with not other house in sight. Two fans hung overhead, motionless.

“Nice… place…” I repeated, unsure of what to say. “Dare I ask how big it is?”

Kylo scratched his chin, thinking. “I believe 8,000 square feet. Six bedrooms and six bathrooms, though two of them are sparsely decorated. The master bedroom and three others are kept up for my family visits.” He scowled and walked to the island in the middle of the kitchen where the range was. “Is there any particular type of wine you’d like? Port, merlot, chardonnay, pinot grigio, malbec? I have more than that if you’d prefer something else.”

Like I knew anything about wine. I always bought whatever was at the grocery store.

I couldn’t stop looking around at the stonework. It was truly stunning. “Er… port is fine, I guess.”

“Ah, sweet and heavy.” Kylo drew a wine bottle out of the island and turned to open a drawer to remove a cork puller. “I spoke with the Director of Medicine today. He was pleased with our efforts.”


“Rabies is almost always a death sentence when it begins to show symptoms, no matter how mild. I’m sure we’ll be seeing a flood of people demanding the preemptive vaccine on Monday morning.”

“I want to know what the common denominator was. None of them had any bites. Either something they all ingested was tainted or…” I ground my teeth, perplexed. “I don’t know. I need to figure it out.”

He offered me a half-glass of the port and I accepted it gratefully, taking small sips while he showed me the rest of the house. It was delicious—I loved sweet wine.
Every room was enormous but like Kylo had said, not intensely decorated. He showed me the balcony overlooking the infinity pool. It had a TV underneath the overhang and a fireplace. The pool was open and had an irregular wall to look more like a lake or pond. Lights from within lit up the water, including the attached hot tub that was set a bit higher. There were palm trees and rocks around the edges.

We sat on the balcony and talked for a long time. I’d lost track of the exact time a while ago, and I kept sleepily chatting away even after my second glass of wine.

“Do you have any siblings?” I ventured, emboldened by the port.

“Two younger sisters, unfortunately: Jaina and Breha. Jaiana is about your age; 25 this year, I believe, and Breha is 17. They’re both irritating beyond belief.”

“Well of course you think they are. What does Jaina do?”

“She educates small children in Phoenix.” Kylo rolled his eyes, taking a sip from his glass and gazing off at the starry sky overhead. “Breha wants to be a veterinarian despite my constantly trying to steer her toward human medicine. Animals don’t have a good return on investment.”

It was true. I’d met a few people in undergrad who wanted to become vets and they came to learn after graduation that animals and their people didn’t pay very well. It was a career choice chosen from passion with no regards for money. Being a doctor would pay for itself eventually, even if I would be stuck struggling through my residency.

My cell phone started ringing the next moment and I carefully set down my glass to answer it, fumbling with the swipe command. I pressed it to my ear, wincing when I heard Rose shrieking with laughter on the other side. Kylo watched torpidly over the rim of his glass.

Rose panted a few times. “Where are you, Rey?! I waited for you to come back for two hours but you never showed up. Is everything alright?”

I glanced at Kylo and he smirked a bit before shifting his gaze back to the horizon. She was practically screaming. Everyone within a fifteen mile radius could hear her.

“Yeah, I’m um…” I paused, trying to decide if telling the truth was a good idea. “…I’m just out.”

“We all went to Vegas!” She yelled to someone and laughed. Wherever she was, it was incredibly loud. “We’re going tomorrow night so you have to come, okay? Be safe, Rey!”

I nodded and quickly hung up to stick my phone back in my pocket. “Sorry about that.”

“Dr. Tico, I’m assuming?” Kylo asked.

“Who else?” I picked up my wine again, settling down in my chair to take a dignified drink. “She’s been worried about the bodies they found in Lake Mead so now she calls me a lot more. I’m going to do the same thing to her after this whole rabies scare.”

He swirled the mouthful of port in his glass impassively. “Out of sheer curiosity, is there any particular reason you avoided telling her where you are?”

The weird stares I got from a lot of people were a good reason. I’d made it clear that I had no interest in surgery or neurology and for some reason, Kylo had insisted that I shadow him. Crickets sang on the ground amongst the bushes and rocks and a cool breeze rustled my hair.

“I’ve heard people saying some things about us,” I said timidly.
My host paused. “What kinds of things?”

“It’s not much of a secret that I don’t like either of the things you had me shadowing for, so they’re putting pieces together that aren’t there. I’ve heard a couple of rumors in passing that we’re sleeping together, but I don’t want to substantiate it with a response.”

“Hm… that’s a shame.”

“I know! I don’t understand why they all think that. It’s so rude.”

He finished his port and set the glass down, not looking at me. “I understand why it is in the nature of people to gossip and while I do find it shameful and rude, I was referring to your refusal to substantiate the rumors.”

I dribbled my port back into the cup before I choked on it. Holy shit, was he… was he inferring that he wanted to sleep with me?!

He smiled, kind of coquettish. “That reminds me—I forgot to show you the master bedroom. Would you like to take a look before I bring you home, Rey?”

Yes! Wait, no. You want to go straight back to your apartment, Rey.

The words wouldn’t form in my mouth. It felt rude to reject him like that; to stutter out an excuse and scurry off. It had been how and why I lost my virginity before I wanted to: Rose introduced me to a guy named Peter who knew how to get what he wanted. I could never look him in the eye again.

When I failed to answer and stared at Kylo like a deer in headlights, his smile broken into a grin. He rose from his chair and picked up his empty glass, walking over to take mine and take the last sip I had given up on. He balanced both glasses between his fingers in one hand. Shit on a stick, I hoped he didn’t think my silence was me saying yes.

“Home we go, then,” he said, offering me his free hand.

The relief was immediate. I gratefully accepted and he helped pull me to my feet where the wine promptly hit me like a ton of bricks. My pulse throbbed in my ears for a brief second and I stumbled but Kylo grabbed my upper arm to keep me from falling. I grimaced both from the pain in my head and his grasp. He was really strong.

He seemed to notice he was holding too tight and his fingers slid down to my elbow, gentle and reassuring. “You’re not accustomed to port, are you?”

“I’m not accustomed to wine as a general rule.” I took a steadying breath, trying to ignore the throbbing where he had grabbed me. “Sheesh, you’re pretty strong.”

“I never noticed,” he said dismissively. “Let’s go. I don’t want your wife yelling at me.”
Fingers prying open my eyelids woke me up the next morning much earlier than I wanted. I groaned and swatted at the phantom hand, still groggy from the two heaping glasses of port, and felt someone sit beside me. All I wanted to do was sleep in on a Saturday, one of the only two days a week I got any type of rest. I started drifting back off into a dream when the person rudely grabbed my arm.

“Are these fingerprints, Rey?!”

Irritated, I wriggled my arm free of Rose’s grasp and managed to force myself to sit up straight. I yawned and stretched, not at all interested in her words, and rubbed the sleepiness from my eyes. I’d had a good time with Kylo. Thinking of it made my heart flutter excitedly.

I could feel a mild throbbing in my upper arm. It was a minor annoyance but I pushed up my sleeve to investigate what had Rose so upset. She was disheveled from her night in Vegas.

A couple of oval green bruises were set in a pattern on my skin. I’d expected it to happen—Kylo had a stronger grip than I imagined—but I didn’t know how to explain it to Rose without making her freak out. If anyone found out where I had been the rumors would escalate even further.

So I shrugged it off, feigning nonchalance. “I dunno. Maybe.”

“Where were you last night? I was worried.”

Shower. That would help sweep away the remnants of the wine and give me a fresh start to the day. I pushed Rose aside to crawl out of bed and grabbed a simple v-neck and jeans before heading to the bathroom. She stood up and followed me, still demanding answers, but I shut and locked the door to keep her from harassing me. I’d figure out a good excuse.

I emerged when my hair and teeth were brushed. There was plenty of paperwork to keep me occupied for a few hours and I’d catch up on my TV shows. I didn’t need to go out and get drunk in Vegas.

Rose was waiting in the living room like an angry mother. “Rey, where were you? I promised your dad I’d keep an eye on you and we’re both not terribly familiar with the area. You didn’t get back until almost three in the morning and you slept until noon. Did something happen? If you need to go to the police I can bring you.”

I flopped down on our plush couch, opening the manila folder with the wonderful stack of St. Luke’s officiated papers. They kept the interns busy. Thankfully, I was going to be a resident in five more months and I’d have a slightly elevated status.

“Like I said yesterday, I wanted to be alone. And I was.” I shrugged, letting her agitation roll off my shoulders. “Maybe I have Von Willebrand’s or something. Who knows?”
“You were with Dr. Ren, weren’t you?”

“No!” I blurted too quickly.

She hopped over the back of the couch to sit next to me, narrowing her eyes. “You were! I knew that car ride wasn’t a one-time thing. So, did he grab your arm like that?”

“I had a little wine and I was about to fall over. It was that or I cracked my head open.”

“Are the rumors true? Did you sleep with him? You know attending doctors only want one thing out of interns and once they get it—”

“What do I look like, an idiot?” I snapped. “Of course I didn’t sleep with him!”

“Where does he live?” Rose pressed. “Does he have a nice house? Is he married? Some people think he is and he just doesn’t wear a ring. Does his mom live with him?”

Her questions were infuriating. I gathered my papers and stomped off to my bedroom to deal with them, slamming the door in Rose’s face when she tried to follow. She knocked and whined a little but eventually gave up and shuffled back to the living room. I sat at my desk and pored over the papers, reading over reports and signing my name a thousand times.

After a while I took a small break to call dad and let him know how things were going. He sympathized about the rabies scare and told me to be careful. I left out a lot of the things about Dr. Ren, opting instead to glaze over shadowing the neurosurgery. The less people knew, the better.

The rabies situation was still prominent in my thoughts. I tapped my pen on my chin and opened up my laptop to do some research into it. Could there be a connection between the bodies in Lake Mead? No, that was crazy. That had been happening for ten years and none of those people had been killed by rabies. From what I heard, they were all women who had been hacked up.

No bite marks… I flipped through my papers until I found the reports of the autopsies on the five patients who I had lost to rabies. None of them had anything illicit like meth but I noticed they all had one other thing in common: clozapine.

I frowned. Did they all really have schizophrenia? We couldn’t do a psychiatric evaluation because of the imminent death but none of them had any records with nearby mental health centers. Clozapine was a hell of a drug that was only used as a last resort when other antipsychotic meds weren’t working. It caused agranulocytosis, a dangerous decrease in white blood cells.

My spine prickled as the cogs in my mind twisted faster. They were all immunocompromised and they had all contracted rabies without a bite. What if… What if someone was deliberately infecting them? If they knew what they were doing then the needle marks could be hidden.

“Impossible,” I muttered, shaking my head and closing the folder.

Rose knocked on my door. “Are you done with your hissy fit yet, Rey? We’re all going out for dinner.”

“Yeah, let’s go. I need a break from all this paperwork.”

We weren’t going anywhere fancy, just an Applebee’s 15 minutes away. Rose picked up Maddie along the way and she chatted eagerly about shadowing an open heart surgery on Wednesday afternoon. I listened politely, praying she wouldn’t ask about my neurosurgery shadowing.

The restaurant was packed, of course—it was a Saturday afternoon. We met up with Taylor and
Isaac outside, the latter of which had finally started talking to me again, and headed inside.

Everyone placed their orders and it turned back to discussion again. I looked around in boredom at the decorations and the screaming kids with their screaming parents. Dad and I used to go out for dinner all the time back home. Neither of us were very good cooks so we would’ve starved to death otherwise.

“Is Dr. Ren assigning you to any other cases you don’t really want, Rey?” Isaac asked, raising his voice a bit over the din.

“She admitted the first rabies patient,” Rose interjected before I could respond. “It made sense for her to help Dr. Ren with the others that came in.”

Taylor rolled his eyes. “No, it would’ve made more sense for a neurology intern or a neurologist to help Dr. Ren with the cases. Dr. Holdo said he’s always lone wolf so why would he suddenly decide to collaborate with an intern who doesn’t even have an interest in his field?”

I leaned back and sank lower into the booth, trying to disappear between Rose and Maddie. He told me he was favoring me the day I asked with no hesitation. I’d be spending the next four years trying to dispel the vicious rumors that Dr. Ren and I were an item and he was deliberately picking me not because of my brains but because he just liked how I looked at his side.

If I was Isaac, I would’ve been angry, too. It wasn’t fair to anyone else. I didn’t want to rat Dr. Ren out to the Director of Medicine but I needed to set some professional boundaries.

Maddie glared across the table at the two men. “Cut it out, guys. Rey will figure it out.”

The waitress arrived with our drinks and I nearly polished off my cocktail in a few sips. Rose touched my arm gently, concern marring her brow, but I ignored her. I’d helped kill five people with rabies. It wasn’t like losing someone in v-tac; not at all. Amanda had been talking to me and she was scared and there was nothing I could do short of putting her into a coma.

When we got out food I delved into my theory.

“I think someone’s doing this deliberately,” I said, prodding at my chicken. I looked to Maddie who was enjoying her salad. “Clozapine is used for schizophrenia, right?”

“Um… yeah, but rarely. It had too many negative side effects.” She cocked her head and frowned. “Did one of them have clozapine in their system? That stuff is hard to get your hands on.”

“So what?” Taylor said. “They all probably had the same dealer. We’re right outside Vegas.”

I popped a piece of chicken in my mouth and shook my head. “That’s only one weird part of it. Why didn’t any of them have an animal bite? Rabies can be transferred through saliva sometimes but that’s incredibly rare. Their skin wasn’t broken to let the infection in so how did it get there?”

“Divine intervention?” Isaac offered sarcastically.

Maddie threw a piece of lettuce at him and Rose sighed, patting me on the back.

“Let the police figure out if there’s foul play,” my best friend said. “You’re going to drive yourself crazy if you keep looking for a reason. All we can do is help them to the best of our ability.”

“The clozapine weakens their immune systems to let the rabies wreak havoc.” I pushed my food
around my plate, steadily losing my appetite. “I bet no one ever tested those bodies from Lake Mead for rabies or clozapine. They could all be connected.”

Taylor waved me off. “You’re paranoid.”

No one was going to convince me I was imagining things. I went back to eating my dinner while they all discussed becoming residents in July. I’d figure out what was going on, with or without the police. The first thing I needed to do was get my hands on the autopsy reports for the women who had been found in Lake Mead. If they hadn’t run a rabies test I could see if Dr. Ren could vouch for me.

He was obviously an intelligent man who would follow my logic. We could work with the police and maybe link the bodies and the patients back to a specific person.

Intent on finding the truth, I declined to go out for more drinks at a bar after dinner and had Rose drop me off at the apartment. I trudged upstairs and unlocked the apartment, soon realizing we left the TV on. When I went to turn it off I was captured by the news report flickering on the screen.

“Local authorities say they’ve found the cause of the recent rabies outbreak centered around St. Luke’s Hospital,” the anchor said. “They believe it can be traced back to infected water that has since been removed, a previously unheard of vector for the debilitating disease. Regardless, police are still encouraging residents to keep their distance from animals exhibiting strange behavior.”

I turned it off. They were lying to calm people down. The real cause of the rabies was still at large, and soon it would be back in the limelight again.
Monday turned out to be the slow day I needed to conduct my research. I finished my morning rounds and made a beeline for the morgue in the basement, trying to ignore the furtive glances from nurses and doctors alike. The bodies that had been picked up in Lake Mead over the years had all been brought to St. Luke’s for examination—it was the closest hospital with the proper resources. That meant the results would still be on file in the dank, creepy morgue.

I scuttled along through the basement. It wasn’t poorly lit or anything but the reek of formaldehyde reached you even at the elevator on the other end of the hall. I knocked twice on the steel door and waited for an answer, which came in the form of the hospital’s most committed medical examiner.

Dr. Beverly Lewis wasn’t the type of girl you’d think would find her happiness cutting open dead people. She was petite, under five feet tall, and had curly blonde hair in a bun on top of her head. She wore thick-framed glasses that made her small face look even tinier, giving her the likeness of a porcelain doll. She looked at me through the glass of the door and all I could see were her gigantic green eyes.

She dragged the door open and her two technicians looked up, gangly younger men with goggles on. I’d met her when I lost a patient during a code blue the previous November. She was in her mid-30s like Dr. Ren but she was married with two little boys.

“Heya, Dr. Kenobi!” she chirped, waving a bloodstained glove. Her lab coat went down to her ankles. “What can I do you for? Bringing me another body to investigate?”

“Nope, I haven’t killed anyone since the rabies outbreak.” I stepped inside and shut the door behind me with some difficulty, wincing from the horrible smell. “I was wondering if you could help me find some old files. About the bodies discovered in Lake Mead?”

The techs returned to their work over an old gentleman, disinterested.

Dr. Lewis puckered her lips. “Well, sure, those have their own compartment. Any reason in particular you want to look through them? I myself like to take a gander every once in a while at the good old days when I first started working here. Ah, those were the times.”

“I wanted to see if they had rabies or clozapine in their systems. Something seems off about the infection of those five people and I don’t like being in the dark.”

She broke a smile and led me around the operating table to her small office on the other side of the room. I was thankful that I didn’t have to walk through the refrigerator to get there.

It was disorganized inside but Dr. Lewis was one of those people who thrived in chaos. It made her an excellent problem solver—few things passed by her. She pushed aside some papers onto her computer’s keyboard to yank open a thin drawer that only had some pencils and a manila folder inside. She took it out and handed it to me with her clean glove.
“That’s all I got out of them over the years,” she said. “Why clozapine? You think it’s connected to those poor people having it in them?”

I nodded, flipping through the papers. “Yeah, I think so. It’s weird that none of them had a bite, and I know you’d never miss a thing like that. Someone was infecting them deliberately, but why? Rabies is dangerous to play around with and I thought serial killers preferred to slice and dice, not give people horrible diseases. There’s something strange going on.”

“If it’s any consolation, I agree with you.” Dr. Lewis pointed to the paper I was looking at for a bloated corpse. “First of all, these were all women and every single one was a Jane Doe. We tried finding the families and we’re still trying but it’s been a no-go so far. I don’t remember the precise details of what I found in them but I do recall that they were all lobotomized.”

Sure enough, there was a hole next to each woman’s eye where a stake had been driven through to destroy a vital part of the brain. My spine prickled. The news never mentioned that.

While I sifted I began to notice something other than rabies or clozapine. None of them had either, which discouraged me at first, but they all had another drug in common: Klonopin, a notorious Schedule IV controlled substance that became addictive very quickly. It was a sedative and anticonvulsant popular with pill-poppers for the hypnotic properties that came at a high price.

I scratched my head, frowning. “Were the lobotomies clean or jagged? Did any of these girls look to be regular users? I know the bodies were kind of decayed from the water and some of them were hacked up, but were there any track marks or anything like that?”

Dr. Lewis shook her head. “Not that I saw. They could have been killed by the same drug lord but each one of them had the same dose of Klonopin in them. The lobotomies were botched.” She squinted at the papers and leafed through until she found one of the women who had been particularly brutalized. “This girl was the most recent one… Yes, on the last page of her report—she had clozapine in her. Lithium, too. Strange concoction.”

That couldn’t have been a happy accident. I slowly looked up at Dr. Lewis and she looked back at me, eyebrows lifting. We both knew we were on the trail of something horrible.

“Can I photocopy these?” I asked. “I want to be able to study them at home.”

“No problem,” she said. Her voice had lost its chirpiness. “I didn’t think to test those other bodies for Klonopin… I’ll take a look tonight and let you know what I find. Want to leave me your cell?”

I left her my number and thanked her profusely for her help before hurrying upstairs to copy the reports. My heart was pounding a mile a minute. Two men had come to the hospital with rabies but the vast majority of both the corpses in Lake Mead and the rabies patients were female. It had to be a man with a vendetta against women who picked up strays to slaughter.

They were easier to get away with killing and the police would let the case go cold. They would be looking for the killer again but I knew it was the wrong direction. They needed to follow the rabies cases to the end of their trail until they stumbled across—

“Rey?”

I skidded to a stop outside the break room with all the computers and the photocopier. Dr. Ren was stepping out of a patient’s room, another one with a brain tumor. He looked especially good with some stubble and a confused frown turning his lips. I waved stupidly, clutching my folder.

“Um… hey,” I said, continuing the march of idiocy. “What’s… what’s going on?”
“Oh, just doing my job.” He cocked his head and his dark eyes zeroed in on the folder. “You paid a visit to the morgue? Was Dr. Lewis expecting more corpses from us so soon?”

“No, I had some extra time so I’m doing some research.”

“Care to fill me in?” he asked, peeling off his gloves.

Damn. I didn’t know if he’d think I was nuts, but Dr. Lewis supported me. Kylo could be a great asset to our group and helping us figure out the truth so we could go to the police with our findings. I peered around furtively and gestured for him to follow me into the empty break room.

I dropped the folder next to the photocopier and flung it open with a dramatic flair. “I’ve had a bad feeling about the rabies patients and I came up with a crazy theory involving the women they found in Lake Mead. Everyone thinks I’m insane but Dr. Lewis agrees with me.”

Then Dr. Ren was standing a bit too close beside me and I was lost in the vague scent of his cologne. He put his big hand beside mine, offhandedly touching our pinkies together. His arm pressed to mine.

“And…?” he urged without missing a beat.

“And… and…” I struggled to recollect myself, rubbing the back of my neck. “Okay, so the rabies patients had the disease without a bite and they all had clozapine in them. The women who were found in Lake Mead all had lobotomies done, poorly, and they had Klonopin in them. The woman they found a month ago? She had clozapine in her. What are the odds of that?”

“The rabies was from contaminated water,” Dr. Ren said.

I gathered up the papers and started the long process of copying them. “I’m not buying that. The police know something’s up and they’re trying not to start a panic. All those people were strays, too—no family, no home. They don’t show signs of being drug users, though. A person is targeting them and… I don’t know what he’s doing exactly, but it’s torture.”

Kylo raised an eyebrow. He seemed unimpressed. “Why not leave this to the police, Rey? You don’t want to become twisted in something you can’t escape.”

My spine stiffened at his second incident calling me by name in the hospital. I tried to glare at him.

“Don’t call me that here!” I hissed, swapping papers. “Everyone’s even more suspicious now. I think Isaac told them I spent the night at your house. Can you believe it?”

He smiled. “You should give more thought to substantiating their rumors.”

Heat flushed into my cheeks and I turned back to the photocopier. *Ignore the pretty face, Rey. You don’t want your coworkers to think you’re a floozy, and you have plenty to worry about.* I was on the trail of a serial killer and nothing would distract me from finding him. I noticed something moving from the corner of my eye and glanced down, already breaking my oath.

Dr. Ren’s left hand was trembling on the table. He was staring intently at one of the dead women in my stack of documents and didn’t seem to notice the shaking. I couldn’t look away even thought I knew I had to. A surgeon with uncontrolled tremors would be swiftly unemployed.

His eyes flickered up to mine and followed my gaze to his hand, which he quickly stuffed in his pocket with the other. I averted my eyes back to the photocopier and didn’t say a word.

He sighed dismissively. “I haven’t eaten today. I think my blood sugar is getting a bit low. Why
don’t we go get lunch before you’re too invested in your research?”

_Bullshit._ I’d never seen hypoglycemia cause that much of a tremor.

“Can’t,” I said tersely. “I need to finish these and bring the originals straight back to Dr. Lewis. She’ll be needing them to look at herself.”

“Come along, Sherlock. I’m thirsty and I want your company.”

Thus, I was forced to leave my paperwork behind to accompany Kylo to another diner. I got my jacket and cast another longing glance at the reports before we left together, attracting more attention than usual from our coworkers. Oh well. Everything would be the way I left it when we got back.

One of the technicians from the morgue was outside the hospital having a cigarette. I ignored him until I got the distinct feeling of eyes drilling into my back. Unnerved, I glanced over my shoulder to see him coldly glaring at me while he took a long drag from his cigarette. I pressed closer to Kylo and he touched the small of my back again. The tech’s eyes narrowed and let out a plume of smoke.

One mystery at a time, Sherlock Holmes.
The papers were all gone when I came back.

Dr. Ren had been paged en route to the hospital and left as soon as we were in the doors. I went back to the break room to finish my photocopies and was horrified to find the copies I had made and the originals had disappeared. There wasn’t time to look—I had to conduct rounds and check on patients.

I didn’t hurry myself through my work but I was a little distracted by losing original documentation. One of my patients came close to crashing and I had to work for a while with other personnel to resuscitate her, which didn’t sit well with the family. I discussed options for treatment of lung cancer with a man who was far too young to be suffering the consequences of his smoking.

When I was certain my patients were stable and comfortable I went back to comb through the break room, searching for any signs of the folder. Dr. Lewis would be so mad. I asked the maintenance staff if they found anything but they insisted they would never throw important reports away so flippantly.

Defeated, I shuffled down to the morgue to break the news to Dr. Lewis. Why would someone steal them? They could have taken their own copies or at least put them back.

My eyes narrowed. The technician who’d been smoking outside threw up a red flag. He was younger than me, tall and gangly with the kind of face that made teenage girls swoon. He’d given me an absolutely filthy look when I left to get lunch with Dr. Ren. Maybe he was involved.

Dr. Lewis dragged open the steel door and the smell of formaldehyde was gone. It was four in the afternoon so they were cleaning up for the night. She beamed and stepped aside to let me in, again attracting the looks of the two technicians. The one from outside openly glared at me when I shut the door and leaned over to talk into my colleague’s ear.

“Can we talk in your office?” I asked.

“Of course.” She led me toward the cramped room, taking off her gloves. “I checked the first rabies victim, Amanda. No lithium or Klonopin.”

When we were shut in the office I leaned against the wall and she sat at her desk to clean her glasses. I was relieved the creepy tech couldn’t stare me down through the murky glass door.

“Someone took the papers,” I said. Beating around the brush was a waste of time.

Dr. Lewis blinked her green eyes in shock. “Really? How did that happen?”

“Dr. Ren insisted that I went to get lunch with him and I thought they’d be safe in the break room. What if someone stumbled across it and didn’t like what I was looking up?”

“Thankfully it’s all recorded online, but pulling those records will take at least a week.” She frowned and loosened her ponytail a bit. “That’s strange… I hope whoever you’re following doesn’t work here, Dr. Kenobi. Is it okay if I call you Rey? This ‘doctor this’ and ‘doctor that’ shit gets irritating.”

I shrugged, indifferent. “I don’t mind. My next step was to start investigating different employees in St. Luke’s to see if I can weed anyone out.” I glanced over my shoulder, though I couldn’t see
out into the examination room. “Can you tell me who that tall tech is?”

Beverly also looked out toward the room. “The really thin one? That’s Armitage Hux. He’s a weird kid but he’s a damn good cutter. Lionel isn’t quite as useful but he’s better company.”

Armitage Hux… He had been the one smoking outside the building when Kylo and I left for lunch. I tapped my fingers on my arm, mulling over possibilities. Armie was ‘weird,’ huh? That was an interesting title for the queen of cadavers to bestow on someone. He’d seen me walk out with the documents—maybe he was trying to hide something.

It didn’t help that Armie was a ‘good cutter’. Whoever was killing the women found in Lake Mead was definitely not a good cutter. The wounds were jagged and half-done mostly, and along with the botched lobotomies I highly doubted any real medical professional was carrying out the murders.

Who was I, Will Graham? I thanked Beverly for her help and left the morgue, offering Armie a cold look on my way out. He had a lollipop in his mouth, a sardonic thing a lot of techs did in the morgue. His eyes didn’t leave mine and a small smile turned his lips up when I opened the heavy door.

The day was over soon enough and I was in the break room getting my stuff together. Rose joined me and chattered about how one of her terminal patients in pediatrics was turning around. I smiled and listened politely but didn’t mention Armie or my discussions with Dr. Lewis. If Rose didn’t believe me, I wouldn’t tell her another word of what I was formulating.

Then she touched my arm. “Rey, are you sure you’re okay?”

I looked up from adjusting my things in my backpack, distracted. “Hm? Yeah, I’m fine. I just need to get home to deal with some paperwork. If you guys are going out don’t worry about me.”

Rose watched me silently for a couple more minutes in the darkening break room. She ran a hand through her black locks and smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“You haven’t been going out with us at all,” she said. “Any reason why? You used to love getting drinks and hanging around at the bar in college.”

“I’m busy now. I have a lot of patients and things to worry about. It isn’t tests anymore—it’s real people who depend on me to know what I’m doing.” I zipped up my book bag, avoiding making eye contact with Rose. “This is the way it has to be from now on.”

My best friend slammed her hand on the table in front of me and I jumped. Her dark eyes were alight with fury, practically glowing in the shadows. I paused, admittedly a bit scared.

“I don’t like the new Rey Kenobi,” she hissed. “I don’t like the bruises on your arm, I don’t like you skittering around always looking over your shoulder, and I don’t like that you vanished into the night with some attending surgeon. I trust Kylo Ren about as far as I can throw him and I suggest you do the same, Rey. If you ask me, something isn’t quite right there.”

I bristled. “Do you think I’m that naïve? At least Kylo listens to me when I tell him things instead of blowing me off like I’m crazy! We had some wine and that was it. I’m 26 years old, Rose, and I don’t need you protecting me from every guy I stumble across. I have everything under control.”

A soft knock on the door turned both of us toward it to see the source of our argument with his knuckles resting on the wood. He was wearing street clothes—khakis with a blue linen shirt that was tucked in to expose his belt. His jacket was slung over his arm and he looked damn good as usual. His dark eyes assessed me before moving on to Rose, who gathered her messenger bag.
“He’s trouble,” my best friend repeated, meeting my eyes one more time. “I know it’s hard to look past the nice cars and the big house and the crazy career, but if you peel away even one layer, you’ll start to see what’s rotting underneath. Have a good night, Rey. I guess you can call if you need me.”

Kylo stepped aside to make room for Rose and watched her walk down the hall with his brow furrowed. He turned back to me, frowning in mild confusion rather than irritation. The shirt complimented him much better than his scrubs: he was pretty muscular. It made sense that he accidentally bruised my arm trying to keep me from falling over.

I shook my head, waving her off. “She’s just being the same old Rose.” With great difficulty, I hefted my backpack on and winced. Shit, it was heavy. “Going somewhere fancy?”

“That’s why I stopped by here.” He walked toward me to take my book bag, casually slinging it over his shoulder like it weighed nothing. “I’d like to take you out to dinner this evening, if you’re not otherwise occupied. Nowhere dramatic—a small Italian restaurant on the outskirts of town.”

For the hundredth time since I had met Dr. Ren, my heart leapt into my throat. I had no straps to nervously touch, only my apartment key dangling from my fingertips. He was standing over me in the pressing darkness with his coat over his toned arm and my bookbag over his shoulder.

What was I supposed to do? Refuse?

“Okay,” I said dumbly like I was hypnotized.

He brightened. “Excellent. We can stop by your apartment before we go. I’m sure you don’t want to wear your scrubs.”

We left together again and somehow, the stares were worse. I didn’t see Armie Hux hanging around but Kylo was carrying my backpack and that looked a bit suspicious. He was immune to it all, though. He strode tall and confident, nodding to whoever in a white coat passed by him.

I glanced at his left hand by his side. It wasn’t shaking. Maybe he did have low blood sugar.

My concerns about the possible serial killer at large wasted away on the drive back to my apartment. As always, Kylo was easy to talk to and we moved on to other subjects that weren’t as terrifying. I’d never been out on a really fancy date before and it was exciting. I hoped I had a nice dress hanging up in my closet or I’d have to nab one from Rose and make do.

He parked outside and when I got out, he didn’t. It seemed rude to make him wait in the cold while I got ready so I leaned over to invite him up. It was the Porsche so I didn’t know if he’d be okay with leaving it unattended but my neighborhood wasn’t horrible. He slipped out of his car and followed me into my building, idly taking in the uninteresting scenery.

“I don’t make the big doctor money yet,” I said, trudging up the stairs. “But even when I do, I have to pay off all those loans so I’ll probably be an apartment-renter for a long time.”

Kylo looked around when we got to my floor. “I’m sure you’ll be married by then, Miss Kenobi. At that point your greatest concern will be whether or not you want to abandon eight years of education and four years of residency to raise your offspring. It seems a terrible waste to me.”

“Does anyone become a doctor with the intention of being a parent?” I asked, pushing open my door. “The two don’t go along well together. Something’s gotta give.”

“The children usually suffer the consequences.”
Thankfully, Rose had kind of picked up before she left. I took my backpack from Kylo, repeatedly apologizing for making him carry it, and he put his hands in his pockets to stroll around the living room. My entire apartment, bedrooms and all, was probably the size of his formal dining room. Oh well. I was an intern—I only made a bit above minimum wage.

“So, I’m Miss Kenobi now?” I teased as I headed down the hall to my room. “Oh, make yourself at home, by the way. It shouldn’t take me too long. There are drinks in the fridge, too.”

“You’re Doctor Kenobi at work, Rey on lunch outings, and Miss Kenobi in courtship,” he called.

_Courtship?_ He was too cultured for his own good sometimes. I pulled my hair out of the ponytail and let it fan across my back, pulling open my closet to search for the perfect dress. It didn’t matter what anyone else thought. I’d been working with Kylo for almost a year—there was nothing wrong with seeing how things might work out between us.

I scowled. Rose was just paranoid.
As with everything else regarding Kylo Ren, dinner was perfect. I managed to find a dress that struck the line between fancy and casual and we were out for a long time chatting about things other than work. The food was good, the company was great, and we had more delicious wine. It felt like I was starting to become a woman; like I was growing into my profession and blossoming.

It was nearly one in the morning when he brought me back to my apartment. It was tempting to invite him upstairs but I was afraid of Rose’s reaction and I didn’t want to seem too eager. We exchanged phone numbers, something I had forgotten to do many times with him, and it was then that I noticed Beverly had left me a voicemail. I thanked Kylo for dinner and he said he would call the next day.

My heart was pounding with excitement. Maybe I was different than the other interns to him. A lot of women warned you in med school that attending doctors were only out for one thing, but I’d known Kylo for a while and he had been nothing but a gentleman. I pressed my phone to my ear on my way up the stairs to hear what Dr. Lewis had to tell me.

“Hi, Rey! It’s Beverly. I finished my tests on samples from the rabies patients and didn’t find anything terribly suspicious in them. I also sent out a request for the documents on the murder victims from Lake Mead so hopefully we’ll have them back in a week or so. Have a nice weekend!”

Hm, that was too bad. I’d hoped the killer had some kind of signature that would make him easier to track. I slipped my phone in my pocket and opened up the door to the apartment.

Rose was sitting in the living room in our recliner with one leg draped over the other. She had her fingers in a steeple and was eyeing me suspiciously as I teetered inside. I was a bit tipsy from the wine and general elation. I threw my keys in the basket and set my clutch on the kitchen counter.

She tapped her index fingers together. “Well, did you have a good time, Rey?”

“You know I don’t like when you use my first name in arguments, babe,” I whined sarcastically.

“You’re drunk. Did you sleep with him?”

I slipped off my heels and tossed them to the corner of the kitchen, searching for more alcohol. I was on a roll and I wasn’t ready to stop yet. Maybe Rose had some beer in the bottom of the fridge?

“I was gonna invite him up but I knew you’d be here.” I found a can of Budweiser and didn’t think twice about opening it to take a gulp. It was horribly bitter—I really hated beer. I coughed and set it down to unzip my dress, struggling with the motion while my friend watched irately.

“Hmph,” Rose snorted. “I hope you’re happy. Don’t come crying to me when something bad happens.”
“He’s a brain surgeon. I don’t think he has anything to hide.”

The beer was forgotten and I slinked to my bedroom with my things, wriggling out of my dress. I dropped my phone on my bed and let my hair out of its ponytail. My head was spinning a little but I wasn’t worried about it. I hopped in the shower, bringing along pajamas, and flopped into bed when I was through, almost crushing my cell phone underneath me. It lit up and I saw I had missed a call.

It was from Dr. Lewis. Weird, why would she be calling me at two in the morning? Yawning, I dialed her back to see what she needed and began to drift off to sleep in bed.

No answer. I tried her again and left a voicemail the second time before setting my phone on the charger and settling down under the covers. It was the first time in a while I had fallen asleep with a stupid smile plastered on my face.

The weekend was uneventful otherwise. Dr. Lewis never did call me back but Kylo called to ask if I wanted to go out to a local art gallery the following Saturday. I was taken aback that he initiated our second date and almost immediately agreed. I didn’t think too much about it until after I hung up and realized it would probably be another black tie affair. I needed more fancy clothes than ever before.

Rose kept her distance but decided to start talking to me again on Sunday night, and I went out to get drinks with her and the others. If I did end up actually dating Kylo, I couldn’t forget them. I’d had a few friends who threw me away when a shiny new boyfriend came along and I hated it.

On Monday morning, we went to work together as usual. Rose was becoming a little more comfortable with the idea of Kylo after I’d explained a couple of things to her and she was excited to hear about our next date. We laughed together on our way into the building.

Three police officers were talking to a doctor in the middle of the foyer. Patients waiting in the ER looked uncomfortable and were whispering to one another, and I noticed the staff looked unnerved as well. Rose and I exchanged a glance and cautiously approached the officers, and the shortest one turned to acknowledge us. He had a pen and paper booklet.

“Excuse me,” he said, “but is your name Rey Kenobi?”

I nodded. “Yes. Can I help you with something?”

“Beverly Lewis disappeared from her home on Friday night and hasn’t been seen since by her friends of family. We can’t get in touch with her. Do you have any ideas of her whereabouts?”

Rose blinked. “You’re kidding.”

The officer glanced at her. “I’m afraid not. We’re trying to get a grasp on the ‘why’ but kidnappings from the home are always hard to pinpoint. We heard you were seen with Dr. Lewis last Wednesday conducting some research. Could you explain that to me?”

My heart thundered. Beverly had gone missing. The killer was on to us.

“I was asking about any similarities between the rabies patients I treated and the women discovered in Lake Mead over the past decade.” I swallowed hard, struggling to steady myself. “Dr. Lewis offered me the documents pertaining to all of them, which were stolen from me when I went on my lunch break. Officer, I think the FBI should be involved in this. I’ve figured out a lot of—”
“Thank you, Dr. Kenobi,” the officer interrupted.

They gravitated away from us to ask different people more questions. I glared at the backs of their heads as Rose dragged me to the elevator to drop me off on oncology before she went to pediatrics.

She covered her mouth and shook her head. “This is horrible, Rey. Who would do this to Dr. Lewis? She was always so nice to everyone. Who could do such a thing?”

I narrowed my eyes, immediately thinking of Arnie Hux. Only he and the other tech knew about our talks in the morgue. I’d told my intern friends and Dr. Ren as well but I knew none of them were secret serial killers. No one else had a reason to take Beverly from her home when she was trying to get in touch with me about something important.

There was foul play afoot in St. Luke’s.

The disappearance of Dr. Lewis kept everyone from gossiping about Kylo and I. It was another slow day and I was done with my morning work by 11, giving me plenty of time to go check out the morgue. I submitted my paperwork at the nurse’s station and went back to the break room to check my cell phone, kind of hoping for a call from Beverly.

Along the way I passed a broom closet that I ignored most days. I was lost in thought when a hand reached out of the shadows and yanked me inside before I could squeal in shock.

It was dark as hell and the door shut swiftly, lock clicking. My feet shifted over things on the floor until strong hands grasped me around the waist to set me on top of a tall Sterlite tub. I groped blindly for the stranger, pulse pounding, and presently felt a broad chest under my trembling fingertips. He didn’t need to say anything—I could tell from the cologne that it was Kylo.

He pressed his index finger to my lips. “Shhh… Relax, Miss Kenobi. I knew I would see you rushing to visit the morgue, and I wanted to catch you before you made yourself a beacon to the police.” His mouth was next to my ear, warm breath raising goose bumps along my hairline. “You’ve done enough detective work. Let them do their jobs and you worry about your own.”

“But… I think it was one of the techs,” I managed, finding my voice. “I want to help them and now that I’m in kind of deep—”

“I’m sure the police will come to the same conclusions you did sooner or later. You’ll be fine if you stop poking around where your nose shouldn’t be. We belong in medicine, not finding criminals.”

But a doctor’s insight was exactly what they needed. Why were they taking so long to put the pieces together, anyway? It hadn’t taken me long to find a connection. Did they not care about vagrants disappearing because they had no family to answer to? It wasn’t fair to them or their memory to be tossed aside and forgotten like trash. They needed justice.

I set my jaw. “Then I’ll do this without their help. I’ll find whoever it is.”

Kylo’s lips brushed my neck. “Breathe, Rey. If you keep pushing, you will attract the wrong attention from both sides of the aisle.”

Unfortunately, that was a painful truth. The police already suspected me and I’d probably be hearing more from them sooner or later. I would have to back off and proceed carefully to keep from rousing too much suspicion. I frowned, tightening my grasp on Kylo’s scrubs.

“Fine,” I muttered. “I guess you’re right. But why’d you bring me in here? We could’ve talked in
the break room or gone to the cafeteria.”

“I’m working, Dr. Kenobi. I can’t be seen doing this when I’m on the clock.”

“Doing wh—”

His strong hands were in my hair, cradling my head, and he was roughly kissing me before I could finish my sentence. Kylo was unrelenting and deepened the kiss as soon as I reflexively pulled on his scrubs. His lips were soft but the pressure was intense; I’d never felt anything like it, and the encounter taught me a lot of things about Kylo Ren: mostly, that he was incredibly aggressive.

Oddly, he didn’t seem that way when he was working or interacting with people. I clung to him feebly when he swept me off the container with one arm and pushed me into the wall, knocking a couple of cleaning supplies off the shelves. His mouth left mine, moving on to the unconquered territory along my neck, and his hands ripped mine away from his chest.

Kylo slammed my hands hard into the wall beside my head like it was a punishment and I whimpered in pain, squirming. His body crushed against mine and I couldn’t move a damn inch if I tried. It was mildly terrifying and I had the distinct feeling that it wasn’t easy for him to stop. He tightened his hold on my hands until I could feel the blood throbbing through my fingers; Jesus Christ, he was way too strong.

A twitter from Kylo’s pager made him stop cold. He paused, breathing into my neck, before stepping back to check it. I held my hands in front of myself, shaking. They were pulsating with pain as the blood flowed back to them and but I couldn’t make anything out in the darkness.

“Another new patient,” Kylo muttered. “There must be something in the water.”

Was that how men were sometimes? I’d been with three and none of them had kissed me like that before. My thoughts raced and he gently took my chin between his index finger and thumb to tilt my head upwards in the darkness. His lips brushed mine gently.

“Remember, Miss Kenobi,” he said softly, “no more police work.”

The door opened and he slipped out without another word, leaving me alone in the closet. I cleared my throat and tried to get myself together when I noticed my hands in the thin beam of light from the hall.

Angry red marks were forming on my knuckles where Kylo’s fingertips had pushed too hard. My hands were killing me and I found it hard to bend my fingers. I swallowed and tugged my sleeves over my knuckles to hide the marks, hoping they wouldn’t bloom into bruises. It was just another accident.
The investigation continued around the hospital for the week. Police were in and out of the morgue but I stayed away, keeping Kylo’s advice from our harrowing closet encounter in the forefront of my mind. I tried my hardest to avoid him at work and strayed away from the broom closet, kind of paranoid that he would do it again. It hadn’t been horrible or anything… just overwhelming. Dr. Ren was intense and I wasn’t used to that type of behavior.

On Friday evening I left with Rose instead of waiting around for Kylo. She seemed surprised that I wanted to come with her and even more surprised that I wanted to go out to Vegas with them. I’d been living in Spring Valley for nearly a year and still hadn’t made the drive to see the night life and casinos. It seemed like a waste of my steadily declining youth to lock myself up inside all the time.

We went back to the apartment to get ready and drop our stuff off upstairs. Everyone was going to meet us outside around eight and we would spend most of the night at the Golden Nugget, the largest casino in the downtown area. Rose and I both put on black dresses and excitedly hurried outside to meet with the others, who were likewise wearing dressy attire.

I’d been able to hide the marks on my knuckles with makeup thanks to extensive lessons from Rose in undergrad. Dad didn’t understand that kind of thing so I didn’t wear it much growing up.

The casino was enormous and I was clinging to Rose nervously, afraid of being lost in the crowd. She was in her element and showed me the different places to blow my hard-earned money. I wound up winning about $300 and we moved on to another casino, and another, and another. Along the way we had some alcohol and by the third casino, I was drunkenly collapsing into the slot machine chairs.

I squinted at the screen. I’d lost count of what I won and lost but I had come out with $100 and felt a lot of bills in my purse. Rose was laughing with some guys and Maddie was sitting beside me, groaning when she lost for the hundredth time. My luck had to be turning around.

Before I could start playing again, my phone started ringing deep within my purse. I set my beer down and fished around with immense difficulty until I fumbled to unlock it and answered.

“Dr. Rey speaking,” I slurred, leaning on the slot machine.

“Did I call at a bad time, Rey?”

My eyes popped open and I sat up quickly. “Oh—er… hi, Kylo. I mean, Dr. Ren. Um…” I rubbed my face, humiliated by my inability to speak. “Mister… Ren?”

“Ooo, you are having trouble making your words.” He laughed to himself and I heard papers shuffling. “It’s nearly two in the morning. Don’t forget we’re going to the art gallery tomorrow afternoon.”
I cursed my poor choices. “I remember, I remember. I need to see if Rose’s ready to leave yet.”

Kylo clicked his tongue on the other end of the line. “Oh, let them have their fun. I can come get you if you’d like. All I’m currently doing is far too much paperwork.”

Memories trickled back from our encounter in the closet and my spine prickled. I didn’t know if I’d be able to be alone with him again until I talked to someone about what happened. It would be weird if I brought it up with him since we’d recently started seeing one another. Right?

But Rose was hanging out with Isaac and Taylor having the time of her life. Maddie slinked off with her meager winnings to join them and I rubbed the back of my neck uncomfortably. It was better that I left them to enjoy the rest of their night. I had a date the next day and they were all having a good time.

“…Okay,” I said. My head was already pounding, anyway.

“Where are you?”

“Uh…” I looked around too quickly and my brain felt like it was bashing against my skull.

“The… Red Dragon? It isn’t too far from the Golden Nugget.”

“Gambling, the Achilles’ heel of the wealthy. I’ll be there shortly—wait near the entrance.”

Thankfully, my friends were also too drunk to care much about me leaving. Rose gave me a ferocious hug and I stumbled my way out of the casino into the balmy Nevada evening. I was struggling to get a hold of myself for when Kylo arrived but my mind wasn’t complying. The security guards out front watched intently as I turned in circles and tried to keep myself upright.

This time he brought the Porsche. It growled up along the sidewalk and passerby paused to look, only mildly interested. Fancy cars were more common in Vegas, especially at night. I teetered forward to get myself into the vehicle but Kylo emerged, wearing another linen shirt with jeans. He caught me when I almost fell over the car and laughed at my expense. Burning with embarrassment, I glared at the car while he helped me inside so I didn’t collapse and snap my neck.

I hugged my purse when he slipped into the driver’s seat. He glanced at me and smiled but it twisted into fractals that curved in on one another. Nausea was creeping up on me. I could hardly smile back.

“I’m drunk,” I blurted like I was admitting to telling a lie.

Kylo kept smiling, driving the car cautiously. “Are you? I hadn’t noticed.”

Stop talking, stop talking; for the love of God, stop talking.

Stop talking? Why would I stop talking when the words were practically dribbling out of my mouth? I slumped down in my seat and closed my eyes to make the world stop spinning.

“Lookit!” I snapped, dramatically slapping my hand on the dashboard. I rubbed away some of the makeup over my wrists but the bruises had already diminished a lot. “It wasn’t easy hiding this, y’know, and I think Rose’s gonna start doing strip searches pretty soon.”

He peered over at a red light, frowning. “Did I do that? Hm.” Then he looked away toward the road again and through my hazy inebriation I could see him hiding a particularly mirthful grin. “I don’t know my own strength sometimes, Miss Kenobi. I’m terribly sorry to have caused you pain.”
Mildly satisfied, I cradled my hand. “Hmph. You better not do that again.”

“Don’t hold your breath.”

Words were filtering through my ears too fast and I couldn’t quite grasp them. I blinked furiously and looked at Kylo but he was driving idly, perfectly serene. It had been quiet like it was spoken under his breath. Huh… I must’ve been hearing things. I rubbed my ears furiously.

“I’m gonna crawl in bed and sleep ‘til noon,” I mumbled, pulling myself back up in my seat. I drooped my head to the side to look at Kylo, pouting. “But I’ll be really lonely by myself.”

“How much did you drink, exactly?”

Numbers bounced around in my skull, ricocheting and intensifying my headache. “Lots and lots.”

“I suppose I shouldn’t leave you alone. Rose will hate me with an even greater passion if she finds you’ve aspirated on your vomit.” He puckered his lips, shifting the car up a gear. “You’d be safer staying with me for the evening, don’t you think? I can bring you home tomorrow morning to get ready for the gallery. You should be presentable by three in the afternoon.”

“I… I think I’m dying, Kylo,” I whispered with wide eyes.

“You’ll survive, though I doubt you’ll be keeping the contents on your stomach.”

We drove up to the dimly lit house but I was too wasted to admire it. I managed to open my door and braced myself on the sides of the car to get out of it. Kylo tried to let me do it on my own and I ended up collapsing inside, giggling to myself between undignified groans. He leaned inside to scoop me out like I was light as a feather, holding me bridal style, and kicked the car door shut.

No part of me was begging for my idiocy to end. Every ounce of my rationale was gone like a wisp of smoke and I tiredly clung to Kylo while he unlocked the myriad of doors around his house. He was carrying my purse, too. That was nice of him.

It was quiet inside, save for me making sounds like a car revving its engine. We went upstairs with me draped listlessly in Kylo’s arms and he brought me into one of the spare bedrooms. I laughed a little too much when he carefully placed me on the bed and rolled over on my stomach, stretching my limbs out as far as possible. Mmm, I could fall asleep in an instant.

I’d blacked out for what felt like a heartbeat when a hand grabbed my ankle to drag me to the side of the bed. I whined and squirmed but the hands flipped me over without hesitation and pulled until my behind was on the edge of the mattress, feet not quite touching the floor.

The cogs in my mind turned but they were rusted over; useless. I didn’t remember where I was or who I was with. Whimpering in fear, I feebly resisted the hands tugging on my dress zipper. The person roughly propped me against his chest, restraining me until the zipper was down, and turned me back over on my stomach. It was dark. I couldn’t remember…

And long fingers closed around the back of my neck to push my face into the sheets. I stared off into the darkness, terrified that I couldn’t control my own body. He leaned over me and his mouth was at my ear, warm breath tingling across my skin. Deep breaths. Deep breaths.

“Relax, Miss Kenobi,” he crooned, tightening his grasp on my neck. Dr. Ren? He ran his tongue along the shell of my ear and tangled his first two fingers in my hair. “I’m only trying to help.”

Lips pressed to the side of my head, hard, and I winced. He took my dress off and black spots
appeared in my vision again, threatening to drag me back into unconsciousness. I moaned softly. Why was my head so damn heavy and impossible to lift?

I felt his weight joining mine on the bed. His hands clenched over mine, squeezing until I yelped in pain, and he was pressing himself against me like he wanted me to know he was there. I panted in terror and my eyes flickered around but my head was still ten tons and lying flat on the mattress. He rubbed his cheek on mine, stifling another weak attempt to get away.

“Shhh,” he whispered, “I’m not going to take you now. Where’s the fun in that, hm?” His thumb massaged the side of my hand, pushing a bit too hard. “The frantic struggle and screaming is half the excitement.”

Nausea wormed up from my stomach and I hiccupped. He yanked me off the bed by my hair and made the short trip to the bathroom to drop me on my knees in front of the toilet. Trembling, I grasped either side of it and vomited up most of the expensive alcohol I’d blown my money on. Fingers drew back my hair and I could feel him still standing over me but I was too sick to care.

I rested back on Kylo’s legs when I was done, cold and miserable. The incident on the bed had already been swallowed up by the alcohol but I was acutely aware of my blooming memory gaps. I’d drunk way too much. What if I had alcohol poisoning?

He leaned over me, grasping my chin and wiping away the puke with a tissue that hadn’t quite made it into the toilet. I protested in whines and mumbles when he flushed the toilet and grabbed at his shirt. He looked down at me, tilting his head like a curious cat.

My heart was pounding and I was nauseous all over again. “I’m… sorry.”

Kylo smiled slowly. “I think you’ll make it up to me one day.” He picked me up off the floor by my armpits, much gentler than he had been in the closet. “Besides that, I assumed this would happen.”

Back in my bedroom, I noticed my dress was in a crumpled heap on the floor. I sat upright on the bed, already feeling a lot better after vomiting, and Kylo offered me a blue button up shirt. He picked up my dress while I pulled my arms through the sleeves, disoriented from puking.

“Sorry,” I muttered again, humiliated by my behavior. “I usually don’t drink that much.”

“Clearly.” He nodded toward the bathroom. “There’s a toothbrush and paste if you want to clean your mouth, but you’ll probably be on friendly terms with the toilet for the rest of the night. If you need anything, don’t hesitate to visit.”

Still mortified, I stared at the floor and nodded. Kylo sighed and tenderly touched the back of my head to kiss my forehead, lingering for a few seconds. His fingertips tugged on my hair a little.

Then he was gone and I was alone in the big bedroom. The back of my neck was killing me.
Timid hands shook me awake the next morning. “Um… Miss Kenobi? Mr. Ren asked me to come wake you for breakfast.” The girl paused, voice rising in nervous pitch. “Miss Kenobi?”

Groggy and hungover, I lazily raised my head from the pillows and started when I saw a pretty young woman hovering over me. She jerked back as well, clutching her hands together and staring at me with wide eyes. She was definitely younger than I was—maybe about 20—and was wearing khakis and a green polo. Her brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail.

It had to be the housekeeper Kylo told me about. I groaned in pain, massaging my forehead as I sat up in bed and winced in the blinding sunlight. The girl anxiously wrung her hands.

“Sorry,” I muttered, “I’ll be out of your way in a minute. What’s your name, anyway?”

“Oh, that’s okay!” the girl stammered quickly. “Take your time! …I think.” She glanced over her shoulder and I wondered why she was so on edge. “Mr. Ren doesn’t like waiting, though. My name is Annabelle Prost but you can call me Anna or Miss Prost.”

I managed to haul myself out of bed to find I was only wearing one of Kylo’s blue linen dress shirts. Alarmed, I looked around wildly for my dress and almost collapsed on the floor. The housekeeper pointed me to a couch on the other side of the room where there my dress was neatly folded alongside another fancy black number I didn’t recognize.

I narrowed my eyes. “Is he trying to dress me now?”

Anna was peeling off my bed sheets and didn’t meet my eyes. “He does that a lot. You can take a shower if you’d like, Miss Kenobi. I can clean your undergarments like I did your dress.”

“Please don’t call me Miss Kenobi. Rey or Gen is fine.”

Taking a shower was impossible to resist. I went into the bathroom attached to my bedroom and was irritated to find it was bigger than my living room at the apartment. The floors were warm, smooth tile (temperature controlled, not doubt) and a big mirror stretched across the sink. I shut the door to slip out of my clothes and stepped into the enormous shower that had sliding glass doors and a waterfall showerhead. It was all spotless.

“I’ll bring these right back, Miss—I mean, Rey,” Anna called. “I’ll try to find you a pair of sweatpants, too. It’s only ten in the morning and your appointment is at three.”

I thanked her offhandedly, scrutinizing the knobs to turn the shower on. A blast of cold water made me squeal in shock and I hurriedly turned up the temperature. My weariness was soon washed down the drain as I scrubbed my hair and used a pink razor that had been left for me on the sink.

A fluffy white robe was waiting for me on the hook behind the door. I dried off and slipped it on, examining myself over the sink before I brushed my teeth. I’d pulled my hair to one shoulder when Anna knocked on the door and I impassively gave her permission to enter. Ugh, alcohol was not—

A small gasp interrupted my train of thought. Her smile had faded in an instant and her eyes widened in the mirror, gawking at me: or rather, something on my neck.

I blinked. “Something wrong?”
“N-no. Sorry.” She scurried forward with my clean clothes, including a pair of black sweatpants. “Um, these are Mr. Ren’s but he said to let you use them since you… wore a dress.” Her blue eyes flickered to my neck again and she strained to smile at me. “I hope your shower was nice.”

Anna left me to get dressed, which was an awkward ordeal. Kylo’s clothes were obviously big on me and I had to roll back the sleeves of the dress shirt up to my elbow to feminize it a little. I did the same with the sweatpants, sourly regarding my reflection again. I’d be stuck wearing them until I had to get ready for the art gallery. I’d give Rose a call to let her know I was doing okay.

Low voices in the hallway drifted into the bedroom when I stepped out to join Kylo. I cocked my head, curious when I realized it was him speaking with Anna. She drew a sharp breath and pattered off again even faster than before and I heard him muttering as he turned to idly look into my room.

Our shirts matched. I rolled my eyes at the coincidence but that was where the similarities ended. He was wearing dark jeans and black shoes like always, already dressed to the nines at eleven in the goddamn morning. On most Saturdays I lounged around in my pajamas and studied or did paperwork. Not Kylo Ren. He was ready to go out on the town.

I found my hair tie and pulled my thick locks into a tail. “Now I feel underdressed.”

“Why? I prefer you in my clothes to anything else.” He smiled, gaze sweeping down my body. “You look much better than you did last night. I’ve seen patients on chemo vomit less.”

“I might be a bit of a lightweight,” I snipped. I winced—jeez, my neck hurt. “Anyway, thanks for helping me. I would’ve been leaving that place in an ambulance if you hadn’t picked me up. And let me sleep here so I didn’t aspirate my puke. And loaned me your clothes.” I looked over my shoulder at the new dress and squinted at Kylo. “And where did that come from?”

“Neimann Marcus, perhaps? It hardly matters: you need to have something to eat. Come along.”

“Hold your horses, I need to call my wife before she panics.”

Kylo sighed and crossed his arms to continue waiting for me at the door while I rummaged through my purse to procure my phone. Of course it was dead. I grumbled a curse and chucked it from whence it came, stalking irately out of the bedroom. He followed after me.

The kitchen table was set. I ungracefully sat in the chair Kylo pulled out for me and blinked at the eggs and bacon, hungry but still at the whim of my hangover. He sat across from me at the other end of the table, already done eating, and leaned forward to push my apple juice closer to my plate. I pursed my lips and debated whether or not chowing down was worth the risk.

He raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t you learn anything in medical school, Miss Kenobi? The body draws water from the brain in moderate to severe dehydration, pulling on the meninges and giving you that wonderful headache. You need salt, potassium, magnesium, and I’m sure you’ve lost all the glycogen in your liver. All that acetaldehyde—”

“It’s way too early to talk about physiology,” I interrupted, morosely picking up the juice.

“Eat your food, too.” Kylo leaned back, smiling tautly. “You’ll need to keep up your strength.”

The distinct sound of car doors slamming outside made him look away from me, brow furrowed. He paused, waiting for my noises, and groaned when a peal of feminine laughter broke the quiet. At first I hesitated in my eating out of concern it was a girlfriend or his secret wife coming home but I could hear other voices intermingle with the first.
I turned in my chair when Kylo rose and he casually pulled my hair free of the tie to fan my hair around my shoulders and across my neck. He swept a hand underneath my chin to kiss me on the forehead and walked off to leave the house, probably heading to the main gate.

“That was unnecessary,” I complained to myself, struggling to contain my mop and hopping out of my seat. I wanted to know what the commotion was all about.

In the dappled sunshine I could see a group of people entering the first gate into the courtyard. There was a tall woman with her curly brown hair in a bob who hugged Kylo, beaming from ear-to-ear. She was wearing a light-colored pantsuit. I assumed she was his mother.

Beside her was another tall person, but this was a man in a suit with very dark brown hair. It wasn’t quite black like Kylo’s was. He stood with his hands clasped behind his back and pulled Kylo into one of those weird masculine one-armed hugs, patting his twice on the back. He had an aura of calm dignity—I figured that was dad, based on their physical similarities.

They were both so tall. That explained a lot. I hid behind the doorframe to watch the rest of the ensemble and presently noticed Anna standing near me, also watching. We exchanged a serious glance and started giggling before looking back.

“Mr. Ren uses a different last name professionally,” Anna whispered. “It’s supposed to be Solo.”

A girl who seemed a more normal height leaned on her tiptoes to hug Kylo. She had coppery, curly hair more like her mother’s and let it hang around her shoulders. She had to be Breha, the 17-year-old. Her clothes were still classy like the parents’ but I could see a cell phone jutting out of her pocket.

Last was Jaina, the sister who was closer to my age. She squealed excitedly when she embraced her brother and she was the same height as her parents. Her hair was dark brown and smooth, pulled back in a ponytail like mine had been. She was wearing a pretty floral dress with heels that added to her tallness and she had a purse over her shoulder. They had to be going someplace nice.

“Mom has some boring lawyer symposium,” Breha piped up.

Jaina shot her sister a dirty look. “Don’t be a brat, Breha. We wanted to stop by and check up on you before we headed into Vegas. It’s been a few months—how are things going?”

“Perfect as ever?” Mrs. Solo queried, straightening Kylo’s collar.

“Yes, mother,” he mumbled. “I wish you would call before you dropped in. It’s irritating.”

“Were you busy?” Mr. Solo asked. His voice was really deep.

“Of course he wasn’t busy,” Jaina said. “He’s only busy on weekdays when he’s… he’s…”

Frick. I jerked away from the door when Jaina’s dark eyes met mine, flinging Anna into the wall with me. She darted off into the house and I wanted to scream ‘coward!’ but I didn’t know if I was meant to be seen. Petrified, I waited with bated breath for the older sister’s reaction. Would she think I was a prostitute? I probably looked like one wearing her brother’s clothes.

Kylo laughed. “Come out, Rey. I’m not trying to hide you.”

I heard a couple of gasps and murmurs. Apparently it was strange for Kylo to have female company. Still uncomfortable, I peeked around the corner of the door again and tentatively stepped out into the sunlight, inching my way closer to the well-dressed Solo family. None of
them said anything but stared at me in shock all the way up to Kylo slipping an arm around my waist.

My heart was racing. Had I ever met a guy’s family before? Maybe once or twice, but not like the Solos. A group of mixed dark and light eyes trailed down my clothes and I felt horrible and underdressed again. Being a doctor didn’t mean I belonged with fancy people.

He was holding me tight; possessive. I had a feeling that didn’t go unnoticed.

“This is Dr. Rey Kenobi,” Kylo said. “She’s an intern at St. Luke’s and graduated from NSU, and she works on the oncology floor. We resolved the rabies cases together.”

And I waited in terror for one of his family members to defrost and make me feel like I belonged with them instead of in my tiny cramped apartment. It seemed like the day would never come.
The situation wasn’t helped by me being in Kylo’s clothes, which I desperately wanted to explain away. At the same time, I didn’t want his family to think I was an uncontrolled alcoholic. I shifted awkwardly on my feet—the cement was cold from the previous night and I hadn’t bothered to put shoes on. God, I probably looked like some riff raff he scraped off the street.

Jaina defrosted first while the rest of her family continued to gawk at me. She blinked and glanced between her brother and me, thankfully more shocked than horrified. One of her graceful hands extended towards me as a smile slowly spread across her pretty angular features.

“It’s nice to meet you, Dr. Kenobi,” she said when I shook her hand. Her smile had taken a more nefarious turn and she looked at Kylo again, smirking now. “You must be pretty lovesick—or some kind of sick in general—to introduce us to your girlfriend.”

Mrs. Solo dramatically shoved Jaina aside, who was now snickering while Kylo glared frigidly at her, to pull me into a bone-crushing embrace. I spluttered and tried to hug her back while Breha began to smile the same way her sister had. Mr. Solo was the only impassive one but that was better than the outright shock they’d all shown. Was I that out of place?

“And she’s a doctor!” Mrs. Solo crowed, still clutching me in a violent embrace. “Do you remember the Jamey family who lived down the street from us for years? Well their son, Harry, became a heart surgeon and he married his high school sweetheart. She left him and took all his money!” She turned me around a few times, tightening her grasp. “Now I can sleep soundly.”

“Get a grip, Leia,” Mr. Solo snapped.

Breha puckered her lips. “How much money do you make, Kylo? Are you two getting married? Does that mean I can’t stay here over summer break? Will I have to babysit?”

The very tall Solo family was terrifying. I was released from the hug and Leia carefully adjusted my clothes, bright and happy like she had won the lottery. Her words weren’t meant to be rude—doctors usually married other doctors or high-earning people. Money was a touchy subject when you could easily lose it all to an unhappy spouse with nothing in comparison.

Jaina lightly slapped her sister’s arm, scowling. “You can’t ask people things like that, Breha!”

“Why not?” she asked defensively. “I think they’re all legitimate questions!”

“They’re certainly none of your business,” Kylo said. He brought me back to his side with the same possessive hand around my waist, this time underneath the shirt. His skin was warm. “Anyway, as much as I cherish our family bonding, Rey and I are visiting an art gallery this afternoon.”
My chest tightened nervously when Janet asked which one. Were Kylo and I together now? I’d always made it official in the past after a few dates but we’d only been on one. Still, I’d been working with him for almost a year so I knew him better than almost all of the guys I’d dated in the past.

The anxiety melted into dizzying excitement. Dr. Ren, the same man who had given me a cordial greeting on my first day of my internship, actually liked me. His arm was around me holding me steady to his side while he talked to his family, who were also pleased with me. He’d been eager to introduce me to them so he wasn’t trying to hide anything. Ha! I’d been right: Rose was just paranoid.

Now I was an adult dating an adult who brought me to fancy dinners and art galleries. We were almost ten years apart but I didn’t let it bother me. That was a good thing—he wouldn’t be as flighty or finicky and energetic as men my age could be. We had mutual exclusivity that didn’t need to be verbalized.

His family left after forcing him to agree to have dinner the next night. Kylo stood in the courtyard, still keeping me still, until they had all gotten into their big black Cadillac and driven off. He finally let me go to lock the gate again and I could hear him muttering under his breath.

“They were nice,” I said meekly when we were back inside.

Anna was back, cleaning up the breakfast I’d never touched. Kylo cast me an incredulous glance and finished clearing the rest of the table. I noticed Anna seemed kind of stressed now and she was scrubbing the dishes fervently like she didn’t want to even make eye contact with me anymore.

“Nice enough,” Kylo said. “Have you been to the basement yet, Miss Prost? I’m going to need extra space in the near future if everything goes according to plan.”

She stiffened. “I… I haven’t gone yet, sir.” Her eyes shifted to me for a brief moment. “Will you… need a lot of room or will it be the usual amount?”

“Twice the normal amount. This one will be a permanent fixture. You’ll have some help during the week moving the heavier parts around.”

Kylo was calm during the conversation but Anna looked horribly uncomfortable. She nodded and went back to her work while Kylo approached to fan my hair across my shoulders and over my neck again. My pulse quickened at his touch, turning erratic when his hands were cupping my face.

“You still need to eat something,” he murmured. “What would you like?”

“Uh… I’m not dressed very well for going out, don’t you think? I’m okay; I’ll eat when I go home.” My eyes widened. “Oh no, I still haven’t gotten a hold of Rose! She’s going to freak out!”

“We can stop by your apartment so you can get dressed and check in with your wife, then. Two birds, one stone.”

I went upstairs to get my dress and we headed back to Spring Valley in the Audi. Traffic was fairly thick for a Saturday afternoon so it took us a bit longer than normal to get to the apartment. I clambered out of the car when we parked behind Rose’s SUV, still struggling with the proximity to the ground. Kylo offered me a hand and helped me get back on my two feet.

“I’m going to break my leg escaping that thing sooner or later,” I said, fishing for my keys.
Kylo pushed his sunglasses on top of his head, looking around casually. “I don’t care for this neighborhood.” He squinted and peered up at my building. “Or this place. I hope you aren’t intending on staying here for the length of your residency. That would be a travesty.”

The key jammed in the lock and I jimmied it to get the door open. “Weren’t you the one telling me I’ll be married before I have to worry about moving out of here? Besides, you know interns don’t make a lot of money. I think a kid with a few years at McDonald’s makes more than I do at this point.”

We made the trek to my apartment and I let us in with a lot less difficulty. It was messier than before, no doubt thanks to our night on the town, but I noticed it was oddly quiet. Rose usually had the TV on when she was alone because she couldn’t stand silence. Kylo shut the door and locked it as I looked around for any signs of my friend. She’d probably gone out for a jog.

I went to my bedroom to charge my phone, kind of relieved Rose wasn’t around. Kylo followed and scrutinized my apartment along the way. He leaned on my doorframe while I puttered around my room trying to find an outfit that was good for getting a simple lunch. He was wearing jeans and a nice shirt so I would do the same. Lips puckered, I went to my closet to investigate. It was okay to bounce clothes ideas off him, right? When I found a pretty green blouse I turned on my heel to go ask Kylo and was startled to find him already standing behind me. His hands were in his pockets and he had his head cocked, eyeing the shirt in my hands. I stared up at him.

“Um… is this okay?” I asked timidly. I was part way in the closet and he was looming over me.

He stepped closer and I was promptly against the wall in the semi-darkness. Kylo glanced over his shoulder pensively before pulling the closet door shut until only a sliver of light slipped through. He reached up to push my clothes aside and his hands were around my head again, thumbs on my cheeks.

“Wear whatever you’d like,” he said. “You’ll need to take all of this off first, though.”

Fear became a reality. Kylo kissed hard and the second time was a lot like the first.

His lips moved passionately against mine, tugging on my lower lip to elicit a breathy reaction from me. I tried harder to keep pace with him out of concern that he would find me too meek and was able to wrap my arms around his back. He broke our kiss and pressed his forehead to mine, rapidly unbuttoning the shirt he’d given me and impatiently tugging apart the last few.

I drew a sharp breath when Kylo’s mouth went on to my neck. He slid his hands through the gap in the shirt and across my hips, ravaging my throat and squeezing my skin. It was another flurry of activity; an overwhelming dark encounter I had no control over. That was both liberating and downright terrifying because I knew I would follow wherever he led.

He trailed down to my collar bone and between my breasts, sliding his hands down my body to hook onto the hem of the sweatpants. At that point he was on his knees in front of me and his lips lingered near my hip bones, nibbling and kissing at different intervals. I clung to the wall nervously.

Kylo’s grey eyes flickered up to mine and he smiled. His lips were brushing my stomach. “You’re not a virgin, Miss Kenobi. Are you?” He drifted down further, grasping the edge of my panties peeking over the sweatpants with his teeth and raising an eyebrow at me.

I didn’t answer for a minute, dry-mouthed and aflutter. “N-No,” I stuttered, shaking my head spastically. “But I kind of feel like it right now.”
He laughed, letting my underwear snap back and pulling down the sweatpants. Instead of letting my step out of them he lifted my feet out himself and threw them into the abyssal darkness on the other end of my closet. He stood up again, towering over me and beginning to unbutton his own shirt. I could see his faint outline but his eyes practically glowed.

“In that case, why don’t we both take off our clothes?” he asked, deftly moving through the buttons.

“All of them?” I squeaked.

Before Kylo could reply, the slam of the front door made me jump. He didn’t respond but his head snapped to the side, eyes narrowing as he finished with the last button. His shirt hung open and I could see the contours of his chest with dark hair that faded away around his midsection to reappear in a telltale line toward his pants. I stared at him openly, thankful that he was distracted.

His skin was the same pale shade as the rest of him and he was… well, for lack of more decorative vernacular, *ripped*. I gawked at his ripples of muscles for a solid ten seconds, totally thrown off. It didn’t seem like he had that kind of shape in his scrubs. He had nice arms but I didn’t think beyond that.

Bags were dropped on the floor down the hallway and I heard shoes being kicked off. “Rey? Are you home from your date night yet?”

*Shit.* I groaned and Kylo straightened up, scowling. Rose walked around the apartment and her footsteps came down the hallway to my bedroom. She opened the door without a second thought and Kylo arranged my hair again before turning to stand in front of me. What the hell was she doing flitting around in my room?! Even dad never did that!

The closet door flung open and I flinched from the bright light, ducking behind Kylo and grasping the back of his shirt tight in my fists. When there was silence I peeked around his arm.

Rose had her hair pulled back in a ponytail and she was wearing her running gear. She had a bottle of water in one hand and the other was still holding the door open as she stared blankly at Kylo and me. I blinked back at her, wondering why I felt like I was doing something wrong.
None of us moved for an increasingly awkward span of time. Kylo was standing in front of me and I knew Rose was seeing the same musculature that had stunned me. Her brown eyes were wide and disbelieving, slowly trailing up to his face where I was sure he was glaring at her. Her mouth was open a couple of surprised centimeters and she leaned to the side to look at me.

“What’s going on?” Rose asked.

Kylo stepped forward and braced his hands on either side of the frame, tilting his head. “Oh, we were just deciding which dress I would borrow.” He looked over his shoulder at me with a sarcastic pucker. “Was it the green or the blue, Rey?”

He walked past Rose and she stared after him as I clambered out of the closet with much less grace, taking the sweatpants with me. I snatched a pair of jeans from a hanger and yanked them on while my friend continued to gawk. Kylo was rebuttoning his shirt near me door, glowering at Rose with a ferocity I’d never seen before. Admittedly, it was kind of obnoxious that she stormed into my bedroom.

“Are you two… dating?!” she gasped, covering her mouth like the thought horrified her.

“Yes, so if you could refrain from bursting through closed doors, it would be thoroughly appreciated.” Kylo ran a hand through his hair and his grey eyes flickered to me. “I don’t like being interrupted.”

Rose turned on him, no longer shocked into silence. “We learned all about sexual dysfunction in old men. It’s tough to get it up and keep it up. Don’t worry, Dr. Ren—your secret’s safe with me.”

Kylo tucked his shirt in and smiled icily. “I can think of better uses for your smart mouth.”

I was tugging on the green blouse and stepped between them. Rose was poised to kill and Kylo even looked agitated, which was kind of surprising. They would never get along.

“We’re going to grab some lunch before the gallery,” I said. “Do you want me to bring anything back? I see you were out jogging again; that’s good!”

Rose gave Kylo one more dirty look. “I lost my appetite. Have a good day, Rey.”

Then she was gone and her bedroom door slammed on the other side of the apartment. I sighed and neatly folded up the clothes Kylo had loaned to me. They’d get along eventually. Rose could be hotheaded and she clashed with people who had the same type of personality. When she learned Kylo didn’t have any nefarious intentions she would be more supportive.

We left the apartment to go out for lunch at a small café. It was nice: I had a panini and cup of
soup that helped my hangover a bit more. Afterwards we still had time to spare so we went for a stroll in the local park where people were out with their kids and pets. We sat on a bench in the sunshine and chatted for a while, and soon the conversation turned to the gallery.

“I never would’ve pegged you as the type to like art,” I admitted.

Two kids ran past us shrieking happily in their game of tag. Kylo’s gaze followed them, steely and distant. He could be two different people sometimes.

“Drawing developed my steadiness and concentration,” he said. He pushed his sunglasses on top of his head again and held out his left hand, turning it several times. “I was quite passionate until high school, when I learned artistic boys don’t get chosen for the football team. They also have terrible luck with women and I was very interested in them. What about you, Miss Kenobi?”

“A few,” I acquiesced. “I played volleyball for a long time and did ballet when I was a little kid, but I barely remember it. Dad was always trying to get me involved in girly stuff because I didn’t have mom around to show me those kinds of things. I painted, too.” I frowned, looking down at my own hands. “I really liked painting but after I started college I never had time.”

“Being a doctor hardly leaves times for anything other than breathing.”

The house was empty when we went back. Anna had left for the day and Kylo kept checking his phone all the way until we went upstairs to change. The dress fit wonderfully and left a modest amount of leg showing on the left side. Kylo wore a black suit and we took the Porsche back to Las Vegas.

Everything was beautiful. The artist was local, of course—Andre Paolo, an up-and-coming who liked landscapes and surrealism. There were tons of people and all of them seemed to know Kylo, approaching to reintroduce themselves or meet me. I stood beside him for most of the evening until I was confident enough to go out on my own.

The floors were all hardwood and the walls were white. I clicked around, meandering in my heels and sipping my pinot grigio, and stopped in front of a unique painting.

It was a pale naked woman shown only from her waist up with swirling black and blues around her. She had her eyes closed but her lips were pink, turned down indifferently. Her raven hair was pitch black and flowed around her head, giving her an angelic appearance. I cocked my head, drawn to her while people laughed and chattered around me. I’d never seen anything quite like it before.

Fingers brushed my bare spine. “This is my personal favorite, too.”

I jumped—how the hell did Kylo appear out of nowhere? —and cast him an offended glance.

“You’re sneaky,” I teased. “The painting and I were having a moment.” I squinted, taking a sip from my glass. “She reminds me of ‘Madonna’. I think Edvard Munch made that one.”

“Indeed he did, along with ‘The Scream’. I’d like to own it, but I believe it was auctioned off for $119 million or something to that tune.” Kylo’s hand slipped around my waist. “I think I need this one.”

The gallery closed around ten PM and we went back to my apartment. He parked behind Rose and smiled gradually until he had broken into a grin. My heart pattered. Was he going to come upstairs? Our walls were paper thin and I didn’t want her to hear anything. It would be safer to go to his house. But we had only recently started dating so I wasn’t quite ready for sex yet…
My gaze drifted down the front of Kylo’s suit. He’d loosened his tie on the drive back and opened a button or two. Maybe it was okay to invite him up. We’d known each other for a while.

I knitted my fingers. “Something funny, Dr. Ren?”

He stroked his upper lip with his index finger, trying in vain to stifle his smile. “I was only imagining what Dr. Tico will think when she hears you and I together late at night.” His eyes traveled down my dress. “That might be a fun little game to play, don’t you think?”

“God knows I’ve heard her enough times in our dorm,” I muttered. “She’ll get over it. Eventually. Anyway, thank you for another amazing evening. It was beautiful.”

“Of course, Miss Kenobi.” He gently lifted one of my hands to kiss my knuckles, gaze unwavering. “The pleasure was all mine.”

I stood on the sidewalk and watched him drive off down the street. Things were progressing smoothly. My internship was almost over and I would become a resident. I’d established that I was a keen and dependable doctor, and I had somehow stumbled across the perfect boyfriend. I bit my lower lip and smiled before turning to walk into my building. Everything was coming together.

Rose was sitting on the couch in front of a movie when I came upstairs. She turned and I felt her eyes on me while I took off my heels and locked the door. I’d have to have the dress dry cleaned before I brought it back to Kylo. It was only fair—he’d washed mine.

“How was it?” my friend asked.

Annoyed, I shrugged her off. “Fine. I’m going to bed.”

She rolled off the couch and approached me cautiously. “I’m not trying to hurt your feelings, Rey, I just want you to be careful. He’s a lot older than you and I don’t want anyone to spread bad rumors. He’s nice… kind of, but no one really knows him outside work. Dr. Gibbert said he’s always alone.”

“So?” I snapped. “Not everyone is a social butterfly, and plenty of people are spreading rumors about me already. I don’t care about what any of them say.”

“All I want is for you to be careful. He gives me a bad feeling.”

“Does he?” I rounded on her, slamming my hand on the countertop. “Why? He’s polite, he brings me out to nice places, he clearly has a good job, and he isn’t being pushy with me. I even met his family earlier today and they were all very pleasant people. You’re just looking for an excuse to hate him.”

“He forced you to shadow his surgery!” Rose retorted. “You don’t give a shit about neurology or surgery, and everyone in the damn hospital knows that’s where Isaac’s heart is. So why did Dr. Ren pick you? Because he wanted to show off, even if it meant sacrificing experience for a worthier intern!”

It was true, but I didn’t want it to be true. I bristled and shoved past her, heading for my bedroom and offhandedly pulling my hair over one shoulder. “Fuck off, Rose. I’m not—”

There was a loud, sharp gasp. “Rey, your neck!”

“What about my fucking neck?”
She dragged me to the bathroom and moved my hair a little more, gasping again. I obviously couldn’t see and I irately demanded to know what was going on, so she took a quick picture with her cell phone to show to me. Her hand trembled and my eyes slowly widened.

A purple bruise was creeping across the back of my neck. It was hideous but thankfully not too large. The tendrils crept towards my throat and I realized it had a familiar shape like the contusions on my knuckles. I took Rose’s phone to get a closer look, fear tingling down my spine.

I’d wondered why my neck hurt so much when I woke up, and I finally had my answer. Was that why Kylo took my hair out of my ponytail and kept rearranging it? I didn’t remember him putting his hands on me like that… All I could remember was puking in the bathroom.

Rose grasped both of my arms, glaring at me. “Tell me what happened, right now.”

Unnerved, I set her phone down and shook my head. “I… I don’t know… I must have fallen—”

“Shut up!” she barked, shaking me. “You kept pulling your sleeves over your hands all week, too. And why do you cross the hall when you walk by the broom closet near the break room? Don’t make excuses, Rey; tell me the truth. What the hell happened last night?”

All my life I had strived to find the truth. I hadn’t given in with the rabies patients, I had tried to connect them with the bodies in Lake Mead, and I never gave up on a patient. My friend continued to demand answers while I gazed off into the distance, shell-shocked. I was too drunk to remember what happened but I had an ugly bruise on my neck that Kylo clearly knew about.

I pushed Rose aside and ran to my bedroom, slamming the door shut and locking it behind me. She pounded on the door and I sank to the floor with tears in my eyes. It was the first time in my life I found myself running away from the truth.
The apartment was empty the next morning and I silently ate breakfast. Rose went out for long jogs on weekends and I was relieved she wouldn’t be back before I left. I stirred my cereal around my bowl, holding my head in one hand. I needed to call Kylo but I was dreading it. What excuse would he have? Would he outright admit to doing it? Should I ever see him again?

I took a shower and used a second mirror to look at the bruise in the bathroom, steadily growing angrier. He didn’t have any right to touch me like that. First he’d grabbed my arm too hard when I stumbled, then he slammed my hands into the wall at work, and now he’d apparently squeezed the back of my neck when I was drunk. It was all totally unnecessary and reeked of deliberateness.

Still, I was too much of a coward to call Kylo directly. I flopped down in bed when I was dressed and my hair was dried to type out a terse text message demanding to know what had happened. Rose would tell my dad sooner or later and that would ruin any chances of him ever liking my boyfriend. I rolled over, miserable. It didn’t matter either way. Kylo and I weren’t compatible.

He didn’t answer for a long time. As always, I had plenty of paperwork to keep me occupied and I went to it while I waited. One o’clock rolled around and the door opened down the hall.

Rose peeked into my room. She was in her running gear again with her water bottle hanging from her fingertips. I glanced at her over my shoulder and turned back to my work.

“If you came to gloat, don’t bother,” I said coldly. “I already texted him.”

She plopped down on my bed and leaned forward, clasping her hands together. “Rey, I’m only trying to help you. We’ve been best friends for years now—don’t you trust me at all? I don’t want to patronize you; I want to get to the bottom of this.”

I checked my phone for the millionth time. “There’s nothing to figure out. He grabbed my neck way too hard and I don’t remember it because I was too drunk. I’m not letting some guy push me around.”

“Are you sure?” Rose pressed.

“I’m sure. Besides, my dad would have a heart attack if he knew I was letting him down like that.”

“…Okay. Don’t forget I’m always here for you.”

Several sharp knocks on the door interrupted us. I furrowed my brow, wondering who it could be, and Rose stormed out of my bedroom to answer it. I scrambled to follow her when I realized it might be Kylo and hoped I could intervene if anything started between them.

The door opened and slammed shut just as I arrived, and I quickly pushed Rose away to open it again. She fumed in the kitchen when Kylo stepped inside, casually clipping his sunglasses to the
front of his green t-shirt. He ignored her completely and looked down at me but kept his hands to himself. Good.

I folded my arms, straightening up. “I would’ve preferred a text.”

Rose nodded. “Or for you to never speak to her again. That would’ve been the most preferred option.”

Kylo continued to ignore her, burdening me with his intense stormy gaze. He didn’t shut the door but stood in front of it to give me ample space. “I wanted to apologize to you in person, Miss Kenobi. A man who hides behind a cell phone is no man at all.”

Rose made a retching noise but I kept my eyes on Kylo. Fine. He could apologize all he wanted. “There’s no excuse,” I said curtly.

“No, there is no excuse.” He looked down at the floor. His hands were in his pockets. “Regardless, it was not done with sadistic intent. You nearly fainted in the course of vomiting and I was too hasty in trying to help you. I have a very strong grip, and I am deeply sorry for leaving marks on you.”

“Well… Why’d you try to hide it?” I asked, faltering a bit.

“I knew you would react like this and I’m ashamed of myself. If you ever wish to speak to me again, I will exercise greater caution and keep my hands away to avoid such an incident again.”

Even Rose had softened during his speech. I looked over my shoulder at her, completely at a loss, and she shrugged back at me. He hadn’t done any of it to be cruel but he was still much more than I had imagined. I still hadn’t told her about our encounter in the broom closet. Maybe that would shed more light on the situation.

“You’re positive this was an accident?” Rose clarified toward me.

I wasn’t, but I nodded anyhow. It had to be.

Kylo turned his gaze to my friend. “I also wanted to apologize for my behavior yesterday, Miss Tico. It was rude, and for the sake of Rey I hope we can be urbane with one another. I understand that what you do is in the service of a friend to protect her from heartache.”

She blanched, shocked by his apology. “Uh… yeah, sure. Just don’t leave any more marks on her or I’ll have to let Mr. Kenobi know.” Then she looked back at me again, shaking her head. “I hope you’re making the right choice, Rey.”

That was it for Rose. She left me standing near the door with Kylo to go take a shower and we both watched her leave, not moving until the water had started. I wrung my hands nervously, too afraid to look up at him. I could afford to give him one more chance. He hadn’t meant to do it.

“I will never deliberately cause you pain, Miss Kenobi.”

His voice was soothing; a comfort to my inner turmoil. I peeked up into his somber grey eyes and wondered why I had ever doubted him in the first place.

“It’s okay,” I muttered.

“It’s never okay.” Kylo shifted his weight, now disgruntled. “Miss Tico is right and I hope you won’t allow men to harm you in any capacity in the future.”
We decided to go to the park for a walk again. It was a neutral public place that would free me from any awkward close encounters. I sat on a bench next to Kylo near the fountain where kids were crawling into it only to be chastised by their parents. The wind gently pulled on my hair and I quickly smoothed it around my neck again to hide the bruise.

It was another beautiful sunny day. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath, savoring the good weather. The oppressive summer would come around again soon enough and I would be covered in sweat the minute I walked out the door. Oh well. At least the hospital was air conditioned.

I opened an eye a sliver to look at Kylo and was surprised to see him with his eyes closed as well. His jaw was set tight, though, and I noticed a telltale trembling in his left pocket. His brow was drawn together in a scowl; not at all peaceful like mine. I pulled together my courage.

“You’re shaking,” I said.

He blinked, glancing down at his hand like I had. “It happens from time to time. A side effect of my medication, unfortunately.”

“Oh…” I shrank down, embarrassed for bringing it up. “Sorry.”

Kylo laughed. “I don’t mind.” He withdrew his hand and frowned at it as the trembling tapered off. “It is a bit of a bother, though. I avoid taking it on days I’m performing surgery.”

I twisted my fingers. “I’ve been meaning to ask you something else, if it’s okay.”

“Well…” I winced, too awkward to look at him. “I haven’t been with a ton of men but you’re sort of… different. It’s hard to explain. Or it’s easy to explain but hard to say out loud.”

A golden retriever ran by to catch a frisbee in midair and the owner praised him from afar as he ran back proudly carrying it in his mouth. Kylo was leaning back and watching them with interest.

“I’m assuming you’re referring to our little closet adventure,” he said, raising his eyebrows at me and smiling. I wished I could disappear into the bench but I nodded stiffly. “I wondered why you avoided me afterwards. Did I frighten you?”

“…Only a teensy bit. But it wasn’t terrifying or anything like that. I was surprised.”

“Ah.” He puckered his lips, gazing off into the distance again. “Yes, I suppose I’m different from most men you’ve met. Stronger, too, apparently. You bruise like a ripe peach.”

My expression soured. “Easy for you to say. I like that you’re not the same, though.”

Kylo smirked and closed his eyes again. “I’m glad.”

We went to his house a while later around five to have dinner with his family. I felt much better on the drive there than I had in weeks—it was nice to get all of my concerns out in the open. Only one thing hung heavy on my mind now: the disappearance of Dr. Lewis. Her husband and kids must have been beside themselves wondering what happened to her.

I watched the landscape passing by. “Do you think Dr. Lewis is okay?”

“I certainly hope so,” Kylo said. “It’s only been a week so we shouldn’t despair quite yet.”

“That Armie tech is suspicious. I want to talk to him just to—”
Kylo suddenly grabbed my thigh, smiling tightly. His hand almost closed around my whole leg. “No more police work, Miss Kenobi. Remember?”

“It’s only a couple of questions. If he isn’t guilty he won’t have anything to hide.” I winced and laughed a bit. “You’re going to leave a mark again if you’re not careful and Rose only offers one second chance.”

He slackened his grip. “We’re bringing you to the lab for a blood test tomorrow afternoon. I can’t have you bruising every time I touch you in the slightest, or Miss Tico will be very upset if you decide to spend the night with me. What do you think? Von Willebrand’s? Bernard-Soulier syndrome?”

*Spend the night?* I blinked stupidly at him, not answering for an awkward span of time, and he casually glanced at me to encourage a response. My cheeks burned and I looked down at my hands.

“Must be something,” I mumbled.

The Solos were already waiting at his house. To my relief, they were dressed much more casually and gave me a warmer welcome. Anna had already made dinner and it was in the formal dining room on pretty porcelain plates. Mr. Solo was still quiet but his wife was even more energized than she had been the day before. She rattled off questions, only stopping when Jaina insisted.

They were nice people, though: all were well-spoken and polite. Kylo sat beside his stoic father and sipped his wine with lidded eyes while he watched me talking with his mother and sisters. Mrs. Solo had blue eyes but the rest were all the same greyish shade that Kylo had.

The men went outside and Breha took a phone call from one of her friends. Mrs. Solo went to join her husband and son so and Anna refused to let Jaina and I help clean the table up. She kept glancing at me from the corner of her eye but she seemed better than the day before. She’d probably seen the bruise on the back of my neck when I got out of the shower.

Jaina and I went in the living room to drink coffee and chat. She was almost my age but there were nearly ten years between each of the Solo siblings. Their parents had to be fairly old.

“I’m sorry my mother is so scattered,” Jaina said, rolling her eyes. “She already told all of her friends at the symposium about you. No pressure, though.”

“None at all?” I set down my mug and leaned back. “It’s okay; I’m just happy she likes me. If you don’t mind my asking, how old are your parents? They look really young.”

“They kind of are—both are fifty-one. They had Kylo when they were 16 and he was a nightmare. He’s nice now but it took forever for him to straighten out. Thankfully mom was patient with him because dad definitely wouldn’t have put up with it.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Seriously? He’s so calm… I wouldn’t think he’d be a bad kid.”

Jaina almost choked on her coffee from laughter. “He was the worst! Of course, I don’t remember too much but he was ten when I was born and I got to witness the teenage years. In elementary school he was quiet and drew a lot. In high school he did a one-eighty. He was always sneaking out, drinking; he had a new girlfriend every week. He still got good grades and played football but he was always in trouble.”

Huh. I couldn’t picture Kylo screwing around like that. Then again, I didn’t know him very well yet.
“He stopped when he went to college, then?” I asked.

“None of us really know. He went away to school and didn’t say anything about it, but I have my doubts. I don’t think he slowed down until he turned thirty and realized it was inappropriate.” Jaina ran a hand through her dark hair, suddenly distant. “That’s all behind him now.”

I smiled and slowly drank my coffee, mulling over Jaina’s words.
Two months passed with no sign of Dr. Lewis.

The police sent out notices and stopped by the hospital a few more times to continue their investigation, but from what they could tell she had simply vanished. It weighed heavy on everyone to lose her—she was well-liked and a capable doctor. A temporary medical examiner was brought in to cover the slack but he was much less sociable and kept to himself.

That ground my own personal investigation into the rabies cases and Lake Mead murders to a halt. The new M.E. was taciturn and I convinced myself I was only doing the right thing by keeping my nose out of it. Kylo was right. I had to leave that job up to the police and keep my fingers crossed.

Our relationship blossomed like I had hoped. There were no more incidents with bruises or indecent drunkenness and Rose grew to genuinely like Kylo’s company. I had two lives: one with Kylo going to fancy dinners and drinking wine with him and his family, and another with the other interns acting like any other woman my age. The two didn’t mesh well.

Still, it was hard to be happy when Dr. Lewis was in flux somewhere in the world. I hoped she was safe and I wrestled with guilt—was it my fault she had disappeared?

It was May and I was on the final leg of the evening shift. I’d decided to stay in oncology with Dr. Holdo, who was always teaching me useful tools to become an internist. My patient, Miss Denise Hawkins, had an aggressive form of brain cancer and had slipped into a coma. She was only 22 but thankfully she had plenty of family visiting her every day. Her mother and father alternated sleeping over on weekends in the event she woke up.

Technically the nurses could handle checking her but I wanted to. I’d spoken with Denise a few times before she went under and I hoped I would be present when she came to again. I set my chart aside and adjusted her pillows and blanket, pleased to see she had been cleaned up well already.

“You’re still here, Dr. Kenobi?”

I looked up to see Dr. Holdo peering into the room, looking at me over her glasses. She was frowning like she was disapproving of me sticking around when I should’ve been out the door already. I blinked at her guiltily and stepped back from Miss Hawkins’ bed with my hands clasped behind my back.

“Er… yeah,” I said. “Kylo—I mean, Dr. Ren—isn’t ready to leave yet and I go home with him. I wanted to come check on Miss Hawkins again before I got my things together.”

Dr. Holdo nodded. “Ah, right. Well the interns are in whenever you’re ready to leave. Have a nice weekend, Dr. Kenobi.”
“You too!”

When she left I went back to adjusting Miss Hawkins and finally stopped when I was happy with the results. I got my chart and bade her goodnight before turning to leave the room.

The tech from the morgue was standing in the doorway—Armitage Hux. He had a jacket on but his scrubs were visible underneath, streaked with blood, and he had a cigarette hanging out of his mouth. His hair was shaggy and red and he was tall and lanky. A smile twisted his lips.

“Prunin’ your vegetables?” he drawled in a thick Southern accent.

I stiffened. “Excuse me?”

Armie cocked his head and bared his teeth in an unpleasant grin. “I betcha she’ll be on the slab by the end of next week, and when I’m cuttin’ through her guts I’ll think of you.”

It was getting darker in Denise’s room and only the glow of her life support illuminated us. My hands clenched into fists around my chart, trembling with rage. That smile. It was a grin of the shameless; a beacon of latent psychopathy. He had done it. I could tell.

“What did you do to Beverly?” I demanded.

He puckered his lips. “Me? Nothin’.” Then he leaned closer, conspiratorial, and put a hand to the side of his mouth to whisper. “The boss gets off on the ladies.”

I took a small step back, horrified. There were two of them? Of course Armie wasn’t the brains behind the operation. Beverly told me he was sort of incompetent knowledge-wise, but very good at working with the cadavers. I needed to go to the police and give them a tip. Was she still alive? Would he be coming after me next? He had to be connected to the bodies in Lake Mead and the rabies patients.

“Is everything alright, Miss Kenobi?”

Armie turned and I could see Kylo standing in the hallway with his bag and mine. His hair was mussed from taking off his surgery cap and he ran a hand through it, glancing between the morgue tech and I. We went home together most nights now.

I pointed at Armie, emboldened by Kylo’s presence. “He admitted he took Dr. Lewis! I told you he did! And he insulted Miss Hawkins, which should get him some kind of suspension.”

“You’ve got an annoyin’ fucking voice,” Armie said. “Pretty soon you’ll be—”

Kylo was very suddenly looming over him with a taut smile that even unnerved me. Armue shrank back, leaning on the doorframe for support, and I saw fear in his eyes that seemed out of place.

“There’s no need to be rude, Mr. Hux,” Kylo murmured. “If you make light of a patient in a coma again and it reaches my ears, you will suffer much worse things than losing your job.” His grey eyes flickered to me and he beckoned. “Come along, Rey. It’s late.”

“I’m telling the police,” I hissed toward Armie, gathering my things from Kylo.

The tech tightened his jaw, still nervous around my boyfriend. “Go ahead, they already investigated me and my apartment. I didn’t do shit.”

Kylo wouldn’t let me stay and argue. He pulled me into the elevator, laughing when I angrily
folded my arms and turned away from him. I’d tell the police again and demand they research Armie Hux more deeply. He did it. I didn’t know if he kept Dr. Lewis alive or killed her already, but he was guilty.

I was fuming. “Did you hear him? He said his boss gets the ladies. He’s probably got some pit where he keeps women like fucking Buffalo Bill. I’m not letting Beverly sit there forever. I’m telling the police they need to investigate further and figure out where he’s hiding her.”

“Mr. Hux is an instigator, not a serial killer,” Kylo replied dismissively. He brushed a few strands of hair from my face and cupped my chin. “Ignore him. Why don’t we celebrate the weekend with wine at my home? We can watch a movie.”

The doors opened and we stepped out onto the first floor, waving to people who said goodnight. My irritation melted away and I giggled on our way out the door.

“From what I remember, that’s a high school code phrase for heavy petting,” I teased.

“How unfortunate for you.”

“Easy words for a woman to say,” Kylo scoffed mirthfully, unlocking his Audi. He leaned on the roof to look at me on the other side. “As we all know, the power to decide if consensual sex will happen lies with the woman, because most men wouldn’t turn the opportunity down.” He scratched his chin, squinting at the sky. “Consequently, I don’t recall ever rejecting a woman.”

I rolled my eyes and leaned on my side of the car but had to balance on my tiptoes. “Don’t lump me in with them. I lost my virginity in undergrad because Rose introduced me to her friend and I was too afraid to turn him down. The principle still stands.”

“Well that’s because you’re a people pleaser,” Kylo said, smirking. “A dangerous personality fault.”

We got into the car and I fiercely defended my reluctance to hurt a person’s feelings. It was a big reason why I became a doctor—I liked to make people feel better and restoring their health was a fast track to that. Kylo only laughed and drove, blowing off my offended smacks to his arm like they were nothing.

The cicadas sang outside when we pulled up outside of Kylo’s house. I followed him inside, texting Rose to let her know I would be out late, and I noticed Kylo was texting someone as well. He slipped his phone back into his pocket and hung our jackets on the backs of the chairs in the kitchen.

“What are we watching?” I chirped. “Something cute? Something scary?”

“Let’s change first.” Kylo walked toward the stairs, taking off his scrub top along the way to show he was wearing a form-fitting white t-shirt underneath. “I’m sure you’d like to be out of your scrubs as well, Miss Kenobi? It would be more comfortable.”

I blinked and hurried up the stairs after him past the other bedrooms to the end of a long hall. Kylo opened the door to let me in—I still hadn’t seen the master bedroom—and I was surprised to find it sparsely decorated. The bed was enormous and the carpet was soft under my feet but the only other décor was a television and a bookshelf that spanned the opposite wall. The bathroom door was shut, as was the sliding glass door leading out to the balcony overlooking the wilderness.
Kylo continued to strip and I turned away, burning with embarrassment. Drawers opened and shut and I heard him click his tongue thoughtfully. It was quiet before I felt a hand touch my shoulder to turn me around, putting me back in full view of him. He was in a looser black t-shirt and grey sweatpants, offering me another pair of sweatpants and a blue linen shirt to wear.

I accepted them, relieved he wasn’t going to try undressing me. “These don’t match.”

“Don’t worry too much. They won’t be on you for very long.”

Then he was gone, leaving me to get changed. I looked down at the clothes in my hands before I did so, wondering just how far I was willing to go. It had been two months… that was long enough to wait.

Kylo was in the living room downstairs browsing through a cupboard below the television for a movie to watch. He’d drawn all the blinds to block out any prying eyes and already had two glasses of wine on the table. I crept to my seat and he glanced over his shoulder at me.

“Anything you’d like in particular?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Whatever is fine with me. I like horror movies.”

A disconcerting smile spread across his lips but I assumed it was to play up the horror aspect. “Do you?” He looked back at the DVDs. “Give me parameters. Do you mean Silence of The Lambs frightening or do you mean The Exorcist frightening? Personally, I like Last House On The Left or I Spit On Your Grave. I suppose I don’t scare easily from the usual gore after picking around in brains for a decade.”

The last movie clicked in my head. “Ooo, Rose told me about that last one! Let’s watch it.”

Kylo ran a hand through his hair and didn’t look at me. “Are you sure? It can be fairly unpleasant and I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“It’s fine,” I said. “I’m sure I’ve seen worse.”

Half an hour into the movie, I was beginning to understand why Kylo had a hang up about watching it. I curled closer to him as it progressed and held the front of his shirt tight in my hands, conjuring the scathing review I would give to Rose when I went home. What the hell was wrong with her?! She told me it was shocking but nothing I couldn’t handle.

Beside me, Kylo was stone still. He had an arm around me and his wine was in his other hand, which he occasionally sipped from like he didn’t have a care in the world. My pulse was moving quicker than normal but his was plodding away beneath my ear when I hid my face in his chest.

His fingers slipped underneath the shirt and curled around my ribs. Both grey eyes were riveted to the movie as he took another sip of his wine. “If you don’t watch, you’ll miss the resolution.”

“This is horrible,” I groaned, wincing when I heard another scream. “This isn’t even a movie; it’s just glorifying rape culture with unnecessarily graphic scenes. It shouldn’t be legal.”

“Rape culture, hm?” Kylo shifted and twisted his neck, still watching the movie with intent interest. He finished his wine and kissed me on the forehead a bit too hard. “Excuse me for a moment, Miss Kenobi. I forgot to take my medication earlier and I know you like to watch my tremors.”

“Very funny!” I called when he walked up the stairs.
Ugh, what a disgusting movie. I made a face and crossed my arms but didn’t get up to turn it off. It had to be almost half over either way, and Kylo apparently didn’t mind it. In fact, he said he liked it. How he could stomach watching such a thing and enjoy it was beyond me.

I took out my cell phone to text Rose while the movie continued to play in the pressing darkness. She was still up—they hadn’t gone out to Vegas for the night but Isaac had come over to hang out. Neither of them mentioned anything but most of us were pretty sure they would be an item soon.

My date was taking a while. I lolled around on the couch waiting for him to return while the minutes ticked by. Rose texted me back a couple of times. She was too busy on her own date to hold a real conversation. Bored, I laid back to stick my legs up in the air over my head and admire my nail polish. I was damn good. If I hadn’t had my heart set on being a doctor I would’ve made a great beautician.

The coffee table beside the couch was abruptly shoved away, toppling over on its side with a loud bang. The glass shattered and spilled wine across the carpet. A hand seized one of my ankles before I could sit up and I shrieked when I was dragged onto the floor, making my phone fly out of my hand. I squirmed while people screamed in the background.

Kylo was standing over me holding my legs tight in both hands. He stared down at me blankly and I back up at him, utterly mystified. His t-shirt was gone but it was too dark to make anything out other than what the flickering light from the TV showed me. All I could see were two cold grey eyes and that his hair had been mussed. He looked… different.

A glib smile touched his mouth and he knelt between my thighs, creeping forward to place his hands on either side of my head. I knew my eyes were popping out of my head but I couldn’t help it. The movie played on to our left and I waited to see what he was going to do. I was frozen solid.

He leaned closer, trapping me in his stormy gaze. “I’m very different from any man you’ve met before, Rey.”

I restarted back as far as I could into the floor and Kylo found the TV remote on the floor. He restarted the move from the second chapter, which was right before a particularly gruesome scene, and his long fingers were working through the buttons on my shirt. I swallowed hard and dug my nails into the carpet. It was like Patrick all over again, fumbling over me in my dark dorm room.

Everything wasn’t the same, though. The panting and sobbing from the movie seemed to egg Kylo on and he kissed me aggressively, hardly giving me time to react. I squirmed underneath him when his hands were on my breasts but still couldn’t find the courage to voice my discomfort. He was everywhere in a way I had never imagined and I felt so trapped I thought I was going to cry.

“Are you too afraid to say no?” he whispered into my ear. He balanced his weight on his forearm and his free hand slipped between my legs. “Or do you just want to make me happy?”

It wasn’t what I had pictured for our first night together. It all happened quickly but seemed to last forever, and I clung to his back during the ordeal. I protested timidly when I realized he didn’t have a condom but he carried on anyhow and soon I didn’t care anymore. I fell apart like a cheap toy while the woman in the background wailed and the men laughed.
The carpet was rubbing me raw. It always felt so nice when I walked over it but laying on my back it adopted a whole different feeling that was far from pleasant. The shirt was gone and I was naked underneath Kylo with the movie glowing to our left, dimly illuminating the living room. His face was buried in my neck and his groans were lost in my hair with each aggressive thrust. I couldn’t see him. All I could do was clutch his back and absorb the confusing cacophony of sensation.

He restarted the movie more times than I could count. I was too exhausted to right myself when he draped me over the arm of the couch on my stomach and grabbed my hips to drag me back to him. He was rough like I had imagined—when I tried looking away from the movie he leaned across my back to turn my head to face it, keeping a hand knotted in my hair to make sure I didn’t move.

It was an eternity of conflicting pleasure and fear. No words left his lips until he had returned me to sitting on the couch and knelt between my legs. I’d sworn off oral sex long ago but he held my thighs firmly and propped me up with a pillow, and I fell apart again for the hundredth time. I closed my eyes and turned away from the movie and he spoke in a gravelly tone I didn’t recognize.

“Watch.” He squeezed my thighs, cold grey eyes demanding. “Watch it.”

I did what I was told, hot and uncomfortable, until we switched positions. One of his hands cupped a new glass of wine and the other was tangled in my hair around the back of my head, guiding my mouth up and down his length in slow, steady motions. When I coughed or paused he would shush me but never fully stopped. His lidded grey eyes were trained on the movie and he sipped his wine, smiling into the glass when the woman screamed.

The echo of her shrieking ripped me out of my dream and into reality. I struggled under the heavy sheets in sheer terror and scrambled out of them, quickly brushing my hair out of my face. My pulse throbbed in my ears as I caught my breath and the screaming faded into indistinct ringing. Panting, I swallowed hard and looked down at my trembling hands. Pain pulsed between my legs.

I was a bundle of nerves. The slightest touch or surprise would kill me. Reeling from my memories I ran a hand through my mussed hair and looked around the quiet bedroom. It was Kylo’s, not the one I had slept in when he was my designated driver. The sun was shining and birds were twittering outside and I unwillingly looked to my left to see what I had somewhat dreaded.

Kylo was lying beside me on his stomach, eyes closed in the peaceful embrace of sleep. The sheets were down to his lower back and I could see the marks I had left: little crescents from my nails when I was frantically clinging to him. His muscular arms were under his head and hugging his pillow.
In the living room he finishes in my mouth while the heroine is being gang raped. I try to pull away to spit it out but he tightens his grip on my hair and pinches my nose, covering my mouth, grey eyes hungry. It’s either breathe or choke. I cough into his palm and tears bead in my eyes as I swallow it, the first time I’ve ever done so, and it tastes horrible.

He shoves me away and I fall on my butt, precariously close to the glass. Kylo finishes his wine and looms over me, then tosses it so it shatters somewhere in the darkness. I flinch and just stare as he kneels between my legs and roughly turns me on my stomach. His fingers curl around my throat.

“Good girl,” he whispers. He props my hips up, somehow hard again. “Stay nice and still.”

It had all been real, then, not the product of the movie. I stared blankly at the slumbering man who had been entirely right when he said he wasn’t like any man I’d ever met before. How I felt, I still wasn’t sure. It was a lot to digest and I didn’t want my gut feeling of fear to overwhelm me. He was different, not bad. Some men liked feet, others… others liked watching graphic rape scenes repeatedly.

Unnerved, I slipped out of bed to go to the bathroom and see the extent of the damage. Thankfully he hadn’t left any marks other than some hickies on the insides of my thighs. I turned my back to the mirror and looked over my shoulder to see an ugly rug burn had formed from our brief time on the floor. His bathroom was bigger than the others and had both a shower with an opaque glass door and a huge bathtub with stairs leading up to it. I looked around until my eyes settled on the counter.

I’d been so concerned with making sure I was still in one piece that I hadn’t noticed the array of orange pill bottles strewn on the counter. My eyes widened and I stepped back. There was a needle with a bead of liquid at the end, unlabeled and lying beside the capsule of medication it belonged to. Six bottles… at least six bottles with different colored pills and one even had powder. It wasn’t meant to be seen. I peered into the bedroom, heart pounding, and grabbed each one to read the labels. Ativan, Geodon, Elavil, Prozac, Valproate, Lopressor… the vial contained Haldol. Shaking, I picked up the powder and covered my mouth—it was lithium carbonate. I dropped it and opened the cabinet to find one more bottle resting on a shelf with the label visible: Clozapine.

Benzodiazepines, first and second generation antipsychotics, antidepressants, mood stabilizers, even a fucking beta blocker: and two of the drugs that had been found in the Lake Mead bodies. But what connected all of them? I wasn’t a pharmacist but I knew my drugs fairly well. Only one thing could connect them unless Kylo had a serious disease.

Aggression control. Serious aggression control. Any one of them could counteract another and kill him in an instant and he was apparently selecting the combination he figured had the lowest chance of doing that. Had he injected himself with Haldol when I was in the living room?

The most important thing was to distance myself from the evidence. I made a mental note of all the medications and hurried through the bedroom and downstairs to look for my phone. I had to tell Rose. If there was any chance Kylo was tied to what I had uncovered he might notice I had seen his stash of pills. I was only in his shirt and my panties, searching high and low for my cell phone.

“Rey?”

I spun around to see Anna standing near me, frowning. Her hair was up in a high ponytail and she had gloves on—I must have interrupted her cleaning.

“Thank god,” I breathed. “Have you seen my phone?” I knelt down on the floor to look under the
couch. “I need to call Rose and ask her to come pick me up.”

“Is something wrong?” Anna asked.

Damn, where the hell had I thrown it? I sat up and leaned against the couch. It couldn’t hurt to tell Anna what I had seen. She probably already knew and maybe she could explain it to me. I had to be wrong. Kylo wasn’t involved in anything horrible.

“I found this whole trove of pills in Kylo’s bathroom,” I said. “Two of them were in the girls they found in Lake Mead over the past decade, and most of them are hard to get. Do you know why he has them? Are any of them yours, maybe? I don’t want to jump to conclusions yet.”

Anna gasped in horror. “Oh, please don’t think Mr. Ren has anything to do with that! Those are all mine—my parents are very sick—and I can’t afford them, so he gets them for me. He must have accidentally spilled them when he was getting his medication last night. I try to put it in front but sometimes he doesn’t notice it. He’s a very good man, Miss Kenobi.”

She was lying but I didn’t want to say it. I pretended to accept her excuse and wondered what the hell I should do next. The shock had worn off that Kylo had a collection of pills that would get him a small fortune on the street. Anna was covering for him so she was in on it. What were they hiding? The bridge between Lake Mead and the rabies?

Where the hell was my cell phone? Long after Anna had left I was still creeping around looking for it. I needed to leave and clear my head but I couldn’t until I called Rose. Frantic, I scrambled to my feet and turned to go look upstairs. Maybe I’d brought it to bed with me but didn’t remember.

I immediately bumped into Kylo. He was only wearing a pair of sweatpants and steadied me when I nearly fell over, laughing at my poor motor control. His hair was still mussed and he looked sleepy and that made him even more attractive. No, he couldn’t be responsible for so much heartbreak. He was a good doctor and a good person and his family was so nice.

He pins me down in his bed on my stomach again. He likes that position. I swallow hard and stare at the wall and shudder when he prods for entrance where I really don’t want him. His warm breath is in my hair, hitching with each slow thrust; I’m so nervous that I fidget. It hurts. My body flinches.

Kylo growls like a dog. “Don’t move. Take it.”

Finally, I find my voice, small and weak. “But… it…”

“Shh. Shut the fuck up.” He pushes hard and I almost start crying. “You like being fucked in the ass, don’t you?”

I bury my face in the pillow and the tears come. No. Please stop.

“It’s seven in the morning, love,” Kylo murmured, smoothing my hair away from my face. “What has you so nervous, hm?” He wrapped his arms around me and kissed my forehead. “I was hoping we could spend more time in bed together, but if you’re hungry I can ask Miss Prost to make breakfast.”

No, no, no; I had to be wrong. It was crazy. I swallowed hard and leaned against his chest. For now I needed to relax and act normal. Hopefully Anna didn’t say anything to Kylo.

“I’m fine,” I mumbled. “I just lost my phone.”

“Miss Prost will find it sooner or later.” He sighed, perching his chin on my head. “I accidentally
broke our glasses last night and spilled wine on the floor. Such a travesty.”

Maybe it was better to run like hell. He was far away from any semblance of society but… well… I could run kind of fast. I glanced at his legs when we went back upstairs. No, he was obviously much more athletic than me. His fingers were knitted loosely through mine and his touch was gentle. I had to be wrong. I wanted to be wrong. He might’ve been prescribed all of them.

But that meant he was beyond unstable. It wasn’t fair to judge someone simply for a medication they took but when tied in with the previous night, I found it to be a perfectly valid concern. He was rough almost to the point of sadism. My throat tightened. Would that be my next discovery?

We went to bed together again and my worries faded away. Kylo was far tenderer, which did nothing to strengthen my resolve to tell Rose what I had seen. He kissed along my neck and I reminded myself he would lose his license if he was caught with an illegal stash of pills. It wasn’t right—I would act like I hadn’t seen anything but keep my eyes peeled for any other suspicious activity.

He paused briefly to reach into the nightstand beside his bed for what I assumed was a condom. I squirmed impatiently underneath him and debated bringing that point from last night up.

“Close your eyes, Miss Kenobi,” he murmured.

I did so, squeezing down to keep them shut. There was a vague jangling noise and Kylo returned, taking both of my wrists to place them near the wrought iron headboard of the bed. I frowned a bit and started to ask what he was doing when I felt the cold bite of steel around my wrists.

My eyes flew open as Kylo was slipping away from me with a beastly smile on his mouth. I looked back to see he had looped the chain of the handcuffs around the poster to keep me trapped. Bewildered, I looked back at him and struggled to sit up. He was walking into the bathroom.

“Are you… are you playing some kind of game?” I called feebly. I tugged on the restraints while the sinking feeling in my stomach plunged.

A cabinet closed and Kylo reemerged with a long needle beading with a clear liquid. I stopped breathing, scrambling as far away as the handcuffs would allow and pleading with him to tell me what was going on. It was a game. It had to be a game. Kylo would never hurt someone deliberately. We were doctors: we wanted to heal people, not torture them.

He stepped up to the side of the bed and I started screaming, terrified and praying Anna would hear. Kylo didn’t bother trying to shut me up, whistling and flicking the barrel of the needle to get the air bubbles out. He took the cap off with his teeth and spat it out on the floor.

“I warned you to stop playing detective,” he sighed, jabbing the needle into my squirming thigh. “Don’t fret. Just a bit of Klonopin.”

I strained the cuffs and shrieked like the girl in the movie. Tears flowed down my cheeks as he lovingly brushed my hair away from my face. Oh my god—was I having a fucking nightmare?

Kylo tossed the needle in the trash. “Miss Prost, prepare the OR.” His gaze shifted back to me. “Miss Kenobi is ready to join us.”

The room twisted together and the last thing I saw was Anna peering inside and nodding before darkness swallowed me.
Tranquil

Chapter Notes

this is a very mild glimpse into the next like six chapters.
to warn y'all, graphic surgeries etc., are coming up.

“Rey! Rey!” Scraping; desperate fingernails on metal. “Oh my god, Rey, please wake up!”

That voice… I groaned feebly and clutched my head, still reeling from whatever medication had
knocked me out. The floor underneath me was stiff and cold and my nails clicked against it as I
pushed myself into a sitting position. I wobbled and braced myself, blindly groping for something
to hold onto, and scratched at a cold metal wall. Bewildered, I blinked out of my stupor.

It was pitch black and freezing. I crawled forward on my hands and knees to realize there was a
chain link door in front of me, and I backtracked to figure out I was in a cage. My heart seized in
fear and I turned in circles to figure out how much room I had. Six feet by six feet… I was in a
dog pen.

All around me were quiet sobs and sniffles that echoed in the darkness. I swallowed hard and
looked down—I was completely naked with only a green blanket in the corner of the cage and a
pillow. Two silver bowls were attached to the cage from the outside and one had water while the
other had some kind of mashed white material. Mashed potatoes?

Tears gathered in my eyes and I grabbed the blanket to cover myself, petrified. It was scratchy and
stiff. My neighbor was banging on her cage to catch my attention. She knew I was panicking.

“All right, it’s me!” she croaked. “Beverly. Whatever you do, don’t drink the water. He laces it with
some kind of tranquilizer to keep all of us half-conscious.” She sounded terrible; drained and
exhausted. “You were right all along but we were looking in the wrong place. He’s working with
that horrible Anna woman and the tech—Armitage Hux. I put the pieces together and Armie came
after me.”

I covered my head with my hands. “I fell for it. I saw all the pills in his bathroom and…” Wincing
at the bad memory, I steadied my voice. “How many people are here?”

“Ten including us. They’re all women, but sometimes Armie brings men for himself. Listen, he’s
going to come for you to perform a surgery and I wanted you to know beforehand because no one
told me. It’s unbearable.” Her tone broke and she started crying. “I want to go home to my boys
and my husband… and he’s never going to let me go back to them.”

“Beverly, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry. I never meant—”

A metallic groan a ways away made my heart patter faster and I skittered towards the back of my
cage, wedging myself in the corner. I heard multiple footsteps on the concrete and I shrank down
to disappear into the darkness. The women wailed more loudly and I could hear some of them
flinging themselves against their cages, shrieking for freedom. What kind of surgery was Beverly
talking about?
Harsh fluorescent lights came to life overhead and I flinched. The people stopped in front of me and the door was opened with a creak. I stared at the opening and the three sets of legs and heard a distinct girly giggle as the person in the middle slowly squatted down in front of the cage.

Kylo was in scrubs and had a surgical mask hanging around his neck. He smiled when I violently threw myself against the back wall of the cage, struggling to escape somehow; anyhow. The people on his sides shifted and were silent while he checked the bowl of food and water that had been left for me like I was some kind of dog. He puckered his lips and his grey gaze flickered back to me.

“Not hungry, love?” he cooed, tilting his head. “That’s fine. If you refuse to eat, I can always tube feed you. And I’m assuming Mrs. Lewis told you about our little water secret? You won’t be starving yourself to freedom, Miss Kenobi. I want to keep you. Permanently.”

“You won’t!” I snapped. It was hard to fight the tears and they poured down my cheeks. “I’ll get the truth out, whatever it takes, and I’ll get everyone else out of here, too!”

“Most of them are gonna be dead by the end of the week,” Armie drawled.

“No one leaves,” Anna said in a hollow voice.

The women wailed and rattled their cages and Kylo rolled his eyes. He leaned forward and I realized with terror that he was coming for me. I lashed out but still tried to keep the blanket around myself and that made a major weakness. He grabbed my ankles and dragged me out of the cage, kicking and screaming like a madwoman while Anna watched with her hands clasped together. Armie was making rounds by the cages, pounding on them and shouting for the girls to shut up.

Kylo wrestled with me on the ground, tearing away the blanket so I was naked again underneath him. He seized my throat and slammed my head into the floor. Black spots erupted across my vision and I woozily grappled with him until I felt so faint I had to stop.

It happened quickly. It was to strike fear into the population. He flipped me over on my stomach and held my head down with one hand, sinking inside me before I could get my bearings. A small but shrill scream tore out of my throat and I scratched desperately at the floor until I could feel my nails breaking. Kylo leaned across my back, grasping my hip and ruthlessly taking me.

Anna looked down at her hands and I could tell she was trembling, but Armie glared at the wall. He’d mentioned his ‘boss’ liked women and he didn’t. I squeezed my eyes shut when Kylo’s hand slipped between my legs. Was Armie jealous?

I slumped on the floor when he was finished, shivering miserably. Beverly had her head between her knees and was covering her ears and all the other women had returned to sniffling in their cages. Kylo got to his feet, standing over me with Anna and Armie while he readjusted his pants. I curled into a semicolon shape and shielded my head with my arms. I’d never been more humiliated in my life.

“We’ll cauterize her and destroy half of the group,” Kylo said. “They’ll have to be dissolved—the police will be on edge when they learn she’s gone missing and we don’t want to take any risks. Miss Prost, I’ll need your help during surgery. Mr. Hux, give the others their Klonopin.”

Armie shot me a dirty look. “Why don’t you wanna kill this one, too? We can give her rabies and turn her loose like we did with the other ones. C’mom, the cops around here are a bunch of morons.” He stepped closer to Kylo and touched his arm. “We work good together, right?”
Kylo scooped me off the floor bridal style and my teeth chattered together from fear. Anna was biting her nails. She didn’t look like she wanted any part of it. I shut my eyes. I couldn’t look anymore.

“Don’t question me, Armitage,” Kylo said coldly.

We were moving but I was still too much of a coward to look. Another door opened and closed, lights turned on, and I was placed on something soft but unyielding. He put my wrists in straps and did the same to my ankles and I hesitantly opened my eyes.

It was a dark mockery of an OR. There were surgical instruments everywhere, including a table beside my table with a scalpel and other supplies. An IV drip and other monitoring machines were pushed against the walls out of the way and there were cabinets everywhere, including a refrigerator. I whimpered in terror, too catatonic to do much else while Kylo circled the table, pulling his mask up.

He pulled on gloves that snapped against his skin and opened an IV starter. “This shouldn’t take too long. If you’re going to become a permanent guest, I don’t want to risk pregnancy.” He tied a ribbon around my elbow tightly and deftly pricked the starter into my vein.

“What do you mean?” I asked hoarsely as he attached the IV tube.

“Tubal litigation. What else?” He raised an eyebrow and turned to gather a few machines, completely at ease. “Most of the women here are cauterized if they will be with me for an extended period of time. For the others, any pregnancy will be terminated when I kill them.” He was hooking me up to the monitors, placing different nodes. “Abortions are far messier than spaying.”

“You can’t!” I squirmed in my restraints, crying again. “Please don’t! Let me go and I won’t say anything to anyone. I’ll quit! I’ll move east and you’ll never hear from me again.”

Kylo started up the monitor that I recognized from the hospital. My vital signs appeared and he studied them for a few moments without saying anything before walking away again. He returned with a long needle in his hand that he calmly screwed into the IV’s receptor but didn’t inject. This wasn’t happening. I was in a nasty nightmare. He wasn’t going to sterilize me.

“You’re far too valuable to throw away,” he said. He draped a sheet across me and picked up a marker from the tray to make marks on my lower abdomen. “I’m going to keep you. I’ve spent so many years cycling through so many men and women that I imagined I would never… settle down. But I don’t want to draw attention to myself or the deaths. You will suffice and fill the void the pills seem to miss.”

“The police will come straight here! Rose knows this was the last place I stayed!”

He shrugged. “And I will be gracious and allow them to tour my home, and I will shed tears when they befit the situation. You will be here learning how to behave properly. None of the others grasp the concept but I think you’ll learn soon enough.”

I couldn’t move an inch. So many questions were running through my mind that I knew he would never answer. Mainly, I wanted to know why. His family was so welcoming and we all really got along. I never would’ve suspected anything was amiss, except for when Jaina looked vacant talking about their childhood. Kylo pulled up a chair to sit beside my head and his cheeks peeked over the mask in a smile.

My stomach turned. He’d sexually assaulted me in front of a group of people and had hardly
broken a sweat. Comparing his behavior with what Jaina had said, I knew I was dealing with an unrepentant psychopath. We’d learned about some mental health issues in med school and Kylo fit the bill.

Only a couple more weeks and I would have fallen in love with him. I’d scoffed when the professor talked about how women were sucked in by their charm and compliments. I didn’t understand how a person could be so blind—until I realized there was no blindness. Kylo obscured himself under a mask of composure that no one could see past. They saw the pretty face and extraordinary surgeon.

Even if I played the part and obeyed, there was no guarantee of escape. He was a sadist and my compliance would undoubtedly irritate him further. I stared blankly into his grey eyes. Why were the worst things wrapped in the best packaging? It was nature’s sick gimmick.

“Why?” I whispered.

Kylo frowned and placed a gloved hand on mine. “Why what, love?”

“Why… Why do you do this?”

The door opened and Anna slipped inside, now wearing pink scrubs and a mask as well. She stood beside the table with the surgical instruments and averted her eyes while Kylo stroked my fingers. He rose, turning to put his thumb on the plunger of the anesthesia needle.

“You’re going to fall asleep, Miss Kenobi,” he said. “Count backwards from ten.”

I didn’t get to eight.
Imprison

Chapter Notes

the next chapter will be EXTREMELY graphic. I will add a warning there, too.

an ice pick lobotomy will be performed and there will be several deaths and rape. just adding a warning here, too, so you can avoid it if you want to. it's not plot-essential, other than to point out how awful kylo is.

The anesthesia slipped me into a far sweeter dream than my last. There was no painful rubbing under my skin and dark sense of confusion—only warm sunshine on my back and my mother’s laughter in my ear. I’d never met her but sometimes I swore I could hear her voice. She was soft-spoken and gentle like my dad, and they were perfect for one another. That was why he cried late at night when I was supposed to be asleep in my bedroom. My birth had taken her from him.

Dad loved me all the same, though. He encouraged me every step of the way and listened when I cried during undergrad because I was afraid of holding lives in my hands. He was quiet and protective and he did what he could to give me the childhood any little girl would dream of.

It was hard seeing the other girls with their moms at the mall. Mothers would smile encouragingly at dad when he escorted me into the stores with bright colors and frilly skirts and makeup. He was never looking for someone to replace mom. Whenever I asked why, he would only smile. I was enough. We were enough, just the two of us in Sparks, and it was good.

And I was never going to see him again.

Dull throbbing pain in my abdomen drew me from the painful realization and I blinked slowly as I came to. The anesthesia was wearing off quick and I wanted another hit to keep me from confronting the truth yet again. My throat was dry and scratchy from screaming and I still couldn’t move my appendages. Grimacing, I lifted my head to look around the new room.

I stopped dead before I’d gotten a good look when I noticed Kylo sitting beside me. He’d taken off his surgical cap and mask as well as the gloves but was still in his scrubs. There was some blood streaked across them. He smiled at me when I blanched.

“Twenty minutes,” he said, delicately touching my hip. “You’ll need a week to recover fully and I don’t want you becoming hysterical, so the restraints will be necessary until you’re healed. After that I will return you to your new home and when you’ve broken enough, we’ll see what comes next.”

They hadn’t dressed me and I could see the ugly bruising around my scar. It was small. He had to have gotten his hands on a laparoscopic instrument. I felt the usual symptoms of post-op: bloating, fatigue, excessive thirst and a slight headache. I whimpered in discomfort and Kylo pouted his lower lip, rising from his chair to cup my cheek in his palm.

He’d taken my ability to have children; the basic tenant of my femininity. I’d never be able to experience pregnancy and feel a baby roll around in my womb. What a fucking monster.

I swallowed but my voice still rasped. “Please… let Beverly go…” Fuck, it felt like I’d swallowed
a bucket of nails. I strained to speak. “She has… kids… and a… husband…”

“You know I can’t do that,” he said. “I have to do a bit of… population control, and Dr. Lewis will need to be included in this cleansing.” He pressed his thumb to my lips, eyeing them hungrily. “I may dispose of all of them, actually. Mr. Hux can’t hunt for me with the authorities sniffing around and I have very high hopes for you, kitten.”

“Um… Mr. Ren?” interrupted a feeble and familiar voice.

Kylo stiffened and spun around on his heel to face the door of the room.

“What?” he snapped.

It wasn’t very big but it looked like a bedroom. I peered around while Anna stuttered out something about running low on Klonopin and Kylo barked back at her. The walls were painted a soothing shade of green and I was lying in a small bed with tan sheets. Unfortunately, the comfortable bed had leather restraints that secured my feet about a foot apart and my arms near my sides.

Mostly I could see the ceiling, which had been painted white. Another door was to my right and I figured it was a bathroom. Anna was standing in a steel doorframe that she scurried out of when Kylo was through chewing her out. She disappeared and the door slammed shut.

“You gave all of those people rabies?” I croaked. “Why?”

Kylo rolled his eyes and put his hands in his pockets. “To frighten you. I like fear—it brings out the most interesting facets of a person’s personality. They were all vagrants: easily disposable and hardly missed. Some of them I had for weeks, others I only possessed for a few days. You were quite right about Lake Mead as well. That was my doing and has been for the past decade.”

“Your family is nice… I don’t understand why you would hurt people.”

“Motives are an excuse and nothing more. Men and women like myself are born with intrinsic desires that do not mesh in our society of rules and regulations.” He sat down again, grey eyes distant. “Some of us are gifted with intelligence as well and we can carry out what needs to be done. If I didn’t torment women, I would be in a mental institution by now. The medication suppresses me during work.”

“You perform surgery on drugs?” I clarified.

“No. On those days, I need to skip my routine and invest in my captives. The trembling is a side effect of lithium and my own inability to control myself. I have always had difficulty with that.”

I couldn’t stop the tears running down my cheeks. “What do you do to them?”

He blinked like the question surprised him and rubbed his chin, thinking. “Whatever I have the inclination for. Sex, surgery, beating; whatever will make them scream.” His smile turned placid and he sighed. “The screaming pleases me.”

All those times we had chatted during lunch at work—I couldn’t believe I had been laughing along with a man who kept women in his basement. He’d killed plenty of them, too, but I didn’t think I wanted to know the exact number. I twisted my wrists in the restraints and turned away. The crazy people were supposed to have childhood traumas and bad parents and unstable homes.

Mrs. Solo was the sweetest woman I’d ever met. She was fond of me and we got along well, talking together with Jaina while Breha looked bored and texted her friends. Mr. Solo was stoic
like Kylo and they would sit in silence together, and I mistook that for camaraderie. Jaina had mentioned her father wouldn’t put up with Kylo’s behavior. Had he sensed what was in his son?

The room was much warmer than the common place where Kylo kept the other women. He rose from the chair again to go to the small bathroom and I heard water running. The cotton taste in my mouth worsened and I lifted my head slightly, hoping he was getting it for me. He reemerged and placed a clear cup on my nightstand, then leaned over me with his hands on either side of my head.

“T’m going to release you,” he said softly. “If you try anything, I will be forced to give you fluids intravenously and tube feed. You know how unpleasant those can be.”

I was too weak to escape, anyway. I nodded groggily and he set my wrists free before my ankles. The relief was immediate; my blood ebbed into the starved sections of flesh and I managed to sit up. Being naked around Kylo was still awkward and I covered my breasts with one arm, reaching for the water with the free hand. He sat down again, unreadable.

It was delicious and I didn’t consider whether or not he’d drugged it. If I had just come out of surgery it was highly unlikely and way too risky. Post-op patients had to take a few pills to stabilize their bodies again and I would need to start walking soon. The body slowed tremendously under anesthesia.

“Is there Klonopin in this?” I asked halfway through the cup.

Kylo looked offended. “Of course not. Killing you isn’t my intention, and keeping you in a haze isn’t, either. I numb Beverly because she sobs the most and it irritates me.” He smirked, gaze lingering on the arm covering my breasts. “Besides, I like listening to you speak coherently. You have a sweet voice.”

“What according to Armitage,” I muttered.

“Mr. Hux is jealous, I believe. He resents my attraction to women, and his unhealthy attachment to me keeps him loyal. Miss Prost concerns me, however. I drew her in quickly but I’m beginning to question her loyalty. She did tell me the moment you discovered my pills, though. It would have been unfortunate if you released that information to Dr. Gregoire or your father.”

“They help you with all of this? Why? What do they get out of it?”

He smiled and put his hands in the air, equally perplexed. “Love, perhaps. Or what they presume to be love, though they both understand my nature by now. I’ve been harsh on Miss Prost on several occasions, but Mr. Hux has never required such an intervention. Every six months or so I indulge his sexuality and it has kept him steadfast for three years now. Working alone is terribly difficult. I’m too busy to keep all of these women alive on my own.”

I blanched. “Indulge his… sexuality?”

Another amused look passed over Kylo’s face—he was always treating the world with sarcasm and derision. He leaned back and stroked his upper lip with his index finger mirthfully.

“The gender of the lips around my cock hardly matters,” he said. He cocked his head, examining me again. “Which reminds me—your mouth needs some training.”

I paused in the midst of my next sip and stared at him. He raised his eyebrows, clearly expecting a more frantic response, but I was still coming down from the anesthesia and probably morphine. It was taking all of my willpower not to imagine Armitage between Kylo’s legs kneeling on the
floor and it was even harder to not be irritated by it. What did it matter? Kylo was a raging psychopath.

The door opened with no warning. “Is everything okay, Kylo?”

His grey eyes hardened and his jaw stiffened. He stood up quickly and the chair clattered on the floor, and I cowered when he strode over to Armitage in two angry strides. He slapped the shorter man hard across the face, grabbing his throat and shaking him violently back and forth. Armie’s knees buckled.

Kylo held the door open with one hand, strangling his puppet with the other. “Rey and I are having a private discussion, Mr. Hux. If you or Miss Prost enters this room again I will lock both of you in cages with the general population. Get out and stay out.”

“We… we didn’t know which girls you wanted to keep,” Armie spluttered.

“Euthanize all of them. Use the potassium chloride in the surgery room to end them quickly and dissolve the bodies in the morgue. I want no traces of any of them.” Kylo glanced over his shoulder at me and clicked his tongue. “Leave Beverly for me. She and Miss Kenobi haven’t had a proper reunion yet.”

My throat tightened. “You’re going to kill all of them? Why?”

“Come, come; keep up, Miss Kenobi,” Kylo said impatiently, still choking Armie. He dropped the other man as an afterthought and Armie collapsed on all fours, heaving for air. “Many of them have been here for several weeks and are becoming extra baggage. It’s time to consolidate my properties.” He looked down at Armie, scowling. “And perhaps my staff.”

The water had given me some strength and I wasn’t as woozy from the anesthesia. My thoughts raced—was there anything I could do for those poor women?

“What about the rabies patients?” I blurted. “None of them remembered you. Can’t you alter their memories the same way and let them go?”

“That was the rabies destroying the grey matter in their brains. I’m a very skilled surgeon but I cannot selectively delete memories.” He leaned on the doorframe, puckering his lips while Armie struggled to his feet. “Although… I suppose I could lobotomize them and set a few free. They would lose their personalities, of course, along with their inhibitions and initiative. Ice pick lobotomies are such fun.”

“No, no, I didn’t mean—”

“What do you think of Rey’s suggestion, Mr. Hux?” Kylo interrupted, turning to his cohort. “I think it will be much more exciting than slaughtering them. Destroying the frontal lobe has so many interesting side effects and we can do what Miss Kenobi requested and set some of them free.”

I shook my head frenetically, holding out my hands. “Please don’t hurt any of them any more than you already have! I only thought you might be able to make them forget!”

It was too late. Kylo was smiling like the monster he was and he nudged Armie with his foot, commanding him to bring Beverly into the OR first. I flattened down on the bed when he came for me and screamed until my throat was numb but he dragged me onto the floor all the same. I lay on my back and thrashed, trying to keep him from picking me up, and he stepped on my throat.

All I could do was draw rattling breaths while Kylo stood over me with his hands in his pockets.
He shifted some of his weight onto my neck and my eyes rolled back in my head. I went limp, terrified that my stitches would rupture.

“Be careful, kitten,” he murmured, “or you’ll be my next vegetable.”
The general population room was big and cold. I hadn’t gotten a good look because I’d been hiding my head in shame, but now, as Kylo dragged me out of the warmth of the recovery room, I could see every horrible detail. Fluorescent lights spanned the ceiling above the cages and there were five on either side of the room with fingers, some bloody, clawing at their doors. Some had vomit in front of their cages and the whole room smelled like a nursing home.

Anna had a steel cart with a syringe and a vial clearly marked ‘POTASSIUM CHLORIDE’. She was in the midst of opening the first cage when Kylo and I entered the room, and she flinched back when I started screaming. Kylo wrestled me to the floor where I continued to thrash and the other women fell silent. Even Anna stopped to watch in terror before Kylo shouted an order at her.

She scrambled with another needle, filling it with a different substance, and hesitantly approached us. Beverly was grasping the front of her cage to our right, fingers knitted through the chain links. Kylo straddled my hips and Anna tremblingly restrained my arms and I shrieked louder than I ever had in my life: even Kylo winced while he flicked the air out of the needle. He grasped my jaw and jabbed it into my upper arm, shushing me when I whimpered.

The medication worked quickly. I went limp and Anna let go, backing away and bumping into her cart. She was crying softly and I heard her slump to the floor. In spite of my resistance I was helpless and the drug crushed my resolve, leaving me in a forced state of relaxation. Kylo leaned back and smiled.

“A bit of Ativan,” he said. He eyed me hungrily and looked up toward Anna, scowling. “Why are they all still alive, Miss Prost? Destroy five and leave four along with Mrs. Lewis for lobotomizing.”

“I can’t do it,” Anna wailed. “I can’t do it anymore!”

My eyes roamed sluggishly while Kylo berated Anna. No stairs… how did they get in and out of the place? It had to be Kylo’s basement. I looked toward Beverly and swallowed hard, mouthing ‘I’m sorry’ because my voice was too weak to speak. She shook her head, trying to smile as tears poured down her cheeks. Why couldn’t I help them? Kylo was evil, not immortal.

He went to Anna, grabbing her arm and shouting at her. She couldn’t come back from her crying jag and Kylo threw her into an empty cage, drawing more terrified screams from her. He went back to the cart and drew up the potassium chloride himself. The girls were all whispering and looking at me.

Panting, I turned over on my side and caught myself with a loud slap on my palms. He’d given me a lot of Ativan and I was groggy all over again. I saw a silver sparkle beside my hand and snatched it—a key. *The* key. Kylo flicked the needle while I turned toward Beverly’s cage and
fumbled with the lock. It was swimming in front of me but I managed to open it and swing her door open.

Kylo stiffened and turned around. I brushed Beverly’s hand before he was pulling me away and kicking the door shut in her face. I crawled toward the other end of the room with tears in my eyes, praying I would find an escape there. Kylo stepped in front of me and I saw a drop of the potassium chloride drip on the floor. I stopped dead, lying on my stomach and staring at the spot.

He squatted down, brandishing the needle in one hand and putting out his other palm. “You’re going to pay for that, kitten. Give me the key and it won’t be as severe.”

I shook my head woozily. “No.” The key was clenched in my fist. I would swallow it if I had to. “I’m not… going to let you hurt them.”

Armie stepped up behind Kylo quietly with a pick and hammer. Kylo nodded toward the other end of the room, where a door opened up to the OR, and Armie walked past us to Beverly’s cage. She had been crawling out and screamed when Armie approached to drag her out of the main population room.

Kylo set the needle on the cart and grabbed a fistful of my hair to yank my head back. “I haven’t had my medication today and you’re irritating me. If you don’t give me the key, I will skip the pills entirely and spend my afternoon with you instead, no wine or galas involved.”

“Fuck you,” I hissed.

He shrugged indifferently and ripped the key out of my hand, slicing open my palm. The Ativan made me too numb to do much else other than whine on the floor while blood poured from the wound.

The sound of each door opening was pure torture. They all shrieked and Kylo murmured to them before I would hear the sound of the needle slipping into their skin. Potassium chloride was the final injection given for the death penalty. It caused almost instant cardiac arrest. I covered my head with my bloody hand and squeezed my eyes shut while they all choked to death.

“It isn’t the physical pain that arouses me,” Kylo said from behind me, dropping another dying woman to the floor. “I find the sheer terror they all display to be most invigorating. Initiating that level of fear is an accomplishment and the ultimate form of dominance, don’t you think?”

I’d never felt such passionate hatred for another human being before. The room was quiet after a few minutes and Kylo began whistling, dragging the bodies around toward the opposite side. Blood ran down the side of my face and I tremblingly stretched out to crawl away, unstable from the Ativan. I couldn’t stay… I needed to escape… Kylo was insane…

It still wouldn’t click in my mind that the same man I had gone to an art gallery with and laughed with and worked with and had sex with was capable of coldblooded murder. He’d come to my apartment to apologize for bruising the back of my neck and both Rose and I had bought it. He’d picked me up from the casino when I was too drunk to function and taken care of me. It was all a ploy to gain my trust; to keep the veil obscuring the ugliness inside him.

I moved along the floor, trying to tune out the sounds of the bodies being piled together like trash. He had such a nice family. Breha stayed with him over the summer, Jaina loved him tremendously, and Mrs. Solo thought the sun rose and set with him. Didn’t any of them see it?

Kylo walked along behind me. “Be careful, Miss Kenobi. I only have penicillin to fight infections and from what I read, you’re allergic. Why don’t we lobotomize Beverly and give you a bath,
Ignore. Keep moving until you can’t anymore.

My energy fizzled out before I moved another foot. The wall looked flat and unremarkable ahead of me but I thought I could see the faint outline of a door. It had to be hidden upstairs. The basement was obscured to keep prying eyes from finding it. A secret entrance, maybe? Kylo had the money for it.

He picked me up bridal style and carried me past the mound of bodies. Some were blonde, some were brunettes, and one had reddish hair like mine. I was grateful for the Ativan at that point because I knew I would have flown into another terrified screaming episode if I wasn’t under its calming influence. Anna sniffled in her cage but was otherwise silent.

We went into the operating room. Beverly was restrained to the bed and Armie was standing behind her head to hold it in place. Her eyes were blank and puffy from crying.

Kylo set me down in front of the bed, pinning me between it and himself, and took the pick and hammer from the tray. He grabbed my bleeding hand and forced the pick into my palm, curling his hand around mine to make sure I didn’t let go. I grasped the edge of the bed and squirmed to escape but he placed it to the inner corner of Beverly’s left eye and I was afraid to move.

I stared at her, hardly daring to breathe, and her lower lip quivered. She shut her eyes.

“Thank you for your help, Doctor Kenobi,” Kylo whispered into my ear. He kissed the side of my head and I was wracked with shudders. “I’ll do this part. It’s my favorite.”

It happened faster than I could close my eyes. The pick sank through her flesh with a sickening squelch and there was a crunch. The sensation and guilt reverberated up my arm and I dry heaved. Beverly exhaled and slackened in her restraints and her expression became suddenly flat. She gazed off into the distance while I tried to free my hand as Kylo rotated the pick around in her brain.

“Please stop!” I pleaded, struggling. It wasn’t a lot of blood but the sounds were unbearable.

He set the hammer aside and slipped his hand between my legs. “Let’s send her home with fragments of her frontal lobe.”

The pick drove deeper amidst my begging and I screamed, thrashing violently. Armie held Beverly’s head steady with an impassive expression and she blinked once, moaning in the back of her throat from the pain. I tried to sink down to escape and Kylo pushed two fingers inside me. The pick slowed to small circular motions that matched the movement of his fingers and his breath was hot on my neck. Beverly slowly blinked again.

“You weren’t able to come this afternoon,” Kylo mused. “Why don’t we remedy that?”

I shut my eyes and sobbed helplessly. He finally ripped the pick out of Dr. Lewis’ brain and threw it aside, now far more interested in torturing me. It bled across her face and Armie snapped his fingers in front of her eyes to see if she blinked again. She was dying.

Kylo sat in a chair, forcing himself inside me again with me still facing the table. His hands roamed and moved me when I refused and tried to get away. I slumped in defeat after a while, drained in every capacity, and Armie began to clean up Beverly’s body. He carried her out of the room with a cold look on his face but I couldn’t cry anymore. All I could do was wait for it to end and Kylo took his time.
He groaned. “I’ll get you to come sooner or later, Miss Kenobi. You’ll learn to enjoy yourself.”

Thankfully, I was in no danger of enjoying what was happening. I was far too traumatized for that. He ground as deep inside me as he could and I hung my head in shame when I felt him finish. I still felt so sick from the anesthesia and the Ativan and pain lanced up my body from the scar.

The bodies were gone when we went back to the main room. Kylo had a hand around the back of my neck and he urged me onward into the recovery room I had woken up in. I was dirty from being on the floor and shivering miserably, now completely alone with a violent psychopath and his two loyal companions. Armie would never break but I would remember to check Anna’s limits.

We went into the bathroom, which was more like mine at the apartment than the fancy once upstairs. Kylo started a bath and left me alone to use the toilet. He returned a few minutes later and stopped the water, offhandedly peeling off his scrubs while I stood silently and stared at the murky bath. He pressed a protective shield over my surgical scar to keep the water out.

“Get in,” he said.

I stayed silent. I didn’t want to speak anymore.

Kylo approached me, now naked but perfectly comfortable in his flawless skin. He touched my chin to make me look up at him. “Mute already? Let’s see if I can change that.”

The lights were turned out and only a sliver from the bedroom illuminated a small section of the water. Kylo tugged me toward the bath and sat inside, softly telling me to do the same. I hugged myself and tried to back away but he grabbed my hand and I was forced to join him.

It was warm. I shuddered reflexively from the change in temperature and Kylo laughed a bit, guiding me between his legs. The water was chest-deep and he held me firm, using the other hand to gently wash my body with a cloth. It was too dark to see. All I could do was feel his breath on my neck and the dirt being scrubbed away. He could be someone else for all I knew.

“It will be just the two of us,” he whispered, lingering on my breasts. He dropped the cloth and kneaded one tenderly, stroking my stomach with his other hand. “No Miss Prost or Mr. Hux. I don’t think I can bear sharing your torture with them. You will be all mine.”

I tried to sit up straight but leaned against his chest. Kylo’s lips moved on my neck and I lulled into a quiet state, resigned to my fate. His damn fingers went between my legs again but this time I couldn’t control myself. The fear and loathing had evaporated and the husk left behind was at the mercy of those unstoppable physiological responses. I whimpered, shifting my hips.

His teeth tugged my ear lobe. “She speaks.”

“Stop,” I rasped, clutching his legs.

“I don’t like to leave a woman… uncomfortable.” He pushed two long fingers inside me and stroked forward, eliciting a strained moaned from my lips. “I believe I owe you several orgasms. Relax and enjoy, Miss Kenobi. I certainly will.”

They were different than what I had experienced: raw and uncomfortable, coerced from what my body responded to and what my mind shut out. Kylo demanded that I count them out and on the fifth, he was inside me again. I was weak and tired but he was as aggressive as ever. He kissed my spine and waited until I came for the sixth time with a strangled sob before he filled me, laughing breathlessly.
“Perhaps Miss Tico will reconsider her position on my sexual functioning,” he panted.

I was clean—sort of. Kylo helped me out of the water and drained it, drying me off before bringing me back to bed. This time I was allowed a sheet and he didn’t restrain me. He kissed my forehead and I curled into a ball, squeezing my eyes shut.

Sleep, Rey. It’s all a nightmare.
The cold, hard cage was underneath me when I woke up.

It was eerily silent and I propped myself up on my forearm, twisting my neck to relieve some tension. I hoped I would be allowed to stay in the bed but I knew that wasn’t probable. Moaning in pain, I sat up entirely and rubbed my eyes. I’d been left an apple in my dish and the water had been replenished in the other. Both could be tainted with drugs.

The lights were off but the room was dimly illuminated by light from the surgery room. I’d been dressed in a green linen shirt and panties while I was asleep and I was grateful for the coverings. Shivering, I gathered my blanket around myself and looked out toward the other row of cages.

Anna was in the cage directly across from me with her hands in her hair and knees drawn up to her chest. She was staring blankly at the ground and rocking back and forth, humming to herself. I looked around as best as I could for any signs of Kylo or Armitage and tapped my wall to get her attention.

“Anna,” I whispered. “Anna! Are you okay?”

Her unseeing blue eyes flickered up to me and she squeezed them shut. “I can’t come here anymore. He said I only had to help him feed them and clean the cages and he makes me kill them now. I want to go home but I forgot where home is.”

She was naked. I didn’t know why Kylo did it—maybe because it was humiliating to be naked in front of people and it reinforced that all the women were nothing to him. My spine prickled uncomfortably. Why had he bothered dressing me? It was unnerving to think about.

I knitted my fingers through the chain links. “How long have you been coming here, Anna? Has Kylo told you anything about himself or is he private? How many girls have passed through?”

“Too many,” she said, shaking her head. “We met on the street—I was… I was a prostitute then, and he offered me a job without having to have sex for money. All I had to do was take care of the house on weekends and I could afford my own apartment and food. Then he showed me the basement and by then I was so hooked on him and the money that I acted like it wasn’t a big deal.”

Of course. He preyed upon those who had no other option because they were the easiest to manipulate. Armitage was a special circumstance and he undoubtedly had his own mental health issues that weren’t helped by being in love with a psychopath. What if I had become Armitage? It would have only been a matter of time before I was twisted around Kylo’s finger like his other two cohorts.

That also meant Kylo would be incredibly private. He had no compulsion to share emotions or bond with others and opening up to either Armie or Anna would ruin him. I bit my nails, clinging to the cage door with one hand. There had to be something in his past that drove him to such
They’d had him at the tender age of sixteen, after all. That had to cause some tension between Janet and her husband. I frowned, trying to draw conclusions with zero evidence. Kylo said he liked to draw… He probably kept incriminating art somewhere. All of them had an Achilles’ heel.

“Can you help me get out?” I asked. “I can tell the police and you’ll be safe. Kylo will go to prison along with Armitage and you won’t have to be afraid anymore.”

“Mr. Ren thought it was time when he bruised your neck,” Anna said, completely skirting my question. “He was going to take you from your apartment if you didn’t accept his apology. Your friend was always in his way, though. He knew she would be a problem. He used to sit here and talk for hours about you, especially the way you dealt with the rabies victims. He likes you.”

“Sorry, should I be flattered that he likes me?”

“Girls are objects, not people.” Anna looked up at me again, stony-faced. “Mr. Ren likes you if he lets you wear clothes.”

A slam at the end of the room made her skitter back into the dark recesses of her cage. I looked up to see Armitage standing over me in ripped jeans and a plaid shirt, hands stuffed in his pockets. We glared at one another and he squatted down in front of me to rattle my water dish.

“You better drink this by the time Kylo comes home,” Armie said icily.

I was tempted to throw the tainted water at him. “Good hint that it’s laced with Klonopin.”

“It ain’t laced with nothin’. Kylo wants you lucid for some stupid reason.” His brown eyes traveled down the lumpy blanket hiding my figure. “Sooner or later you’ll get boring and he’ll come right back to me.”

“Is that supposed to make me jealous?”

“I think it does,” he sneered. “You’ll get attached just like every other stupid woman.”

Irritated, I grasped the cage door with both hands, leaning up on my knees to look Armie square in the eye. The blanket fell away so he could see me in the just the linen shirt and my panties. It didn’t matter if he was gay, and regardless, I knew Kylo wouldn’t let him harm me. That honor belonged to him.

My palm still hurt from the pick. “I will never let myself become attached to a murderer. I have more self-respect than that, and I can think of all the people he’s tortured and killed for his own demented pleasure. You can try to play the game with me, Armitage, but you’ll lose. Eight years of college, four of which I spent learning about the human body, give me the upper edge.”

He ground his jaw and grabbed the chain links, too, pressing his forehead to mine through the thin veil of steel. His eyes were wild. “He’s gonna break you clean in half.”

“Let him try,” I hissed.

Armitage cast me one more dirty look before storming off and the slamming sound vibrated through the room again. I leaned back in my cage against the hind wall, sinking down with the blanket wrapped around myself in the suffocating darkness. Anna began to cry softly again.

The hours dragged on. I didn’t know if I’d be able to deal with utter silence and darkness every day. It was Monday and I was supposed to be at work. Had they noticed I was missing or was
Rose waiting to report it? How was Kylo going to react? He’d be a person of interest since he was the last one I was with. I curled into a ball on the floor of my cage, hugging my pillow. What would happen to me?

The loud boom woke me after an eternity. Groggy from sleeping, I raised my head from the floor just as the door swung open. There were a lot of feet on the floor and I could hear a deep voice screaming into a gag but I was looking into Kylo’s smoky grey eyes. He smiled as Armitage’s feet along with a foreign set of legs went by us in the background and even Anna peered from her cage curiously.

“Hello, kitten,” Kylo murmured. He had changed out of his scrubs into a pair of dark jeans and a tweed brown shirt. It was his torture-casual.

I shrank back, bristling like a cornered cat. “Don’t touch me.”

The newcomer was howling from a distance and I could hear distinct grunting. Kylo’s smile faded and he turned, getting to his feet in a stiff, angry motion. It gave me space to creep out of my cage and watch him approach the combined figures of a strange man with Armitage draped over his back. I flinched and looked away from the scene when Kylo ripped Armitage off the other man and stepped on his chest.

He leaned his arms on his thigh, crushing Armie to the point of choking. The new man was trying to get up, trembling and pulling his pants back on. I looked toward the other side of the room. A door.

“Bring him to the recovery room, Mr. Hux,” Kylo said coldly. “I can’t have you fucking like animals in front of Miss Kenobi. We don’t want to upset her.”

It was clear to run. Anna watched me scramble out of the cage and bolt toward the indentation on the other side of the room where I was positive they came in and out. There it was—a handle built into the door, and I could see the outline in the black wall. I tried turning it but of course it was locked. Frantic, I pounded on the thick steel and yelled for help. It had to lead directly to the stairs.

Armitage collected himself and his captive and another door shut. I felt along the wall until I was violently turned around and shoved into it before Kylo slapped me across the face. He was broad-shouldered and tall; even more imposing in the shadows of the basement. He grabbed my jaw and pressed his body to mine, impassively ignoring my frenetic struggling. I still couldn’t believe how strong he was.

“Let go of me!” I spat, reeling from being slapped.

“Ooo, we’re much sassier today, aren’t we? You must have slept well last night after I was through with you. But I couldn’t help to notice you didn’t drink your water.”

“I’ll starve before I eat or drink anything you give me.”

Kylo laughed, eyeing my mouth. “I’m going to give you one more chance.”

Then he yanked me away from the wall and back to my cage. He pushed me down on my knees and stood over me, reaching into the cage to get the silver bowl of water. He set it down in front of me and some sloshed over the sides. The floor was cold on my knees. I refused to drink and Kylo circled his long fingers around the back of my neck to force my head down until my nose touched the water.

“Drink,” he commanded.
“No!”

“Drink it, Rey!”

“Get off me!” I shrieked back, and under his incredible weight, I managed to swat the bowl. It tipped over and spilled across the floor, staining it a darker shade of grey. I was trembling from the sheer force Kylo was exerting on me and he slipped his fingers through the hair at the back of my scalp. He squeezed briefly and I shut my eyes, terrified of what would come next.

“Feeding tube it is,” he said.

A resounding ‘fuck’ went through my head.

Kylo dragged me into the OR and I could see Anna’s fingers curl around the links of her cage. Why did he have to be a goddamn surgeon? It wasn’t enough that he was completely psychopathic and sadistic—he was extremely good at playing God with bodies. He could do whatever he wanted and that in and of itself was more frightening than anything else.

He strapped me down with some difficulty: I was fully conscious and resisting to the best of my ability. There was no morphine or IV or theatrics. Kylo went to the cabinet and collected a few things before coming back to me, snapping gloves on his hands. He didn’t even bother with a mask.

The tube was small and thin. We used them for patients who couldn’t swallow or aspirated their food when they ate. Normally an endoscopy would be performed to check the positioning of the stomach but Kylo wasn’t interested in wasting time with that. I thrashed in my restraints, hyperventilating as he wiped the side of my abdomen and brandished a small scalpel.

“This is going to hurt a bit,” he said.

It was blistering agony. I screamed shrilly while Kylo sliced through the outer part of my skin and down to my stomach, opening a small hole to insert the tube. My eyes rolled back and I could feel my throat bleeding from the ferocity of my wails. I’d be lucky if I still had my voice. He pushed the tube inside my stomach and casually sealed it again with small stitches. I couldn’t breathe.

Overwhelmed, I gulped for air and promptly fainted.
“Yes, mother, I’m aware. I brought Rey home two nights ago and I’m not sure where she went off to. She enjoyed late night walks through the streets.” A pregnant pause followed by a sigh. “If I knew where she ran off to, I would have her home by now. All this worrying is pure torture.”

The first sensation I became aware of was something soft but unyielding between my teeth, holding my mouth open. My eyes cracked open and were briefly blinded again by radiant overhead light. I moaned but the gag in my mouth muffled the noise to a small whimper that couldn’t be heard. My wrists and ankles were restrained apart again. I was in the recovery room this time, naked again.

A thin white tube about four inches long was jutting from just below my ribcage. I panted in fear at the ugly thing that was near my scar from the tubal litigation. No painkillers, no anesthesia. Kylo had simply strapped me down and sliced through my stomach to put in the feeding tube. The only saving grace was that it wasn’t stuffed down my throat instead.

Kylo approached, still wearing the tweed shirt but it was open in the front, exposing his abdomen. He had his cell phone between his ear and shoulder and I could faintly hear Mrs. Solo’s sad voice on the other line. They were figuring it out now since I hadn’t shown up to work.

He had a filled needle between his teeth and a familiar instrument in his hands. It was a big syringe with a bulb at the end that was given to patients who could handle tube feeding themselves. He smiled vaguely at me and drew a reddish concoction into the syringe, casually listening to his mother lament my disappearance. He popped off the leak stop on the tube and attached the syringe, slowly injecting the pureed food with the pressure of the bulb.

“I know, mother,” Kylo repeated past the needle, exasperated. “The police were already here.” He set the syringe aside and popped the needle out of his mouth, showing me the label. He covered the mouthpiece on his cell phone to address me. “Just some Klonopin, kitten.”

I couldn’t scream if I tried. He stuck me with what felt like the hundredth needle and injected the highly addictive medication into my arm. My head was spinning. The tube was uncomfortable and it wasn’t pleasant feeling food being forced into my stomach. I let my head loll to the side and reconsidered what I had snapped at Armitage. Maybe Kylo would break me faster than I thought.

The medication numbed me over mentally and I disregarded the physical pain. Kylo filled another syringe with water to push it through the tube and flippantly leaned over to kiss my forehead before he left the room. I gazed dispassionately at the wall, unable to swallow my saliva, leading it to drool from the corner of my mouth. Hopefully I would get an infection and die.

Another eternity passed before my captor returned. He calmly slipped out of his shirt and draped it on a nearby chair and I watched through hazy eyes as he unbuckled his belt. He was stepping out of his shoes and smirked back at my vacant expression. How long would he keep me? Weeks? Months? Years?

“Your disappearance has been noticed,” Kylo said. He stripped down completely and crept into the bed on top of me, furrowing his brow. “Doctor Holdo was very upset, and your friend Rose has been granted a week of grievance absence. Unfortunately, I’m not sure if your father knows. I’ve been wasting so much time shedding tears for the police and letting them scour my home that I haven’t been able to keep tabs on him the way I want. And there’s the matter of fending off my family… irritating.”
Slow as molasses I blinked back at him once, trapped in his sadistic grey gaze. I couldn’t speak and I could barely think but I could feel hatred burning from my stomach. He puckered his lips and turned slightly to reach for something. Things rattling around caught my ear and I let my head droop to the opposite side to see what he was doing.

It was another steel cart with a red towel. On that towel were a lot of things I didn’t want to see: objects that looked like they belonged in a sleazy sex store and not directly next to my naked body. Multicolored beads, weird shiny clamps, and other… things that were obviously designed for penetration. My eyes widened in terror as Kylo lackadaisically picked up a thick string with two pink balls several inches apart.

The Klonopin was wearing off already—it had knocked me out for a long time. I whimpered when he idly popped the balls into his mouth and sucked on them, eyeing me, and he drew them back out. He smiled and leaned forward and I struggled against my restraints when I realized his intentions. Oh no; no, no, no, he was not going to put them inside me!

Kylo’s broad shoulders blocked out the overhead light and all I could see was him. He shushed me as he pushed the balls through my pliant flesh and I panted anxiously. It didn’t hurt, thank god, but I still didn’t want it in my body. I squirmed in discomfort and felt a foreign tingling.

He watched my expression shift rapturously. “How does it feel?” His head dipped to my breasts and he tugged on my nipples, eliciting another uncomfortable writhe from me. “Different?”

Admittedly, it felt kind of good. I squeezed my eyes shut, determined to stay still and avoid deriving any pleasure from the experience, but Kylo wasn’t going to let that happen. He flattened his body to mine and gently rocked forward to make my hips move. I twisted my wrists in the cuffs, shivering.

“I’m sure your little boyfriends in college weren’t entirely sure of what to do with you,” he murmured, knitting his fingers over mine. “I know exactly what you need.”

It definitely wasn’t two involuntary surgeries. I sank my nails into Kylo’s hands, agitated from being helpless beneath him, and he returned the gesture with an aggressive squeeze. The way he kept rolling his hips was impossible to ignore or escape and I could feel the things shifting around inside me. With a quiet moan into the gag, my body betrayed me yet again. It was humiliating.

Kylo withdrew them and set them aside and I saw him slide some kind of ring over his penis. Before I could wonder much more we were joined together and I was still clinging to his hands. I was practically gnawing on the ball to stifle my voice but it wasn’t easy, and soon I was angling my hips toward his. He rested his forehead on mine, laughing breathlessly, enjoying my suffering.

When he was finished and had coerced me into finishing again, he lay beside me in the bed, removing the thing he’d put around himself. I looked at him from my peripheral, suspicious of his motives as he ran both hands through his thick black hair and linked them behind his head. His chest rose and fell and he was smiling widely, grey eyes glittering with some kind of sick happiness that normal people couldn’t feel. I stared at him. So attractive, intelligent, and successful, but utterly insane.

He looked back at me, frowning. “Why so glum, kitten? Is it your mouth?”

Amongst other things, I thought, but I nodded emphatically.

“You’re drooling everywhere,” he said dryly. He tilted his head in a curious manner. “I prefer it to your incessant shrieking, but I do miss your voice.”
Mercifully, Kylo reached around the back of my head to unclasp the strap holding the gag in place. I dropped it into his waiting palm and he put it on the cart with the other strange things. My jaw was incredibly sore but I could finally close my mouth and swallow my spit. My only other wish was to have my hands and legs free but I didn’t want to push my luck.

“What the hell is wrong with you?” I croaked. So much for playing it safe.

He put his arms behind his head again, shrugging dismissively. “Something, I suppose.”

“If I’m going to be here forever, why don’t you just tell me?”

“It makes no difference.” Kylo turned his penetrating eyes on me. “I know what you’re looking for, Miss Kenobi—a catalyst; the event that triggered me in the way Jeffrey Dahmer was inspired or Ted Bundy or Josef Fritzl. You can pry and wheedle as much as you please and you will find nothing to satisfy your instinct to rationalize me.”

“There’s always something,” I insisted.

“Evil can sometimes exist for no reason at all.”

I couldn’t accept that as an answer. I pressed my lips into a thin line and tried to turn toward him.

“You were just born a sadist, then. Didn’t your parents find out and get you therapy?”

Kylo lay on his side next to me and extended his long fingers to run them down my abdomen. He held his head in one hand, nonchalantly stroking my skin. His touch was feather-light—the mark of a surgeon.

“My mother thought I was perfect,” he said. “Han, on the otherhand—” He paused and glanced at my eyes, smiling. “—My father. He noticed something was amiss from the beginning, but my mother refused to listen to him. They struggled for many years financially and my behavior became routine after some time. Jaina was born and they invested themselves in her instead.”

“She mentioned you were… uh… difficult.”

He grinned and to my stark shock, rested his head right above my breast. “Only a little.” He opened his palm on my stomach, avoiding the tube, and his fingers spanned from one side to the other. “I would drink and fuck and brawl until I became an attending and began to steal the medication I need. It stifles my impulses enough that I can function from day-to-day. Pills notwithstanding, I still require an outlet.”

“Great,” I muttered. “Too bad that involves killing people.”

“Death is not the ultimate goal. Torture is what matters—the fear and suffering exposed when I push people to their limit. I’ve only killed about thirty people in total, six of which were men for Armitage.”

I glared at the ceiling. “That’s a lot of innocent lives.”

“It is as natural to me as breathing. Some sexual sadists have the capacity to feel remorse and empathy, and they seek out willing partners.” Kylo traced the scar from my tubal litigation.

“Others, such as myself, are not burdened with guilt. The greatest pleasure comes with the keenest fear.”

Neither of us spoke for a while. I didn’t know what else to ask Kylo and he was amusing himself by running his fingertips along my body. The basement was eerily silent: all of the rooms had to
be separately soundproofed to avoid noise mixing. The fluorescent lights whirred overhead and I closed my eyes, imagining I was sitting in Dr. Lewis’ office talking about the coincidences we’d discovered.

Why didn’t I specialize in psychiatry? Maddie could’ve been a great help if she was around. I didn’t find specific organ systems interesting so I decided to be an internist so I could see how they all connected together in pathology. Having more insight into what Kylo was would’ve been useful.

Goddamn, he was so good at hiding it. I looked down at his head on my chest and his curled fingers on my stomach. Psychopaths were supposed to be unstable, usually with some kind of childhood trauma, and they frequently wound up in prison. Kylo had none of those attributes. He was a functioning member of society even if he depended on medication and humoring his cruelty to stay that way.

When we met for the first time, I thought he had a chilly demeanor. Everyone else said he was reserved but charming and affable; someone you could be good friends with if you kept your distance. He swept me off my feet and in spite of all my caution I was washed downstream to drown.

Drained, I drifted off to sleep with him.
Time dragged on.

I became uncomfortably familiar with Kylo’s routine and kept track of time that way. If it was a weekday, he wouldn’t show up for a long time, and Armitage would be the one to wake me up in the morning with food and an impolite knock on the roof of my cage. On the weekends Kylo had plenty of time to spend in the basement and he would sometimes be around for hours on end until he had something else to attend to back in reality.

From the way I calculated, nearly a month went by. Anna festered in her cage—they were starving her to death, only granting her a fraction of the water I was given. She would lie on the floor most days and cry quietly to herself while I stared off into the distance, dirty and miserable.

Sometimes I dreamed Rose stormed over to the house with the police in tow and they figured out where I was. It would feel so real I would wake up and sob myself, briefly more distraught than Anna. Everything was over. I would never become a full-fledged doctor and practice medicine again. I would never see my father smiling again. I would die in a dirty basement with two psychopaths.

The door slammed shut and I started, blinking out of my grogginess. The gag was in my mouth again and I had the strange balls inside me but I was still allowed to wear clothes. One of Kylo’s linen shirts hung loose around my shoulders, open in the front, and my wrists were bound behind my back. I’d tried to rip out the feeding tube one too many times and had suffered worse treatment for several days now.

It was better that I couldn’t move. If I did, the things shifted around inside me and I would be in the state Kylo wanted when he came into the basement. I glared at my cage door and bit down on the ball in my mouth as the person squatted down in front of me.

*Armitage.* His shaggy red hair was tied at the base of his neck and he had some stubble. He’d become more stressed out in recent weeks and ended up killing the man he took captive. I didn’t falter under his gaze and returned his cold look until he broke into a smile. I saw two pairs of sneakers step up on either side of him and my eyes widened. Who could they be? Kylo had a tight circle.

“Still hanging in there?” Armitage cooed. “That’s too bad for you. I was talkin’ with two of my buddies and they were real interested in meeting you. You understand, right? I could use the extra dough.”

The door swung open and they dragged me out, kicking and screaming into the gag. Armie’s friends were shrouded in shadows and I couldn’t get a good look at their faces. I could hear the crinkle of money and deep laughter between the three of them as I was shoved down on my knees, slamming the side of my head against the cold cement floor. One of them was behind me and my underwear was tugged down.
“Damn, this dude’s a kinky motherfucker,” the man said before yanking the balls from me.

The other sat in front of me and took off the gag, promptly forcing me to go down on him. I strained my wrists behind my back and cried during the entire assault—they were in me; owning me horribly. It was long and far more torturous than anything Kylo had done to me and Armitage stood nearby to watch with his arms folded, smirking. Anna wasn’t even breathing in her cage.

One of them found the syringe for my feeding tube and spat in it, laughing raucously with his friend and injecting his saliva and ejaculate directly into my stomach. Bile rose in my throat and I dry heaved but they seemed to enjoy that. They pushed in some of the food mixture Kylo gave me along with water and I thought I saw them adding pills to the mix. Maybe they would kill me.

They threw me back when they were done and moved on to tormenting Anna. Armitage put the gag back in my mouth while I lay very still on my side, covered in sweat and thoroughly traumatized. He leaned over me to push the balls back inside me and I whimpered, raw from the assault. He smiled glibly.

“Not a word of this to Kylo,” he said. He slapped me across the cheek and I hit my head off the floor of the cage, stunned to silence. “Or there’ll be more where this came from.”

A long time passed before they left for good, taking Armie with them. Even Anna was deathly silent from her cage and we both basked in the brief solitude. I had a tremor that wouldn’t go away—probably from the pills they’d inserted into my gut. One moment I was staring blankly at the wall and the next it felt like my consciousness was falling through a trapdoor into a vacuum.

Fuck. I knew what was coming and my pulse raced as my eyes rolled back in my head. My ears rang and my eyes violently jerked to the right, quickly followed by my entire body snapping to the right. Breathing became impossible and I gasped as my eyes painfully pulled to the upper right until I was sure they would burst inside the sockets. It was like I was being dragged by them.

All I could do was salivate uncontrollably as the seizure took full control of my motor functions. I gained my peripheral vision but Anna was turned away from me, probably asleep. Sputtering desperately, I thrashed toward the side of my cage and slammed my head against it in a futile attempt to stop the splitting agony in my skull. Fuck, I was going to pop.

Consciousness shredding, I gulped for air like a fish, foaming spittle trailing out of my mouth. It was going to happen. In a few horrible minutes my brain would seize out and I would be dead. I trembled and my fingers twitched behind my back as the darkness closed in.

“Miss Kenobi?! Rey!”

The door swung open and I unceremoniously spilled out. It was Kylo and thank god he was a neurologist. He had a needle buried in my arm in the next minute and ripped the gag out of my mouth. He rolled me on my side, resting my head in his lap to let the seizure run its course. I spluttered desperately and blissful unconsciousness finally ripped me from my nightmare.

The sensation of warmth brought me back.

I flew up in the bathtub, gasping to breathe and sending water flying across the bathroom. My heart pounded frantically and I scrambled out of the tub to grab the toilet, barely making it in time to puke. I shuddered forlornly as pain radiated through my head. Holy shit. I’d never had a seizure before.

Gentle hands touched my back and I jerked away in terror, throwing myself against the edge of the tub. Kylo remained near the toilet with his hands still outstretched but there was something
different about the look on his face. He flushed it and made no move to approach me.

“Who gave you Elavil, Miss Kenobi?” he asked in a soft yet menacing tone.

I stared at him, panting in fear, and shrank down. “I… I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Kylo knelt down on the floor to be at my eye level. He was oddly calm. “The bottle was left on
the tray near you and Miss Prost—I administered Valproate to slow the seizure. I also cleaned
your feeding tube while you were unconscious and noticed it was rather… dirty. Did Armitage act
alone or have accomplices?”

Sure enough, the tube was gone, but the anchor was still in place and sealed. All I wanted to do
was climb in the bath, sink beneath the murky water and take a nice, deep breath.

“Please leave me alone,” I begged. “I don’t want to talk about it.” I clutched my head, squeezing
my eyes shut. “I don’t even want to think about it.”

He approached silently and tugged my wrists to break my hands away. I resisted, still reeling from
the seizure, but Kylo held me firm and locked my eyes with his steely grey gaze. My chest
tightened as he returned me to the warm water and leaned over the edge of the tub.

“Tell me what they did,” he said.

My lower lip trembled. “I can’t.”

Kylo watched me impassively for a few more moments before gesturing toward a loofa and
different cleaning supplies at the other end of the bathtub. “Wash yourself and wait here.” He
grasped my chin between his long fingers. “Don’t do anything while I’m gone. Do you
understand?”

I nodded and he left the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind him. Weird… I expected him to
carry out his daily ritual. I grabbed the loofa and body wash, furiously scrubbing myself to get rid
of the feeling of the two men all over me. It would never go away. When I was through cleaning
my hair and shaving I stepped out of the bath and padded to the mirror to examine myself.

I’d lost weight. The seizure had left me pale and jittery, and my eyes were sunken in and
exhausted. I was relieved Kylo had taken the balls out of me at least. Shivering in the cold, I
wrapped a towel around myself and drained the water out of the tub. My skin was thickening to
the torture.

The door opened again and Kylo was very suddenly standing behind me. He took my jaw in his
fingertips to turn it to the side and his reflection was watching mine. His lips pressed together
irately.

“You need sunlight,” he said. “Synthetic vitamin D isn’t the same. Has he been feeding you in
the morning?”

“…Sometimes.”

He scowled. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Why bother?” I snapped. “You’d probably get off on it!”

“I don’t want you dead. I want to dominate you.” He quirked an eyebrow and rested his chin on
top of my head. “There’s an enormous difference between the two, and that separates me from the
usual kill-and-dispose sadists. You’re getting too thin for my liking.”
“Perhaps you should stop feeding me pureed shit through a tube?”

“No… I enjoy that. Though it has come back to bite me, unfortunately. Get dressed and come with me.”

Of course, getting dressed consisted of wearing one of his shirts and my panties. I was surprised to find sweatpants had been added to the mix that were made for a woman and not another thing out of his closet. Kylo offered me his hand when I left the bathroom with my damp hair in a ponytail at the nape of my neck and I hesitantly outstretched my fingers to his. I didn’t have a choice.

“What’s going on?” I asked suspiciously. “Where did you disappear to?”

He had a hand on the door to the OR. My heart leapt in my throat when he smiled frigidly.

“I was collecting Armitage and his friends.”

The door swung open with a low groan to reveal the three of them tied to chairs with a combination of rope and duct tape. They had rope in their mouths between their teeth to keep them from making a sound and all three of them were naked. I stepped back but Kylo touched the small of my spine to urge me forward toward the harsh light hanging over the three men.

Armitage was in the middle, eyes puffy and red from crying. I stared at them blankly, fighting the urge to run out of the room. The other two were lanky and clearly around our age as well but they wouldn’t look directly at me. I swallowed hard and tried to leave again and Kylo grasped my upper arms from behind to keep me steady in place. My heart was racing. I wanted to be as far from them as possible.

“Miss Kenobi, I’d like you to meet Adrian Hubert and Ricky Pomona,” Kylo said, squeezing me. “It’s nice putting a name to the cock, don’t you think?”

I couldn’t speak. Kylo kissed the side of my head and approached them, slinking with the collected grace and confidence of a predator. He went to his silver cart with different surgical supplies and snapped on gloves before picking up a scalpel that glinted in the strong light. He turned it in his grasp and circled back around the men to stand in front of them. His smile was downright disturbing.

“Why don’t we remove their favorite possession?” he asked.

And one by one, he did just that while I watched in blanch horror. They screamed and there was blood everywhere but Kylo didn’t mind one bit. He whistled a tune while he slowly sliced off all Adrian and Ricky’s genitals and cut open their gags to jam the remains down their throats.

I pressed myself to the far wall and sank down to the floor, covering my head with my arms. They choked loudly and began to gurgle: he was holding their mouths shut. The two men bled out quickly and I heard Kylo set down the scalpel on the tray again. Was it over? Had he killed all three of them?

He clicked his tongue. “Come here, kitten.”

It was a bloodbath. Adrian and Ricky’s heads were drooped down and they were bleeding profusely even now, both from the organs in their mouths and their mutilated genitals. Kylo was standing behind Armie with a needle in his hand that was covered in gore and he had smeared some of it across his own face. He tilted his head and beckoned me, radiating sadistic joy.

“They told me what they did to you,” he murmured. “Miss Prost was a nuisance, but you mean a
great deal to me.” He put his hands on Armie’s shoulders and the man started nervously, hyperventilating. “Mr. Hux has overstepped his boundary and I would like you to give him his camphor.”

“Camphor?” I echoed in a small voice.

“An herb. It induces violent seizures in high amounts.”

Holy fuck. Kylo exacted the kind of revenge you saw in horror movies. I blinked at him and mentally notated to never get on his bad side or inspire him to get back at me. The results weren’t pleasant.

My humanity was pushed aside when I remembered the two men assaulting me while Armitage watched and laughed along with them. They’d tortured me. I could’ve died during my seizure if Kylo didn’t happen to amble down the stairs. But I couldn’t still call myself a practitioner of medicine if I willingly killed another human being, no matter how awful they were.

The Hippocratic Oath… I wasn’t supposed to do harm. That was the first rule on the relatively short list. I was expected to do right by people and heal them.

Hatred prickled hot in my veins as I continued staring at Armitage. He starved me and taunted me when Kylo wasn’t around. He facilitated a lot of the horrible things his ‘boss’ did and he had outright tricked poor Beverly into an early grave. I ground my teeth together. He was also in love with Kylo.

*Jealousy is an ugly thing.*

I got to my feet and walked toward Kylo. No, I wasn’t jealous.

*You’re still attracted to him.*

He smiled, offering me the needle, and I tentatively picked it up.

*He’ll kill you like he killed them.*

Armitage’s eyes were wild and wide like a cornered animal’s.

*Kill the competition.*

Right in his pasty neck.

Fueled by hatred, I thrust the needle hard into Armie’s jugular and released the contents. He coughed into the gag and squirmed desperately, leading me to drop the weapon like it’d burned me. Kylo was utterly euphoric and more interested in watching the conflicting emotions across my face than his cohort beginning to enter a grand mal seizure. Armitage’s eyes rolled back and it started.

Kylo shoved the chairs aside and his hands were in my hair, mouth moving aggressively against mine. I felt invincible in that moment along with a whole host of other curiosities I wasn’t comfortable with. He was familiar and my pulse throbbed in response to his touch. We wrestled for dominance until he had me pinned to the floor a few feet away from the seizing Armie and his dead friends.

His grey eyes were hooded and salacious. “Congratulations, Miss Kenobi. You’re the first woman to move on to phase two.”
I blew him off and we came together in carnal, amoral bliss.
It was dark when Kylo brought me upstairs to enact the so-called ‘phase two’ and I made mental note of everything’s position. There was a door embedded in the wall in the common population room and it shunked back into place when we left. You couldn’t tell it apart from the wall in the fake basement, where Kylo had stored odds and ends to avoid detection. A retina scan opened it.

We went up the stairs to the first floor of the house and I took a deep, satisfying breath of the fresh air. I’d been wrong about my time in the basement—it had been almost three brutal months in the dark with nothing but a pillow and blanket to comfort me. Kylo made the decision to kill or keep his captives at that mark and I was the first he had decided to keep.

Even seeing moonlight was overwhelming. Tendrils of pale blue light poured through the windows, bathing me azure. It was a balmy summer night, the kind I would usually spend going out with Rose for late dinner or drinks. Crickets sang. I was so happy I could’ve burst into tears.

Kylo took my left wrist to put a thick black bracelet around it. It locked in place. “If you try to leave the premises, this will send 50,000 volts of electricity through you. Not enough to cause pain—only to stop you. It is water proof, fire proof, and you will not be getting it off with a pair of scissors. I have the key, of course. If you stay inside the house, nothing will happen.”

“You’re… You’re letting me go?” I whispered, gazing through the window at the sky.

“No, kitten.” He kissed the side of my head. “That’s phase three. I’m granting you some autonomy, which is beneficial for both of us because I’ve killed my assistants. Pity.”

It was foreign being able to walk on my own. I shuffled into the living room like a zombie to sit before the enormous glass windows and look out at the sky. Dusty desert stretched beyond the border of Kylo’s property and the stars and moon reflected off his pool. Heat prickled my skin and I closed my eyes to enjoy the sensations and the sounds of life around me. I would never take it for granted again.

A sweet scent interrupted my silent contemplations and I blinked, surprised to find a glass of wine being offered to me. I followed the arm up to Kylo’s expectant face and took it hastily. Jesus Christ. I’d missed tasting food.

“So… now what?” I asked.

He was in his boxers with her shirt draped loosely around his shoulders, open down the front. His cold grey eyes studied the horizon. “Only time will tell, Miss Kenobi. I’m not accustomed to only keeping one prey item at a time but you are a bit different than the others. Non-disposable.”

I soured. “Oh, thanks, now I feel warm and fuzzy inside.”
“I enjoy your company.” Kylo smirked into his glass as he took another drink and his eyes flickered to me. “Particularly in the midst of fucking, but you’re tolerable otherwise.”

Swear words and Kylo Ren’s mouth were not two things that mixed. I shuddered and finished my wine much quicker than him, too excited about finally drinking something to care. Hopefully he would take the feeding tube out soon. It had tormented me long enough. I pressed on into the conversation with the distinct fear of walking on thin ice.

“Are you going to bring me down there again?” I asked tersely, examining my glass.

“Not unless you misbehave and need to be reminded of your place.”

“Are you going to do the same kinds of things to me?”

Kylo rolled his eyes. “It depends. Are you going to continue prodding me with asinine questions?”

“Don’t be obtuse.” I spun the glass in my fingertips and looked out over his pool that dropped off over the horizon. The moon reflected off the pristine surface. “I think after being in your basement for three months, enduring all kinds of sadistic torture, I have a right to know.”

He laughed and finished his wine, casting me an incredulous look. “This is why I’d prefer to keep you alive. So vivacious, even after three months in near darkness. I was certain you were on the cusp of breaking like the others many times but I realized what a treasure you were when Mr. Hux’s friends had their way with you. Invicta.”

It felt like I’d broken. No, it was more akin to being shattered into a thousand tiny fragments that somehow stayed together and formed a passively functioning woman. I was petrified of Kylo and the other things he might do now that I had been granted some degree of freedom. He was wildly unpredictable and I was trying to suppress the constant urge to scream.

Yet there was a new level of understanding between us. I had ascended beyond the typical victims and entered into a new realm of Kylo’s undeniably warped mind that I suspected straddled the lines of admiration and his sadism. He liked me, but he still needed to cause me suffering.

I stretched out my legs. “Don’t pull out the Latin on me.”

“It’s from a poem. ‘Invictus’ by William Ernest Henley.” Kylo collected my glass and rose to bring them to the sink. “It fits you well, Miss Kenobi,” he called.

Poetry… my least favorite thing in the world besides chemistry. I massaged my legs, upset that they had gotten so thin from misuse. I’d need to exercise as often as I could to gain my muscles back. They had atrophied horribly in the basement but Kylo probably wanted it that way.

Regardless of my desire to escape, there was clearly no way out. The heavy electroshock bracelet on my wrist reminded me of that and I wasn’t willing to risk being shocked to death trying to get away. I examined in curiously, wondering where Kylo got all of his supplies. He probably stole some of the medication directly from St. Luke’s but what about the expensive machinery?

Being upstairs was a breath of fresh air and my mind was working properly again. The Nevada wilderness carried on endlessly before me and I had plenty of room to walk around instead of being confined to a cage. I sighed with relief and lay down on the floor flat to look at the ceiling.

Kylo lay beside me, putting his arms behind his head. He looked bored. I still couldn’t wrap my head around him, even after all this time and finally speaking to him like a normal human again.
“I’m supposed to be a resident now,” I said.

He nodded. “Your friends miss you terribly.” And his palatial gaze moved to mine, serious and stiff. “Unfortunately, I needed you more than they did.”

“You could’ve asked,” I said. “Wouldn’t that have been more prudent than the whole kidnapping and three months of torture spiel? I would still be practicing medicine, no one would think you’re suspicious, and you could satisfy whatever horrible part of you needs to inflict suffering on other people.”

“I have plenty of reasons for avoiding that. Firstly, requesting permission ruins the pleasure and I don’t have a conscience to restrain my actions, anyway. It would have been such a bother convincing you to have the tubal litigation, and you would have fought me every step of the way. Women don’t particularly like to be controlled in my experience and they also tend to shy away when you mention you’re an insatiable sadist.”

I tinkered with the bracelet and he seized the offending hand to hold it between us, squeezing threateningly. Fuck, maybe he did need all of those pills.

“There are certain groups who would be happy to oblige,” I said tersely.

“I’m aware. I am nothing like them.”

Excuses, excuses. I could feel the blood pulsing through my fingers from his strong grip and I closed my eyes to try to ignore it. I had other things to reflect on besides Kylo Ren, like how I’d just killed a man with camphor. Did Armitage deserve it? I could’ve died from the seizure he induced in me with the Elavil, but luckily Kylo showed up in time to give me the antidote.

It was wrong for me to keep practicing medicine even if I did manage to escape and return to normal life. I’d broken the golden rule of the Hippocratic Oath and with that kind of blood on my hands, I couldn’t provide healing to the sick. It would always follow me wherever I went. If I could have kids it would kill me to even touch them knowing what I had done to get my revenge.

Kylo was the one who had kidnapped me so I should’ve turned the needle on him. His stranglehold on my hand loosened but he still kept his long fingers around mine and I shifted uncomfortably. I couldn’t do it. Why? That was for a psychiatrist to decide. I turned all my rage toward Armitage.

The night crawled on and I began to drift off, surprisingly at ease on the floor in front of the window. I finally didn’t have to curl up in a cage and dread hearing the door open. Now I was had a degree of freedom to stretch my legs and wander the house. All I had to do was keep it clean and organized and try not to step on Kylo’s toes. It was a vast improvement.

“How’s my dad doing?” I asked after another stretch of silence.

“Poorly. He moved from Sparks to the area to assist in finding you but the police are waiting for your body to show up in Lake Mead. He’s rather taciturn.”

Poor dad. He had to be heartbroken and so confused. I held back my tears, wishing I hadn’t asked.

“That sucks,” I mumbled dismissively.

“When we reach the level of understanding I would like, you will be able to see him again.” Kylo was stroking my hand with his thumb but I didn’t think he even knew he was doing it. “Dr. Tico and Dr. Taylor are in a relationship as well. I believe it’s a comfort to her in your absence.”
“What level of understanding?” I pressed. “Tell me what you want and I’ll do it now. I want to see them again. I want them to know I’m still alive.”

“All in good time, Miss Kenobi.”

Ooo, he was frustrating.

I glared at him and sat up stiffly, rubbing the sleepiness from my eyes. “I’m going to bed. I’ve suffered enough today from you and your friends.”

“They weren’t my friends,” Kylo said. He sat up as well and reached out to run his lean fingers through my hair, twirling it around his index finger. “I am far too possessive to share you with other men in that manner. Your hair is lovely. I like a bit of red in a woman’s hair.”

His hands curled around the back of my neck and he smiled venomously. “However, your tone is irritating me. I suggest you drop it before I am forced to take more drastic measures.”

He shoved me before standing up and I collapsed on my side, still too weak to react quickly. I watched him leave the living room and walk up the stairs and remained on the floor, simmering with anger. I’d get him sooner or later. Whether it was in a week or three more months or even after I’d been set ‘free,’ I would have my second sweetest revenge on Kylo.

I ground my jaw and got up to follow him. First I needed to shower and then I was going to sleep until the end of time in a bed, and I would love every second of it.
Pale sunlight was pouring into my bedroom when I was startled awake by heavy weight on top of me. Disoriented, I tried to push them off but they were lying across my back and pinned my hands beside my head, squeezing my fingers in theirs. It was still a bit dark in the bedroom and taking a while for me to remember where I was and who was attacking me in bed.

Kylo didn’t say anything. The only sound was the rustling of the sheets as I continued to struggle and my groggy whimpers mingled with his shushing. Birds twittered outside to herald the arrival of morning.

He buried his face in my hair and inhaled deeply, sliding a hand along my ribs and down to my hip to prop me up to a better angle. I was panting in fear into my pillow and fisting my sheets, knowing full well what would happen if I fought back. His fingers crept between my legs and I turned to hide my reactions in the pillow instead of trying to breathe. Maybe I’d pass out.

The silence was deafening. I could hear my heart beating in my ears and feel Kylo’s on my back; his pulse picked up when I squirmed from his touch and moaned. The bed creaked a bit when he pushed inside me, ruffling a handful of my hair into his fist to give him more leverage. His fingers stretched across the side of my head, squeezing and straining with each movement.

It wasn’t as long as usual and I was left slightly uncomfortable when he was through. He slid a hand under my chin, cupping it and forcing my head to turn so he could kiss me hard on the mouth. I twisted away and hugged my pillow. I was covered in sweat. Get out of me. Get out of me and leave me alone.

Kylo rose from the bed, cracking his joints. “Come, Miss Kenobi. We’re going to shower before I leave for work.”

I hugged my pillow tighter and didn’t say anything. *Bite me.*

All was quiet for several minutes. I could hear him shuffling around and I wondered if he was letting it go. Wary, I raised my head a bit to look around the room and was happy to find it empty. The curtains were open to reveal the barren landscape and the birds were all starting to wake up. I turned on my back to stretch and hoped Kylo had already left.

A brief stinging in my wrist preceded the electric shock.

Rippling, hot water split from the point of contact through my whole body, conducting via nerves and veins. It was dreadfully uncomfortable as it passed through my bones and seized my muscles and I could feel my heart immediately burst into faster rhythm. The electricity died out seconds later, leaving me sluggish and with a heavy, ringing head. I swallowed and gasped for breath.

Kylo was at the foot of the bed with his car keys and his thumb was on a black object. He was naked, smiling eerily at me while I recovered from the shock. Holy shit—was that electrocution?
“Come, Miss Kenobi,” he repeated, idly swinging the keys around his index finger. “Shower.”

I couldn’t get out of the bed fast enough. I never wanted to feel the shock again.

We went to a bathroom in the hallway instead of Kylo’s. It was largely the same, minus the huge tub. Another shower with opaque sliding glass doors was waiting across the warm tile floor. Of course he had heated floors in his bathrooms. Spare no expense. He impatiently took off my clothes when I stood awkwardly in the middle of the bathroom.

“No need to be modest,” Kylo said, throwing them in a pile. “I’ve seen you naked plenty of times.”

“And my skin still crawls every time,” I snapped.

He shoved me into the glass doors and they rattled. I spun around to confront him and he slammed his hands on either side of my head, leaning over me to try to look intimidating. I glared up at him and pressed my palms to the class to steady my trembling.

“Don’t tell me you miss your cage already, kitten,” he said in a soft, disapproving tone. He moved closer and grabbed my chin, squeezing hard. “Would you like to go back so soon?”

A retort was itching madly at the back of my throat, waiting to be unleashed in a scream, but I swallowed to keep it back. He wouldn’t hesitate to do it if he thought I was stepping too far out of line. I needed to step lightly around the boundaries and feel him out to figure out exactly where they were. Unfortunately, Kylo was so unpredictable that I didn’t know if I’d ever accomplish that.

My silence spoke volumes. He opened the shower and pushed me inside, and I folded my arms over my chest stubbornly. The water was cascading around me a few moments later and Kylo pulled my arms apart to start washing me. I stood stiff, refusing to yield but obeying when he told me to rinse off. He ran his fingers through my hair to clean it as well while I stood miserably under the stream of water.

Thankfully Kylo didn’t expect me to do the same to him. I looked at the bracelet on my wrist while he cleaned himself and ran through ways to destroy it. There had to be something. Maybe if I sent enough electricity through it something would be… shorted out?

Fuck, I didn’t know a damn thing about technology outside of what was necessary for work and pleasure. Dad was always good at tinkering with computers and software but I always blew him off when he tried to show me. Regret seared through me and I averted my eyes to the floor, hoping Kylo wouldn’t notice. It felt like all I did anymore was sit around and feel bad for myself. And it continued on when I was set free to sit in the bedroom again. I stared at the wall, waiting for Kylo to finish getting ready for work, the same place I should’ve been going. Now I’d taken on Anna’s role and I would have to do the chores around the house. It was a change of pace from lying in a cold cage but I was a doctor. Why did it give me a sense of accomplishment to graduate from being an animal in the basement to being a maid under house arrest?

Kylo stepped into the room. He was in his scrubs and putting on a watch. I didn’t look at him, too concerned with finding what scraps of my will to survive were still lying around. He was standing in front of me a few moments later with a syringe and I reflexively lay back. Still with the feeding tube.

“Good girl,” he murmured. He leaned over me to kiss my forehead, cradling my head in one hand. His thumb stroked my lips and I seriously considered trying to bite it off. “Remember: don’t
try to leave the house. I’m sure you won’t after being acquainted with the electric shock that accompanies it. Feel free to do what you wish otherwise.”

I resisted the urge to flinch when Kylo injected the puree through the tube. It wasn’t cutting it, even though I was sure he put a potent enough cocktail of vitamins and minerals. Patients on feeding tubes just lost weight not being able to eat normally. I’d have to look around in the kitchen.

He yanked on my hair and I grimaced in pain.

“Is that clear, Rey?” he asked quietly.

I took several sharp breaths and nodded, refusing to speak. Kylo pulled harder and I yelped.

“Yes!” I hissed.

“Speak when spoken to.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

I’d been under the impression Kylo wasn’t going to slap me. The retaliatory palm across my cheek jarred me from my sense of security with a stinging reminder that he didn’t have any sense of morality. My right ear rang as I stared in shock at the wall across the room, eyes tearing up. It had been so long since he last did it... I thought things had changed.

My silence seemed to please him. He stood up and left without another word and I didn’t start breathing again until I heard the front door shut.

I crawled under the covers completely to curl into a ball. The birds sang outside the window, tormenting me with their freedom while I was trapped in a house with a psychopath. The tears spilled over and I cried for a while, hiding my face in my hands from the paranoid fear that Kylo would see.

It was cathartic finally shedding my grief. The episode was broken by brief moments of clarity in which I renewed my vow to escape and return to my old life. But I would fall apart again, reduced to sobbing and sniveling like a child. I remained under the sheets for a few hours before summoning up the willpower to sit up again and face the day.

I would have to defy Kylo in more subtle ways. For now, staying alive and keeping the abuses to a minimum was the most important. The more it happened, the faster I would break.

What kinds of things did Anna do? She made food, cleaned dishes, and probably did laundry. I scowled at the thought of it, wiping my eyes with the backs of my hands. I’d graduated from being a possession to being an unpaid house servant. Whatever. Maybe it would keep his hands off me.

Growing up without my mom didn’t mean I hadn’t learned any traditionally ‘female’ tasks. Dad taught me how to cook, sew, and mostly importantly, clean like a demon. He was fastidiously neat and instilled the same thing in me so it wasn’t too far out of my element to do what used to Anna’s job. I hadn’t missed out on much in my childhood. Some women used to whisper that I would become a tomboy or a lesbian (as if either of those things were bad) but I had disappointed them tremendously.

The house was huge, obviously, so the work took most of the afternoon. It helped keep my mind off the situation and I wore one of Kylo’s shirts to avoid seeing the black bracelet weighing down my wrist. I rummaged through the pantry until I found ingredients to make spaghetti. It was for my
benefit, too. I wanted to taste solid food in my mouth again.

Four o’clock came and the meatballs were cooking, so I wandered off to find something to occupy myself with. Kylo wouldn’t be back until 6:30, maybe later, giving me plenty of time to explore.

On the second floor down the hall from Kylo’s bedroom I discovered another room. Curious, I tried to open it and was surprised to find the handle wouldn’t turn. My eyebrow raised and I settled back into the same detective mode that got me in my current predicament. What could he possibly want to hide from me? I had a firm grasp on how demented he was so smoke and mirrors weren’t necessary.

Hm. Another day, then, when I had more time.

I moved on to look through the books in his bedroom, pausing to smell them. Books… how I missed books. I sat on the bed I had made and browsed through medical textbooks and *The Great Gatsby* and stumbled upon an art book. It was nothing special, just some old time paintings. I’d forgotten Kylo liked art—he said the kids in elementary school made fun of him for it.

The front door suddenly slammed shut and I nearly dropped the book in my haste to put it back. Holy shit, it was already 8 o’clock! I scurried from the room to greet Kylo but paused when I heard him knock something heavy over. He muttered under his breath and stumbled.

“How!” he shouted. He paused, trying to gain his bearings. “Ah, I’ll find ‘er…”

My blood ran cold. He had to be drunk. A bad day turned ten times worse with alcohol involved. Fuck, why was he drunk? Kylo never drank to excess.

I skittered down the hall to the third bedroom that was unoccupied. He was coming up the stairs slowly, snickering to himself and mumbling things I couldn’t make out. Heart thundering, I sequestered myself in the closet, taking care to shut the door with as little noise as possible, and hunkered down in the far corner in the darkness. Maybe he wouldn’t see me. Maybe he’d think I disappeared.

Time dragged on. Kylo kept tripping over himself and swearing when he did. The alcohol had to counteract with all the pills he took. He must’ve skipped them for surgery.

Finally, he arrived at the room I was in. I held my breath, wishing I had voluntary control of my racing pulse, as he wandered about. He dropped to his knees to check under the bed and rose. Silence settled on the room and I strained my ears, hoping he had given up and left.

He laughed ominously and I started shaking.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” he sang.

Footsteps came closer. I shrank down, trying to fade into the background. Kylo would loop around and leave the room. I squeezed my eyes shut. Home; I was home making cupcakes with dad and we were bringing them on our fishing trip in the morning. Please help me, daddy.

He slammed his hands on the closet door beside me and I covered my mouth to hold in my shriek. His palms squealed down the wood as he collapsed on his knees with a thud. I heard another noise and realized he was pressing his ear to the door. My eyes were wide and terrified, staring through the darkness at the thin slab separating me from the far more dangerous inebriated version of Kylo.

Silence. Tears trickled down my cheeks. I wanted to go home. Why did he pick me?
Rustling, like he was rubbing his cheek on the door, then:

“I can hear your heart beating, kitten.”

The door flung open and I wedged myself in the corner, screaming for him to leave me alone. Blinding light and Kylo was all I could see. He was far worse drunk.
Renaissance

Chapter Notes

The master bedroom was the quietest of all and Kylo left me to my own devices there when he was through. I lay slumped on my side, hugging a pillow and watching a news report flash across the television. Evidence of our lengthy time together was strewn throughout the room: the peculiar balls were lying on the nightstand beside an open bottle of lube—I had been too terrified to react the way he wanted, and I suspected I was developing an infection.

Some of his clothes littered the floor. The shirt that he had torn off of me that now lay in a miserable pile of green scraps. His scrubs were elsewhere and he had recollected his boxers when he left the room. I was stark naked under the dim glow of the television with steel handcuffs around my wrists.

My eyes were wide and staring and my cheeks were cracked with tears. I only blinked when the burn in my eyes became unbearable. What if Kylo slipped into the room in that fragile second it took for my eyes to open again? I swallowed and the fraction of saliva I had in my dry mouth grated down my throat that was now fractured from screaming.

The manacles were hurting my wrists. I crawled from the embrace of the pillow, dragging myself on my elbows and wincing when pain lanced between my legs. After a few seconds it ebbed away to a dull throb and I shifted my hips around to slide off the bed but wound up crumpling on the floor. I panted, recollecting myself, and grasped the edge of the bed to pull myself to my feet. I staggered but stood on my trembling legs and took a few more steadying breaths.

Where had Kylo gone? It wasn’t like him to leave the scene so quickly after his crime. I swayed down the hall with my feeding tube still jutting from my abdomen in search of him. He’d put Prozac through the tube to get me to calm down when I started pitching a fit like never before. I was dizzy with chills and a transient ringing in my ears that arrived when my headache came back.

Soon I stumbled across the locked door. I paused when I heard scratching within over my tinnitus and turned to lean on the door when Kylo’s voice floated from within. A pencil was running across paper, reminding me that he mentioned he liked art. Exhausted from the short walk I raised my hands to knock.

“Nothing helps… I’m getting worse.”

I paused, holding my breath to make sure he didn’t hear me. There was a beat of silence before I heard papers shuffling and a soft thump. It was quiet, then…

…A distinct choking noise to restrain his sobs. He laughed a bit but his sardonic chuckles disintegrated into crying that froze me to the spot. I stared at the door. No. The monster did not have tears.

But he did. Kylo carried on for a long time while I remained rooted outside, listening with a mix of sadistic pleasure and stark horror. How dare he cry? He had no right to feel any emotion, much
less grief for himself. He’d killed people and tortured them and forced me to help him lobotomize Beverly. He had no right to align himself with humans. He was something else—a predator in a flesh suit.

It was pity for himself; for his slow descent into madness that not even prescription drugs could stop. He knew he would be consumed by his psychopathic tendencies and be caught.

Enraged, I pounded my fists on the door.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” I shrieked, tearing my throat open anew. The tears were coming back out of instinct and nothing more. “You have no right to cry!”

The sounds stopped and he rose quickly, toppling the chair he was sitting in. I stepped back with my jaw clenched as the door flung open outwards and a half-naked Kylo emerged. He shoved me into the wall before I could say anything more, eyes red from crying but furious beyond comprehension.

I screamed at him, frustrated with my powerlessness, and he shouted back at me. He kept pushing me over and over, giving me a bit of space each time so he could repeatedly throw me back into the wall. I backhanded him when I got the chance and he slapped his cheeks a few times to illustrate how little I could hurt him. He was too strong—I covered my face with my bound, shivering hands and cried.

Kylo stood over me as I slowly sank to the floor in a heap of shattered willpower. I feebly covered my head and squeezed my eyes shut. I’d hit my limit for the day already. I couldn’t take anything more.

He rolled me over on my back with his foot and stepped down on my stomach. It made breathing even harder and I tried to stop crying to draw in breaths but wound up sputtering for air. He glaring down at me, an elegy of emptiness in the dark hallway. I could see marks on his legs where he injected himself.

Trapped, I gnashed my teeth together and drew sharp breaths through them, straining to escape and hide somewhere. All the blood was rushing to my head from the stress of trying to move even an inch under his foot and it throbbed loudly in my ears. I squirmed, shrieking hoarsely. He was too heavy.

Then Kylo’s weight was off me in the next blessed second. I sucked in a cleansing breath, wheezing and turning over on my side to wrap an arm around my stomach. He circled me like a vulture.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said, “and I’d like to rip that feeding tube out of you.” He suddenly stepped on my head, grinding my cheek into the rough carpet. “And let the chips fall where they may.”

I wanted to disappear. I wanted to shrivel into the hollow shell I was becoming and be free of him. Eyes sealed shut, I held back more tears and pressed my trembling lips together, hoping he would stop if I didn’t make any noise. That was what drove him, after all: the reaction and the fear. If I ever wanted to get out; to have things return to normal, I couldn’t let him win.

He squatted down beside me, resting his forearms on his thighs, and cocked his head. All I could do was look back at him through the blurry veil across my eyes and wait for his next move.

Kylo raised an eyebrow. “Well, Miss Kenobi? What do you think?”

Head swimming, I managed to pull myself up on my hands but collapsed and was forced to roll
over on my back like a dog. I offered my handcuffed wrists toward him and they jangled lightly from my trembling. He glanced at them and back to me, feigning ignorance.

“Take them off,” I begged.

“What’s the magic word?”

“Now!”

The retaliatory slap across the face was hardly felt. I was too numb from our tussle and it stoked the fiery hatred festering in me. It invigorated me, burning anew with passion. How dare he shout at me? Throw me on the floor? I glared at Kylo and wiped the blood away from my mouth. He smiled and I imagined worms crawling out of his lips.

“Why would I try to ease your suffering?” he asked. He straddled my waist and leaned forward to grasp a fistful of my hair. “After all, you’re the only one permitted to cry.”

“You’re a murderer,” I spat. “You don’t even deserve to be alive.”

He yanked back on my hair—hard.

“Every time I have you whittled down, you recover. I am having an obscenely hard time training you into proper behavior, kitten.” He scowled, genuinely irritated. “I had hoped it would be a clean break but you’re a feisty woman. Perhaps I need to be more severe with your punishment.”

“Perhaps you should stop crying like a little girl!”

The peal of the doorbell interrupted Kylo before he could spout off a retort.

Both of us froze and for the first time, I saw shock on his face. It took me a second to start screaming and he hurriedly covered my mouth with both hands to muffle me. His grey eyes flickered to the end of the hallway and he waited for the sound again. I gnawed at his palms but he ignored me. My heart was racing—was someone coming to rescue me? Had they found out?

It rang again. Kylo swore under his breath and dragged me off the ground toward the mysterious room he had been crying in. He dumped me inside and unlocked my manacles to reconnect my wrists behind my back. I tried to make more noise but he fitted the ball gag in my mouth and paced a few times, trying to figure out exactly what to do with me. I was on my knees in the dark room, head bowed.

A drawer opened and I heard the rattle of pills. He slammed it shut, muttering to himself, and the doorbell went off again. More movement, and papers drifting to the floor, and he returned. A needle buried into my left arm and I grimaced in mild pain.

“It’s my damn family,” Kylo said, brushing my hair from my face when he was through. He held my chin firmly in his fingertips and fixated his stormy gaze on me. “The Haldol should keep you quiet until I can get rid of them. But, just so we’re clear... Be very quiet, Miss Kenobi. You know what happens when you disobey me, and you’re already irritating me today. Be a good girl and lie down.”

He shoved me over and I kicked furiously at him as he left the room. The door shut and I was alone.

Haldol worked quickly. Weakened, I managed to roll over and sit up again, cross-legged on the floor as Kylo welcomed his family into the house. My head lolled back and I had a full view of the room. The drug distorted my vision somewhat—Kylo always gave me excessive doses to
cause the nasty side effects—and that made what I was seeing a hundred times worse.

The walls were covered in crude drawings and paintings. A few were professional and I recognized the one I had seen ages ago on my date to the art gallery with Kylo: the pale woman with black hair and ruby red lips. The others were different types and sizes with different materials. Some had been ripped out of a notebook or diary while others were laminated and poster-sized.

They were everywhere. I assumed there were at least a couple hundred and they started up at the top of the ceiling to the very bottom where it met the floor. Horrified, I scrambled backwards and pressed myself to the wall. They mostly showed women being killed or dying in various ways, most of them naked with their faces contorted in pain. He’d spent time on a select few but most were hasty scribbles.

Jesus Christ. Kylo had told me he liked art… it was another vector for his violence. I felt a paper tear behind me from my shifting and I looked down through hazy vision to see a child’s drawing beside me. It depicted three stick figures: a man, woman, and child, and all of them were bleeding.

I jerked away from it, staggering to my feet and swaying towards the desk. Muffled voices drifted along from downstairs but I knew they would never hear me. I couldn’t make enough noise to catch their attention. I collapsed in the chair Kylo had been sitting in and looked down to see more drawings.

They were all clearly labeled with my name. They were the same as the others but smudged from his hasty drawing. Me. They were all me dying in various ways, occasionally with my insides hanging out or the top of my skull cut off. He had a penchant for blood and it was scratched across the paper in bright red streaks. It was far worse than anything I had seen before. It was personal.

I stared at them in wide-eyed horror. Art wasn’t a passion for Kylo. From what I could see, he was a slave to it. It was another facet of his expression of violence—another means to an end.
going to upload the next few chapters quickly; probably two a day so this should be done in like three or four days

Hours went by with no word from Kylo. I’d heard his family leave quite a while ago but remained in the study surrounded by his countless gruesome pieces of art. My hands were numb behind my back and my jaw hurt from clenching around the ball between my teeth but I couldn’t find the will to stand up. I leaned back in the chair, naked under the unwavering faces surrounding me.

Exhaustion set in and I finally rose from the chair to find him. I couldn’t fall asleep with the gag in my mouth or I’d end up choking on my saliva. The door had been unlocked so I could slip out into the lightening hallway. I stumbled along, more tired than I had been in ages. It was almost morning… maybe he had gone to bed? He probably had to be to work and it wasn’t like him to budget his time improperly.

I wandered around the upper floor in search of Kylo before making my way downstairs. There were a couple of wine glasses hanging around but it was eerily silent otherwise. Confused, I walked into the living room and tried to find signs of where he had gone. Out for a drive, maybe?

Light was flooding over the landscape but the sun hadn’t quite risen and I could see Kylo sitting by the edge of the pool before the limitless horizon. His back was to me, blue shirt fluttering lightly in a breeze, and he had a bottle of wine beside him with a half-empty glass. I stared out at him for a few moments. Would I be electrocuted if I stepped outside the house, or was it only if I left the boundaries of the property? The pain in my wrists drove me to experiment.

It was difficult but not impossible to open the door backwards. I took a tentative step into the cool morning—it smelled like fresh rain and the cement was damp. It was my first time being outside in months but it was not the beautiful experience I had been hoping for. The sun was still cold behind the distant mountains, not warm and comforting, and I was too tired to enjoy it.

I tiptoed forward until I was standing a few feet behind Kylo. He didn’t budge. His legs were hanging in the clear water and his hands were clasped loosely in his lap. A breeze ruffled his black hair and he seemed to come to life from it. His shoulders shrugged and he glanced at me over his shoulder, grey eyes somber. He looked tired, too.

“Come,” he said. “Sit with me.”

There wasn’t much other choice. I couldn’t bully him into doing what I wanted. Aggravated, I plopped down where Kylo gestured and let my legs drape into the water as well. It was temperate and felt great on my sore muscles. I relaxed a bit but kept my guard up. Kylo was unpredictable and after seeing his little gallery I was even more afraid of him than normal. Still, he took out the gag and tossed it aside.

He ran a hand through his hair and casually rested it on my thigh afterwards. Ugh—weird. I didn’t like how the tingling I felt from his touch and I swung my legs gently through the water to dispel the tension. It reminded me of when we had sex in the basement after killing David together.
No, not together. I was under duress. I’d been starved and beaten and assaulted; I’d watched women die before me with a simple injection; I’d been treated like a dog and eaten out of a bowl. Kylo would’ve made me do it regardless of what I said. Besides, David deserved it for what he’d done to me.

My scalp prickled and I jerked my leg from under Kylo’s palm. It returned to his side and he looked at me like the rejection confused him. Fuck, his mood swings were giving me whiplash. He could be fairly tolerable and other times he could chase me through the house when he was drunk or have a screaming match with me in the hallway. Stepping cautiously was so tiring.

I looked away from him when I felt my cheeks burning. I’d suppress whatever Stockholm syndrome complex I was feeling as best as I could. I was not attracted to him. He was completely insane and a goddamn murderer. I would fight to the last breath and never give in to the pretty face.

“How’s your family?” I asked.

Kylo grasped my thigh again more firmly. “Fine. Alive and accounted for. They’re all still terribly upset that you’re missing but…” He hesitated and squeezed. “I think my father has an inkling.”

My heart soared but I quickly brought it back down to Earth. An inkling didn’t mean he knew and it certainly didn’t mean he was running to the police. But it was still something to hold onto.

“Oh?” I attempted as offhandedly as possible. “Why do you say that?”

“He was wandering around the house investigating. My mother always believed I could do no wrong but Han knew what I was from the beginning. I’m concerned he’ll call the police or return to look some more… It would be terrible if he found you or the retina scanner in the basement.”

Thank god one of his family members was suspicious. I hoped Rose would react the same way and immediately consider Kylo as a suspect but he and I had been getting along so well in the short time that we dated that she probably threw the thought out fast. Even after all the strange bruises we both bought his apology in a second. I was regretting more than a few decisions I’d made.

“Maybe it’s time to move on to phase three?” I suggested.

Kylo reached into his breast pocket to produce a key and unlocked my handcuffs. I rubbed my wrists and winced when I saw the angry red marks and dried blood smeared across them. He set them the handcuffs and key aside, not acknowledging my words, and nodded toward the pool.

“Get in,” he said.

“Um… I have a confession to make. I don’t know how to swim.”

He laughed, shaking his head and taking off his shirt. “Of course you don’t.”

It was odd but I’d actually never learned. Kylo stepped into the water that came up to his chest and reached up to pull me in with him. Being surrounded by water made me anxious and I clung to him as he sank in to an even deeper section, holding me tightly around the waist. It was warm and quiet but I was afraid he’d drop me and let me drown to solve all of his problems. I hid my face in his chest and squeezed my eyes shut.

“Nervous?” he murmured into my ear.

“Slightly.” I shivered and looked at the sun peeking over the horizon. “Mostly because I saw all
of your… artwork.”

“I told you I like to draw. What were you expecting, unicorns and landscapes?”

I shrugged. It was so warm in the pool—I was close to falling asleep. My eyelids drooped and I yawned, fighting against relaxing and staying vigilant. All I had to do was doze off…

“No,” I said sleepily, “just not as much blood.”

“It helps a bit. Lithium has the best effect but the damn tremors are getting worse. Sooner or later it will all stop working and I will lose everything I’ve attained.” He was drifting around through the water, voice vague and kind of bitter. “But I suppose that fact pleases you more than anything else, kitten.”

It didn’t for a couple of reasons. Mostly because I knew what would happen to me if Kylo lost everything: I would be the one to pay the price and be the first death in a long line of murders. But I had also gone through the trials and tribulations of med school and I knew it would be crushing to waste all of that time on something you couldn’t keep.

And of course, there was the small part of me that simply didn’t want to see Kylo exposed to the public. I had the intense urge to get away from him again as it crept from the furthest reaches of my heart and back into the light. After everything that happened I was still attracted to him. Hopefully therapy would fix that when I finally got back to freedom. It had to be a result of being held captive.

“I don’t care,” I mumbled.

Kylo pressed his cheek to the side of my head. “You will run straight to the authorities if I release you but keeping you here is becoming riskier. I’m not certain I can trust you to keep quiet.”

“And to think, you could’ve avoided all of this by asking me from the start.”

He ran a hand down my spine and held me closer, pausing in the middle of the pool. We were up to our shoulders and warm sunlight was spreading across my back.

“I would not trade our past three months together for anything, Rey,” he said. “It was lovely and I would gladly repeat it a thousand more times. You are truly one of a kind amongst the typical rabble. Allowing you out of your cage took away the sense of control I had and I was certain it would disturb me more than it has. Perhaps we can move on to phase three sooner rather than later.”

“Whatsoever,” I sighed, too tired to keep listening.

“Sleepy?” Kylo lifted a hand from the water to stroke the back of my head and kissed the crown of my skull. “I’m drained as well. Breha talks incessantly.”

We left the pool—Kylo carried me with one arm and picked up the wine and his shirt with his free hand. I was dead weight but I’d come to realize how ludicrously strong he was. He went to a gym every other weeknight for a couple of hours, evidenced by the sweat on his shirts when he would rap on my cage.

My chin was on his shoulder and my arms were draped loosely around his neck. He stopped to drop off the glass and wine in the kitchen and went upstairs with me, now shivering from the change in temperature. I closed my eyes as he brought me down the hallway and nudged open a door. Lights flickered on and I was placed on the cool linoleum floor in the bathroom.
I was about ready to drop to the ground and fall asleep. Kylo dried me off as well as himself before going to the bedroom, where he laid me on the bed and walked off. The bracelet felt heavy as hell as I turned over and realized I was in his room rather than mine. The thought of sleeping next to him made me queasy and I was briefly lucid from fear. It faded as quickly as it had come, though, replaced with ringing ears and a throbbing headache. It was too bright.

The curtains were drawn to block out the sunlight. I crawled toward the pillows and he turned me over on my back, kneeling between my legs with a telltale needle in his hand. *Fuck.* I was already too spent to fight him so why did he need to shoot me up with more drugs? I’d had so many recently… Haldol, Elavil, Klonopin, Ativan. It was a wonder nothing had counteracted and killed me yet.

When I whimpered and flinched away Kylo paused, cocking his head and eyeing me curiously. He wanted to keep me in a drug haze but I needed to come out of it. I needed to think clearly.

“Please don’t,” I croaked.

“Why shouldn’t I?”

I grasped at straws, half-conscious. “Because… because… I’ll do whatever you want. A-And I won’t complain or say anything. Or I will if that’s what you want.” I was riveted on the needle as I propped myself up and grasped the front of his shirt. “Please just tell me what you want and I promise I’ll do it!”

He blinked at me in surprise but didn’t put the needle down. Tears gathered in my eyes and I struggled to rein them in, my hold trembling on his shirt. The birds were starting to sing outside and their symphony drifted through the window and the curtain, buffering the silence.

Kylo puckered his lips and slowly reached over to set the needle on the nightstand beside a few bottles of pills lying on their sides. He pulled my hands away from his shirt and knitted his fingers through mine, pinning them beside my head with his own. His slate grey eyes studied mine for a moment.

“I want you to lie quietly while I fuck you,” he said. “No moving or making sounds.” He grinded against me in small circles and pressed our foreheads together. “Can you do that, kitten?”

I nodded spastically and a couple of minutes later he flipped me over on my stomach. The feeding tube stung from being moved but Kylo propped up my hips with a pillow and leaned across my back to grab a fistful of my hair. It was going to hurt. It was going to *really* hurt. I squeezed my eyes shut and braced myself for the pain as his other hand slipped along my stomach to my breasts.

He was draped over me possessively. “Never forget that you belong to me.”

That would prove to be heartbreakingly impossible.
Kylo’s slow descent into madness progressed gradually over the next few weeks. I wasn’t sure how long it would take him to snap and probably kill me along with himself but I kept a close eye on his changes. It was getting harder and harder to keep my wits about me and frighteningly enough, I was beginning to forget who I was. We were both going to collapse in on ourselves.

I’d hoped things would get better moving upstairs with only an electrocution bracelet to keep me in check but they worsened. It was as if I couldn’t exist outside of him anymore. I pined over him when he was gone and found myself cleaning and cooking not because I was afraid of punishment, but because I wanted him to be happy. I didn’t know what to make of my emotions. I couldn’t tell if I hated him. The fluttering in my chest and knotting in my stomach told me I didn’t.

It was a Friday night and I was sitting at the kitchen table with my head in my hands while our dinner—lasagna—finished cooking in the oven. What was wrong with me? Was it Stockholm syndrome? I massaged my temples, squeezing my eyes shut. I could poison him. That would resolve… nothing. I’d be trapped in the house with the bracelet and I’d die of starvation.

Even worse, I was finding that I didn’t want to leave. It was… logical to leave, or so I thought. He treated me like more of an equal and I was almost positive I could get through to him. Maybe that meant it was more practical to stay where I was and try to help Kylo. I wouldn’t have to see everyone and have to explain why they were wrong about him. I didn’t want to see them much anymore.

“Fuck!” I spat, knitting my fingers in my hair and yanking hard. “Fuck, get a grip, kitt—Rey.” I gritted my teeth. “Your name is Rey Kenobi, you fucking moron! You’re going to go home to your father and see your friend Rose… Rose…”

“Such foul words shouldn’t come from such a pretty mouth.”

I jerked upright in my chair when I heard his voice. It slipped down my spine and settled in my gut like a slow-acting poison, eliciting butterflies and sweaty palms. He didn’t like when I tried to remember.

Kylo appeared from the corner of the kitchen loosening the tie around his neck. He was dressed up in black pants and was currently taking off his shiny shoes, eyeing me reproachfully through the dim light. He’d had a meeting with a couple of other doctors about a patient to figure out what course of treatment she needed. I was finding it more difficult to keep up with medical jargon.

“S-Sorry,” I stuttered, scrambling to my feet. “I’m sorry.”

He watched me scurry around the kitchen getting the table ready for dinner. I put the lasagna and salad on the table and was racing back to get cutlery when a strong hand grabbed my upper arm to stop me in mid run. I babbled on, shrinking away from him, and Kylo’s hands moved to clutch my cheeks.

“Shhh,” he murmured. He shoved me into the counter, smiling. “Shut up.”

The meeting must have been particularly dull. His mouth was harsh and passionate against mine and he held me firm, refusing to yield when I tried to pull back. I kissed him back as best as I could and he shook his head before breaking away from me. My lips throbbed and I stared up at him anxiously.
“I want you to resist me,” Kylo said, sliding his hand up the back of my head to tangle his fingers in my hair. “Can you do that?”

I nodded, grasping the countertop behind me so hard that I was sure my palms were bleeding. He wrapped his other arm around my waist, fingers creeping underneath and up my bare spine, and I started pushing back at him in a feeble attempt to escape. His lips came back and he grinded his arousal against me, agitated and looking for release. Even after four or five months dealing with his aggression I was still afraid of Kylo.

He pushed me into the wall and ripped through the buttons of my shirt. They clinked to the floor along with the green fabric and he kissed away from my mouth on my jaw, moving gradually down my neck and collarbone to my breasts. It was difficult pretending to fight him.

We went on the floor but Kylo didn’t turn me on my stomach like usual. He worked with his pants between my legs while I continued pushing on his shoulders, torn between genuinely wishing he would get away from me and wanting him. He tugged my sweatpants and underwear halfway down my thighs before he grew too impatient and tried to enter me.

My spine arched from the pain and I wailed, now truly desperate to get away from him. He clapped a hand over my mouth and kept going, panting into my neck. I screamed and clawed at his fingers.

Then he suddenly leaned back and ran a hand through his hair. He gritted his teeth together before shifting forward again to slap me across the face. I whimpered in fear and pressed my palms to his chest while he glared furiously at me in the dark kitchen. Why did he stop? He never stopped.

“It seems your body doesn’t want me to get any further,” Kylo hissed. He reached between my legs and abruptly forced two fingers inside me, which still hurt but not to the same degree as sex. “You’re of no use to me if I can’t fuck you, kitten.”

I writhed uncomfortably, tears in my eyes. “Can’t you… fix it?”

“No,” he snapped. “I’m a brain surgeon, not a gynecologist. I was opting for the latter but cutting through skulls with a saw seemed much more appealing at the time.” He withdrew his fingers and sat back against the island, glowering at me. “I suppose I could do a pelvic exam. I have a speculum.”

“Let’s not be too hasty,” I said, scrambling to sit up. “Maybe I just need more time or—”

“I should have killed you weeks ago,” he interrupted. He moved his jaw side to side, irritated, and folded his arms over his chest. “You’re a burden. So why haven’t I?”

_Shit if I know_, I thought, staring at the floor. All I knew was that I didn’t want him doing a pelvic exam on me. I had to suffer one every two years for a pap smear and I absolutely hated them. It was uncomfortable and too intimate and once or twice I’d been stuck with a male OBGYN. I knew they were medical professionals but I also knew they were still men looking at a vagina.

Kylo grabbed my hair to drag me toward him and pushed my head down. I obediently wrapped my lips around him but he guided me otherwise, pulling and slacking on my hair to make me do what he wanted. I kept my eyes closed and waited for it to end while he groaned, occasionally thrusting into my mouth. It was still better than having agonizing sex with him.

He threw me into my chair at the table when he was done, leaving me in my cami while tugging up my underwear. I kept my head down, untangling the knots in my hair and refusing to look him in the eye. He rebuttoned his pants and sat across from me to put food on both of our plates. I’d
lost my appetite. I hadn’t gained much weight since leaving the basement.

“I know you like how I taste but you can’t possibly be *that* full now,” Kylo said. “If you don’t eat your food, I’ll put it in the blender and force it into your stomach.”

I stared at my salad. “Why won’t you just kill me?”

He leaned back in his chair, sipping his wine and eyeing me disapprovingly. “Don’t encourage me to dwell on it.”

“If you’re not going to let me go, kill me and put me out of my misery.” I clenched my hands on my lap into fists and swallowed hard. My throat hurt. “I… I can’t even remember Rose’s last name anymore. You win. I do whatever you want and I don’t complain anymore. You can’t have sex with me now, either, so what’s the point in keeping me here? You could find a hundred more women.”

“Are you certain you want to leave? You’ve been out of work for nearly five months now—I’m sure you’ve forgotten a few things. And what will you tell your coworkers and the police? It’s safer for you to stay here with me, kitten. You belong here now.”

I stood up quickly and my chair toppled over. I slammed my hands down on the table, rattling my glass of wine, and Kylo raised his eyebrows at me over the edge of his own glass.

“I’m supposed to go home!” I shouted.

He cocked his head. “Where is home?”

Of course I knew where home was: I wasn’t stupid. My mouth opened to spit it out but the words weren’t forthcoming. The blood drained from my face as the minutes ticked by and I remained standing in front of Kylo like a suffocating fish. Where was I from? I’d been born in Sparks, Nevada, but had I moved somewhere? And for that matter, where did I go to college?

Enraged, I flung my plate off the table and it shattered on the floor a few feet away. Kylo idly drank his wine and watched me fist my hair and shriek in frustration.

“This is your fault!” I accused, pointing a trembling finger at him. “You did this to me!”

He shrugged. “I would personally place blame on the drugs but by extension I suppose that encompasses me. So, if you’ve nowhere to go and cannot remember something as simple as your friend’s last name, why should I bother releasing you? You’re better suited to stay here.”

“I can’t stay here anymore,” I faltered. “I need to leave.”

The food was getting cold. My shattered table setting was lying on the floor a couple of feet away from me and Kylo was studying me through the frail light. He took another sip of his wine and rose, making me flinch back in fear. Fuck, he was going to feed me through the tube again. I shrank back against the counter as he approached slowly like a vulture circling its prey. He reached out to cup my cheek and I trembled miserably. His palm was warm and soft.

“You sound so hesitant,” he said. “Are you sure you aren’t happy with me?”

He shrugged. “I would personally place blame on the drugs but by extension I suppose that encompasses me. So, if you’ve nowhere to go and cannot remember something as simple as your friend’s last name, why should I bother releasing you? You’re better suited to stay here.”

“I can’t stay here anymore,” I faltered. “I need to leave.”

And leave you will—I need a gynecologist to fix your little issue.” He curled his index finger under my chin to raise my eyes to his and smiled. “But this is your home now, kitten. You will always come back to me and sleep in my bed and do what I tell you. You will not tell the police or
your friend—her name is Dr. Tico, by the way—a thing about our time together.”

My heart was racing. “You’re… You’re letting me go?”

“Ah, ah, ah, this is conditional release. I need to find some collateral to keep you on the right track. If I suspect you’re deviating from your course, it will buy you more endless weeks in your cage. With my father sniffing about and this recent development with you, I don’t have another option. We have some things to discuss before the time comes and I need to remove the feeding tube.”

Joyful tears spilled down my cheeks and I nodded eagerly before hugging Kylo without another word. He as hard as a rock and twice as cold but he awkwardly touched my head while I cried into his shirt. Mercy, mercy. He was being so merciful and nice to me. I owed him for it.

“I’ll do whatever you want,” I sniffled, squeezing harder. “Thank you so much, Kylo.”

“Of course,” he purred and kissed the top of my head. “Let’s clean the mess up and eat, hm?”

Dinner tasted better than it ever had. We cleaned up together, which was odd, and while we were in the midst of doing the dishes Kylo turned on the TV in the kitchen. I was trying to hold back my smiles while I scrubbed our plates when I heard distinct words that immediately sidetracked me.

“…Las Vegas authorities believe the Lake Mead killer has struck again. The body of 23 year old Penny Reid was discovered this morning and foul play is suspected. The search continues to find the madman responsible for numerous deaths over the past decade.”

I frowned. “Penny Reid? I thought I was the only one?”

When I looked over at Kylo I was surprised to see him staring in shock at the TV. He lowered his cup into the soapy water and swallowed hard enough to make his Adam’s apple bob.

“You are,” he said. “I think I’ve attracted a copycat.”
“A copycat?” I echoed. “You mean someone else is doing this?”

A second killer… how was that possible? And why would they want to follow in Kylo’s footsteps? I drew my hands from the soapy water while Kylo dried his own and focused on the news report. They didn’t say much else about the murderer’s M.O. or details about how Penny died. If she was brought to St. Luke’s for her autopsy Kylo would be able to get his hands on the finer details but that might rouse suspicion. Still, could he just ignore someone else throwing corpses in Lake Mead?

Kylo folded his arms and glared at the television. “Yes, and it’s problematic. Whoever it is will be looking for me to take up my work and that may lead them to stumbling across you. You’re staying here until I find them. It’s much safer than allowing you to wander about.”

Freedom was slipping through my fingers. I grabbed his arm with my wet hands when he started to walk away and he paused, glancing down at my offending grasp.

“But what about me seeing the doctor?” I asked.

“I’d prefer you alive and unfuckable than dead.”

I frowned. Since when? If a serial killer got to me that would solve a lot of his problems. But I brushed off Kylo’s words, not putting as much stock in them as I used to, and shifted closer to Kylo to press my body to his side. He blanched for a brief moment, surprised by my candor. He was accustomed to being the initiator and forcing me to go along with everything.

“I’ll be careful,” I said softly, careful not to overstep my boundaries. He had to feel like he was in control. “The police will have a lot of questions for me so I’ll be safe and you can bring me home from work every night. You’ll always know where I am and who’s with me.”

Kylo’s eyes lingered on my mouth. “You won’t be returning to work so soon. They will place you in therapy and the questions will never end. I’m not entirely sure you’re ready, kitten.”

I’d never felt so powerful. He was listening to me for the first time since I had met him, and it was after he threw me in his basement for three months. His grey gaze was willing more words from me instead of cutting through me and demanding silence and obedience. He raised his eyebrows. Was he… were we equals? Did my submission give me better standing with him?

“I’m ready,” I insisted. “We can think of a good cover story together and you can get back to using me how you see fit. Like you said, I’m sort of wasting away inside. I’ll reintegrate at work, go see the gynecologist, and the pressure will be off both of us. You know I’m good at figuring out the truth—I can help you find whoever’s copying you.”

Separate, but equal. Could I make that work?

He turned to face me and threaded his fingers through my hair to gently cup my cheeks. His palms were soft and warm but his grip was firm. “I’m concerned you’ll tattle on me. Not that it matters, I suppose. It would be your word against mine and they have no way into my basement.”

I nodded ardently, grasping his wrists. “Exactly. No one’s going to find out. I’ll take it to my grave.”

Neither of us moved nor spoke for several minutes. Kylo was stony-faced but a smile touched the
corners of his mouth and spread gradually. I blinked up at him, unnerved.

“You are an endearing little creature,” he murmured. “So eager to please even after all these months of torture. I’m not sure if I’ve broken you or you’re simply waiting for me to set you free. If it’s the latter, you are an impressive actress and should consider changing career paths.” He tightened his hold and his smile became more foreboding. “That said, I expect complete obedience.”

“I know.”

“I will know where you are and who you are with at all times. You will continue to do as you’re told. If you attempt to deviate or disobey I will keep you in your cage until the day you die. This freedom is a gift, kitten, and we mustn’t be ungrateful.”

“Yes, I understand,” I said, getting kind of impatient. “I’ll do whatever you want.”

Kylo released me to brush back my hair, doting like a parent sending their child off to school. “You already voluntarily helped me kill Armitage so I suppose on some level you mean what you say. If I need your help again I will expect you to assist me without any complaints.” He scowled. “No more of that melodramatic nonsense.”

“There won’t be.”

“You may experience a withdrawal from the drugs. Don’t give the police a laundry list—we don’t want them linking the missing medication to St. Luke’s and investigating the staff. You know what counterindicates and what you need to avoid. Elavil, Klonopin, lithium, Haldol, Ativan, Valproate… many are out of your system by now but you’ll be wanting to watch for withdrawal symptoms.”

I rolled my eyes and crossed my arms. “Yeah, I know. I’m a doctor.”

Screaming and crying didn’t get me anywhere with Kylo. I had to control myself and try to look as composed as possible. When I was home I could bawl my eyes out in my bedroom without worrying about him seeing me and taking it as an invitation. He was horrible to me but I would do what he said. He’d been nice and that glimmer of camaraderie kept me faithful.

Was I that weak to fall for a smile and the ‘gift’ of freedom? He owed it to me. He had stolen it from me in the first place and was conditionally returning it. It wasn’t fair but I wasn’t going to argue with him because I knew exactly what would happen if I committed that atrocity.

“I’ll remove your feeding tube tonight,” Kylo continued, ignoring my sarcasm. “Don’t tell them about your tubal litigation, either. Obscure as much as you can without rousing suspicion.”

“Easier said than done. They’re going to do a physical evaluation and they’ll notice I had my stomach cut open. Plus, the litigation left a small scar. Maybe I should hint that I was taken out of the state… I could suggest it was a woman, too, but the OBGYN will notice the… um… damage.”

And the thought of that put a cruel smirk on Kylo’s face.

We sat in the living room to rehearse our story. The police wouldn’t push me too hard for a while—in fact, they’d probably give me a week of solitude to recover from my experience. I would suggest I was taken across state lines but tell them I wasn’t sure exactly where to try to defer any connections to the bodies in Lake Mead. I’d tell them I had never seen my kidnapper’s face directly as he had always worn a mask but that I knew he was short and lanky.
Being vague was the key to diverting their suspicion. It also meant I would have to keep the truth inside forever and live every day fully aware of what had really happened to me. Most of it had been repressed and I could only draw forth certain memories. My mind couldn’t tolerate the bulk of them.

Kylo drank a glass of wine and rose from the couch, nodding toward the hall. “Come. I’m going to take out the feeding tube. As much as I would like to leave it in it will be obvious a surgeon placed it.”

“Um… Is that a good idea when you just drank alcohol?”

“I could sew your stomach with two bottles of wine in my bloodstream,” he said, arrogantly strutting out to the kitchen to put his glass in the sink. “Any idiot can seal an ostomy.”

His confidence was comforting and unnerving. Sure he was an amazing surgeon but I knew how he was with alcohol. Still, I didn’t have any say in the matter. I took a deep breath and got up to follow him.

The basement had more clutter than before. While Kylo moved things aside to get to the place I had been trapped for three months, I wondered what he would do with all his equipment. Maybe he would end up killing me and carrying on like always. I rubbed my forearm, spine prickling. No, he couldn’t. I heard him crying about how he couldn’t control himself anymore.

What would that translate into? My death or my permanent place at his side? Would I ever be able to tell the police and Rose what had really happened?

The main population room was cold as always. I shivered while Kylo flickered on the lights to cast a glow across the ten steel cages where he kept his victims. It had the ambiance of a horror movie, with the stained floor and weak lighting and doors hanging open. I watched him organize things a bit before he kept moving onward to a set of steel drawers I hadn’t noticed.

“What are you going to do with all of this?” I asked.

He peeled off his shirt and glanced at the cages. The harsh, unforgiving lighting made him look kind of tired and vulnerable. His black hair was mussed from all the touching and his grey eyes were distant.

“Well I don’t think I can sell it on Craigslist,” he said sarcastically. He furrowed his brow, regaining his usual trivializing demeanor. “Though that would be a good place to look for new occupants. What do you think, kitten? Can you help me kill a handful of people to prove your commitment?”

“Of course,” I said without missing a beat. If I hesitated, everything could fall apart.

Kylo put on green scrubs and I remembered seeing him in the hallways at St. Luke’s, wondering why such a perfect man was alone. He pulled a mask up over his mouth to cover his smile.

“You know where to go,” he said. “I’ll give you anesthesia this time and remove the bracelet while you’re asleep. Recovery should only take a day or two of rest and we will hammer out the finer details of your freedom. I still don’t have good collateral on you.”

No, Kylo didn’t have much to keep me loyal. He could kill me, sure, but if I ran to the police it wouldn’t matter. He didn’t have Rose or my dad to hold over my head, either. All that kept me tethered to him was the same horrible and unwelcome feeling I had been confronted with when we killed Armitage together. It was a small but powerful thing, gradually crawling forth toward the light.
I’d felt love before. This was a warped version of it that turned me into a slave.

He looked at me expectantly, raising his eyebrows, and I skittered off toward the OR. The cement was freezing on my bare feet—why did he have to keep everything to arctic? I pushed open the heavy door and slipped inside to will my heartbeat back to a normal rhythm. I did not belong to myself anymore.

Worse yet, I was confronted with the table from my nightmares. My dear friend Dr. Beverly Lewis had died on it with my forced participation. I’d been, as Kylo put it, ‘spayed’ in the same spot and had a feeding tube inserted with no anesthesia. I had killed a man there. He was no innocent but I had still ended a life. Could I ever return to being a doctor with that blood on my hands?

The lights cast an eerie glow across it. I hesitated before stripping naked and climbing to my place, pulling a thin blue sheet across my body and over the feeding tube jutting from under my ribcage. It had all been under duress. I wouldn’t have done it otherwise.

The door groaned open to cast more light across the floor and Kylo stepped inside. He went to the cabinets to gather supplies, laying them out on the tray beside the table, and finally washed his hands before approaching me. He smiled under his mask and snapped his gloves on. I stared up at him.

“Everything will be fine,” he murmured. “Trust me.”
Screaming dissipated the hold the anesthesia had over me.

I groggily came to consciousness, floundering for a sense of proportion to where I was. The lights were blazing overhead and an IV was buried in my elbow; it still smelled like surgery and hospital. When I tried to move my hands I realize they were bound to the table. My knees were bent and ankles bound like I was at the gynecologist. I whimpered in fear and twisted my wrists as the shrieking escalated.

The cuff was gone from my wrist and the feeding tube had been taken out. I could feel dull pain in my stomach but it was nothing major. I swallowed hard and summoned up my voice.

“Kylo,” I rasped. Water… I needed water. “…Kylo!”

The groan of a metal door and click of a lock was my only response. The shouting had descended into sobbing and I could hear him murmuring something to the person. I pulled on my restraints, straining to hear what he was saying. It was only supposed to be me. Why did he get someone else?

Footsteps approached the OR. I was still naked underneath the sheet, shivering as the temperature of the room caught up with me. My heart was pounding and I could feel the same sickening jealousy I was subjected to whenever Armitage was around Kylo. I struggled to escape, weakly calling his name. It was only supposed to be me. It was only supposed to be me.

Dim light from the common room flooded into the OR and Kylo stepped inside. He was in a polo and jeans and would have looked otherwise normal if it wasn’t for the maniacal glint in his grey eyes. He smiled at me and ran a hand through his black hair while the new captive regained her voice. The screaming started again, and while I was frightened by it, he was utterly immune.

He stood between my legs and I woozily watched him push the sheet back over my knees. I curled my toes against the cold metal stirrup when I realized what he was intending on doing.

Kylo unzipped his pants and stepped closer until I could feel his heat against mine. All I could think of was the pain from the kitchen and I whined, yanking on my wrist cuffs in a vain attempt to escape. His fingers crept across my knees to my thighs and he shushed me.

“Quiet, kitten,” he whispered, looming over me like a storm cloud. “I need you right now. The painkillers will help.”

They hardly did a thing. I screamed so loud that Kylo covered my mouth but he didn’t go any faster. He was taking his time with me in spite of my agony and soon my tears were running across his fingers. I’d been attacked quite a few times at that point and even factoring in my encounter with Armitage’s friends, the incident on the table was by far the worst.

After an eternity he finished between my trembling legs. Instead of withdrawing and leaving me
alone Kylo leaned across me to kiss my forehead, pushing himself deeper. I was sweating and felt disgusting and no matter how much I twisted I couldn’t get away from him. My eyes rolled back—it hurt.

He kept kissing me, moving across my cheeks and nose and down to my neck. “Are you upset?”

What a nasty trick question. I stiffened my upper lip, holding back a torrent of tears, and slowly shook my head. I was in blistering agony and he wouldn’t get out of me. ‘Upset’ was too weak a word.

Kylo leaned back and stepped away from me to peel off his shirt. He slipped his fingers through his hair again, plastering it back, and opened a cabinet on the other side of the OR. I couldn’t move of course and was forced to lie on my back like a used toy. He was a monster.

“Our new friend’s name will be Puppy.” He took out a vial and a needle. It was probably Haldol.

“Stupid,” I croaked.

He smiled to himself and drew some of the drug into the needle, clenching it between his teeth for a brief second. “Envy is an ugly color, kitten.”

I’d kind of wondered where Kylo injected himself to avoid track marks. It was in the thigh, of course, a place no one would ever see on a man. He readjusted his pants and took a deep breath as he aligned everything in the cabinet. Puppy and kitten… what a freak.

When he freed me from the restraints I noticed a tremor in his hands. I pretended not to see but watched it from my peripheral, shocked that he fumbled a bit with unlocking me. It was a side effect of lithium, not Haldol. He moved away again when I was out of the cuffs and I slowly sat up to watch him opening and closing his hands into fists.

I rubbed my wrists and wiped tears from my eyes. The shaking was getting worse.

“Someone’s going to find out about that,” I said as I got down from the table. “Either one of the nurses will notice during surgery or you’ll accidentally kill a patient.”

“I know that!” he snapped, wringing his fingers and glaring at me over his shoulder.

Sucks to be you, I thought to myself with a hint of sadistic glee.

Sooner or later one of his coworkers would notice and Kylo would at minimum be forced to leave surgery. He wouldn’t be able to cut people up in the way he enjoyed and would have to stay on the sidelines diagnosing and watching patients from afar. That would probably make him snap if nothing else did—I knew he got some pleasure and release from hacking open skulls and picking through them.

The floor was cold. I folded my arms over my chest and crossed my legs, still not entirely comfortable with standing around naked. The throbbing pain between my thighs was dulled somewhat by the painkillers Kylo had given me but it was still almost acute.

But the feeding tube was gone, leaving only a small scar behind, and the heavy electrocution bracelet had been taken off as well. Those were two things I could be thankful for.

We left the OR and went out to the main population room. Puppy had fallen silent for the most part and was sniffling to herself in her cage. Her clothes were lying on top of another one across the room. I rubbed my upper arms and walked along after Kylo, my feet slapping rapidly on the cement and his shoes clicking at a slower gait. He paused in front of the girl he had kidnapped and...
smiled at me.

“You can come see her if you’d like,” he said. “I’m sure she’d love the company.”

“I need a drink.”

“Hmph… I suppose you do.”

The girl took a sharp breath. “Hello? Is there someone else there?” She pulled herself forward and wrapped her fingers around the bars on the cage but I couldn’t see her face. “Please help me! He said he would bring me back to my dorm and—”

Kylo kicked her cage and she squealed in fear, scurrying backwards again. I glanced down at his hands in his pockets to see they were still trembling.

“She’ll learn,” he muttered. “All of you do.”

We went upstairs, leaving the freezing, dreary basement and Puppy behind. It was early morning from what I could tell: Kylo must have knocked me out for the entire night after the surgery. I hobbled upstairs to the bathroom in my old bedroom while he went to the kitchen to get me water.

It would be one of my last nights staying with Kylo. Soon I’d be back in my apartment with Rose and everything would go back to normal. I could see dad and tell him I was still essentially in one piece, return to work, and put all the things I had gone through behind me. I’d need some intensive therapy to be able to function from day-to-day. Maybe St. Luke’s would offer it to me.

When I was done in the bathroom I wrapped my wet hair in a towel and stepped out to see a glass of water and some crackers on my nightstand. I put on pajamas and was surprised to see ‘MON, 10AM’ on the alarm clock. Kylo should’ve been to work hours ago.

I guzzled my water and nibbled on a few crackers before wandering out to find him. I’d become familiar with all parts of the house and was a bit bitter about leaving it behind. How many times had I hidden from Kylo in a closet he didn’t know of when he came home drunk?

My stomach turned. He’d been drinking more, too. Maybe he was unraveling faster than I thought. Maybe in the end Kylo would wind up being his own undoing.

Loud music floated down the hallway from his office. I frowned and carried on, a bit unnerved by the sound and shivering from the cold. He even kept the house oddly arctic now.

It was chaotic classical music that I didn’t recognize. I’d never been into it and dad listened to a lot of Bette Midler and Led Zeppelin during my childhood. I hesitated in front of the door, restrained by my insecurity, and took a couple of seconds to make a few hesitant knocks. Why did I even want to see Kylo? I could go to sleep if I wanted to for the rest of the day. What did I care if he skipped work?

The music turned down. “Come in.”

I peeked inside to see Kylo sitting in front of the desk with a huge medical textbook open in front of him. He still wasn’t wearing a shirt and had busied himself rummaging through a drawer. A half-empty bottle of vodka was sitting beside the textbook and one of his hands was on the pages, still trembling like I had seen almost an hour ago. That was bad.

“Shouldn’t you be at the hospital?” I asked, shutting the door behind me.

Kylo took out a ton of empty and near empty bottles of pills, tossing them carelessly across the
desk, but didn’t respond. I sank into a chair near the door and watched him silently. His hair was mussed and his skin was flushed from the alcohol. All around him hung his trove of demented drawings.

I looked down at my hands. “I hope you’re not taking any of them with the alcohol. You’ll kill yourself.”

He slammed the drawer shut, rattling the bottles on the desk and knocking several off so they tinkered to the carpet. I glanced up to find him advancing towards me but I couldn’t move fast enough to escape. His fingers tangled in my hair and he threw me out of my chair to the floor.

“Mind your own fucking business, Rey!” Kylo shouted.

Terrified, I scrambled into the fetal position and covered my head. He knelt down on top of me and pulled my arms apart but I couldn’t fight back. If I resisted him, especially when he was drunk, he would throw me in a cage like he had with Puppy and I would never get out. I bit back screams while he yelled and slapped me until all I could see were stars.

He leaned back when he was done, breathing heavily and wild-eyed. My entire face was so numb that I couldn’t tell if I was crying anymore. His grey gaze stayed on mine for several seconds before I saw his hand reach between his legs and heard his zipper being pulled down.

“N-No,” I stammered, shaking my head.

“One more time.” Kylo pinned one of my hands next to my head and lay down on top of me, holding me down with his weight while he tugged on his pants. “It will help you relax.”

I couldn’t control myself. I screamed and pushed at his shoulder with my free hand while he drunkenly tried to pull down my pants. Fuck, I couldn’t take anymore! He buried his face in my neck and it was like having a ten ton weight pushing me into the carpet; I raked my nails across his bare back.

“You’ll never get away from me,” he whispered into my ear.

With another petrified shriek, I yanked one knee free from underneath Kylo and managed to hit him hard between the legs.

He hissed in pain and all his strength meant nothing for some brief, fleeting moments. Fueled by adrenaline, I shoved him off and scrambled to my feet to the desk. I grabbed the open textbook and slammed it shut before whirling around to face Kylo.

I raised it over my head and violently brought it down on his skull.
A heartbeat passed. I stared at Kylo’s unconscious body now lying prone on the floor with the book still in my trembling grasp. His head was bleeding—had I hit him too hard? Terrified of the consequences when he woke up, I tossed the book aside like it was on fire and reached down to drag him out of the office. He was going to kill me this time. I had to lock him up.

Kylo was heavy as hell and near impossible to move anywhere. I struggled to get him down the stairs to the first floor and continued pulling him to the basement for another fifteen minutes. He was out cold. I wasn’t sure if I didn’t an irreparable damage but he definitely had a concussion.

The dim lights in the basement made it hard to get his retina into the scanner. Adrenaline gave me surges of strength and I managed to push him up the wall and open his eyelid. The door beeped and clicked open, allowing me to drag my captor where he was always dragging me. I was on autopilot. I had no idea what I would do after he was safely locked away.

Puppy moved in her cage when she heard me come in. I was panting and covered in sweat and couldn’t hear her speaking to me. I pulled Kylo to the cage two doors down from hers and shoved him inside, drawing a soft groan from his lips. The sound scared me even more and I slammed the door shut, hastily locking it with shivering fingers. I backed away and collided loudly with a cage behind me.

“Let me out!” Puppy screamed, rattling her bars. “Please let me out of here!”

I could briefly remember hearing the other girls shrieking when I had first arrived and Kylo casually killed each one. I thought of Beverly sobbing as Dave dragged her to the OR to have her lobotomy and when I recalled helping Kylo with the procedure, I bolted out of the basement.

The key was upstairs in Kylo’s bedroom. He never carried it on him anymore but it offered me access to anything locked in the house. I scrambled to find it and pocketed it when I did.

It was two in the afternoon and I was a free woman. Free. I could leave the house without worrying about being electrocuted. I didn’t have to wake up to him on top of me and I didn’t have to watch him pushing pureed goop through my feeding tube. It should’ve lifted my spirits. I should have run out the door and never looked back and told the police every gruesome detail.

My ears rang. Everything… they would want to know everything. I’d be making serious allegations against Kylo and I would have to show them the basement and tell them all the things he had done to me and other women. I’d have to relive it over and over again if I had to stand at a trial.

I ran my hands through my hair, clenching it in my fingers and pacing in the kitchen. What did I do? Kylo would be furious when he woke up so I couldn’t let him out. But if I wandered back into the real world I would have to answer so many questions. I couldn’t lock him up forever—they would notice his absence and search the house. I wouldn’t be able to check on him to keep him alive.

What was I going to do?

“Get a grip, kitten,” I muttered, mimicking the deeper tone of Kylo’s voice. “Go outside and get some fresh air so you can think about what you’re going to do. There’s no rush.”

But I couldn’t bring myself to leave the house. I kept getting to the foyer and pausing at the front
door, staring blankly out of the sunny afternoon. Every time I reached for the door handle I was
stricken with nausea and clammy palms. What was waiting for me on the other side? Questions.
Endless questions.

They’d think I did it to Kylo. I knew how these things played out when wealthy, powerful men
were involved: I had been asking for it somehow and I was just trying to ruin him. I flexed my
fingers and anxiously bit my nails, miserable. The police officers would be men and they wouldn’t
understand how it felt. Maybe I was better off staying in the house.

I sank to the floor, squeezing my eyes shut. He would forgive me if I let him go, right? I’d
apologize and do whatever he wanted and grovel if he let me live. It was the way things had to be.

It would never be time for me to go back to my old life. I belonged in the house with Kylo. There
was no grand retribution for him or salvation for me. It was my purpose to keep his violent urges
at bay and try to stave off his mental collapse for as long as possible.

No—no. I wanted to see my father and Rose again even if it meant answering questions I didn’t
want to think about. I wanted to feel a loving touch that wasn’t followed by brutality; I wanted to
smell Rose’s perfume at five in the morning when we were getting ready for work; and mostly, I
wanted to hear their voices saying my name. I needed a reminder of who I was.

I lurched toward the door on my hands and knees to twist the handle and spilled out into the
sunlight. My stomach knotted and I covered my head with my hands, trembling on the ground for
a few minutes.

Birds sang in the trees dotting Kylo’s courtyard, unaffected by my fear. I slowly raised my head to
peek around the serene garden with my pulse pounding in my ears. The wrought iron gate
separating me from freedom cast a foreboding shadow across the sidewalk that ended at the edges
of my knees. A breeze ruffled my hair, carrying the scent of mowed grass and dry earth.

Out of habit, I glanced over my shoulder. The kitchen door was ajar but Kylo wasn’t chasing after
me. He was locked in the basement with Puppy and I was free.

I staggered to my feet and broke into a wide smile, relishing in the sunshine on my face and the
warm sidewalk under my toes. He let my outside once into the pool but this was different. I didn’t
have to go anywhere with him. I could strut off the property and forget anything ever happened.
The sky was vast and blue above me and Nevada State stretched past the horizon on all other
sides.

The gate groaned open. Shivering with glee, I stepped outside the courtyard for the first time in
five months, since I had gone home with Kylo one night and never escaped. The Porsche and
Audi were parked out in the driveway and the street leading to civilization was open. I could grab
his car keys and drive myself to a police station, or maybe even all the way back to Sparks to see
my father.

Instead, I decided to run.

The months of tube feeding made it almost impossible and I hadn’t even bothered to shut the front
door. My feet slapped on the hot pavement and my lungs burned but I was shrieking with laughter
the entire way down the road. I was alive. I never thought I would escape with my body in one
piece. I was running like a bat out of hell from my prison and I would never look back. Pure
elation kept me motivated and I panted and sweated my way back to the highway.

I was still in my pajamas as I stood at the edge of the road with my hair a mess and my pajamas
hanging from my thin frame. It was deserted and I heaved for air, leaning over on my knees to
catch my breath. Fuck. I couldn’t run the whole way back to my apartment. Where the hell was my apartment, anyway?

A truck zoomed by at that moment and I jerked back in terror, collapsing in an ungraceful pile in the dirt on the side of the road. It screeched to a halt some meters ahead and the person driving pulled over to their side of the curb. I stared in blank shock and my excitement faded into cold fear.

What if it was another bad person like Kylo? What if I was kidnapped all over again? It was safer to go back and beg for his forgiveness; to grovel at his feet until he agreed to keep me alive. I couldn’t remember where I lived… I barely remembered what my childhood home was like. The truck’s door opened and a man stepped out, shading his eyes with a hand. A girl emerged from the other side.

“You okay?” the man called.

I scrambled to my feet with the intent of fleeing. But I was weak from running and fell on my knees again, clawing at the ground trying to escape. The strangers approached.

“Should we call the police?” the girl asked. “She looks crazy.”

It was too late to turn back. I couldn’t move an inch from malnourishment and my hasty escape, and soon the police had arrived in a squad car to collect me. One mentioned that I looked familiar—they were both men. When they reached down to help me up I screamed reflexively and turned over on my back to violently lash out at them. All four of the people standing around jumped back.

The police officer who had spoken turned to his radio. “Sergeant, we found that missing doctor. She’s aggressive but we should be able to get her into the car.”

Their touch burned like fire. I kept screaming like a banshee and the girl hid behind her boyfriend in horror, watching the police push me into their car. Thoughts ran amok: why did I ever think fleeing Kylo was a good idea? I should’ve stayed put. I didn’t want my family and friends seeing me in the middle of a mental breakdown. I belonged where I was. I belonged where I was.

“I belonged where I was,” I muttered, straining against the cuffs holding my hands behind my back.

The second officer, a shorter man, smiled feebly at me. “We’re bringing you to the hospital, Rey. Okay? Your father is on his way and your friend Rose is already waiting. No cameras or interviews; we want to make sure you’re doing okay before we go to the station.”

“I belonged where I was,” I repeated. I kept saying it. I couldn’t stop.

They couldn’t get me back out of the car. The officer radioed someone again and I waited in terror in the darkness, hyperventilating like a cornered animal. There were loud shoes on pavement and I heard a familiar voice, one I thought I would never hear again. But it only scared me more.

My best friend had changed a lot. Her black hair was cut in a bob and she was wearing glasses now instead of her contacts. She was in a straight skirt and blouse; a professional at work who had to deal with a crazy woman in pajamas. My lower lip quivered at the sight of her stricken expression and she quickly tried to pull herself together. Tears beaded in her eyes.

“Oh Rey,” she whispered. “What happened to you?”

Too many things for me to ever be the same person again. I would always carry my torture at
Kylo’s hands on my back, the heaviest burden I’d yet to bear. I didn’t know if I would ever smile again in Rose’s presence or if I could even tolerate letting my own father hug me. I knitted my fingers over the back of my head and squeezed my eyes shut, turning my face down toward the floor of the car.

“I belonged where I was… I belonged where I was…”
Salvation

“Do you remember who took you, Rey?”

I was falling to pieces like glass shattering across pavement. That was their favorite question: who took you? It should’ve been an easy answer but his name was glued to my tongue. I’d only open my mouth to scream during the physical examination, and Rose had to come in to help hold me down. They muttered to one another and shook their heads while my friend tried to distract me. I was a trembling mess.

Rose sat with me in the room after, holding my hand. I was in a hospital gown and was squeezing her fingers despite myself. They figured out that they needed to keep men away from me. Even my father hadn’t been allowed to see me yet, not that I thought I could tolerate it.

Her eyes were puffy and red. “Please tell me who did this to you.” Her voice cracked and she looked away from me. “I need to know, Rey. Who was it? How did you get away?”

It was a strange form of torture being separated from Kylo. I was sure I would be able to hold it together on the outside but without his cold, controlling influence, I lost my willpower. We had a relationship built on equal amounts of dysfunction and forbearance: he had broken me so severely that I could no longer function without him. I was pitiful in that regard—still a puppet dangling from her strings.

I covered my face with my hands, ashamed. Say it! Tell them who did it! He’s in a cage waiting to be found and all you have to do is say his goddamn name!

“I don’t know,” I lied. “I’m… I’m sorry.”

Rose suddenly grabbed me and she was leaning in my face, screaming demands.

“You tell me right now, Rey! I swear to god, if you don’t tell me I’ll take matters into my own hands and figure out which doctor did this to you!” She shook me violently. “It had to be a surgeon or you would’ve died from having your tubes tied! TELL ME WHO DID IT!”

The room faded and my ears rang and all I could see was the OR in Kylo’s basement. Sensations trickled back: him raping me on the floor in front of the other girls, the pick slicing through Beverly’s brain, the Klonopin keeping me in a hazed stupor while he fiddled with the tube in my stomach.

…My fingernails scraping across the dirty floor as David’s friends dragged me out kicking and shrieking; their intrusive fingers; the echo of their laughter mingling with the sound of bodies slipping together…

A shrill scream tore out of my throat before I could register it and the door banged open. People poured in to separate Rose and I, but only one of us was crying. She alternated between apologizing and begging me to tell her while a handful of doctors struggled to contain me. I was hysterical for what felt like the millionth time, barraged with unwelcome memories.

They spat in my feeding tube and filled it with pills and dirt.

My eyes rolled back in my head. I wanted to smash my skull open to forget it all.

After a while I calmed down again. The door opened and dad came in and he looked older and sadder than the last time I’d see him. He approached carefully at first but he couldn’t help himself
and hurried over to wrap his arms around me. I stiffened, uncomfortable from the touch, and it took a few moments for my obligate fear to recognize that my own father wasn’t a threat.

Another doctor was sitting across from us with a chart.

“She needs intensive therapy. We’d like to keep her in a psychiatric facility but as her father, the choice is up to you. It would be safest for her to be home with you rather than living with Dr. Tico.”

Dad hugged me tighter. He smelled like home. “I’m never letting her out of my sight again.”

“Of course, Mr. Kenobi. The police are willing to give you and Rey a week to settle in back home before they bring her in for questioning. She’s malnourished and had some… surgeries that we’d like to keep an eye on, but we think it’s best for her to be home with you right now. If we keep her here we’re worried she’ll have another episode. Try to keep her stress levels low.”

“Will she ever be a doctor again?” dad asked.

“…In time.” The doctor shifted through her papers. “We still need to conduct a pelvic exam but that will have to wait until she’s less hysterical. That’s probably the source of her fear.”

“I don’t want to hear this.”

Slowly, I recognized her face. It was Dr. Holdo. Her pale blue eyes were watching me sadly and she didn’t want to look at her paperwork. I stared at her and turned away.

“None of us do, Mr. Kenobi,” she said softly. “We’re going to give you some supplements for her and let time heal instead of using IVs. She has several injection sites so—”

Commotion outside interrupted Dr. Holdo. She frowned and glanced over her shoulder as the voices rose in volume beyond the door. Dad held me closer when Rose’s dissention entered the fray.

“She isn’t supposed to see any men!” Rose insisted. “She needs time to recover!”

The door banged open and my heart leapt in my throat.

Kylo was panting as two other doctors tried to pull him back out of the room. He shoved them away, grey eyes riveted on me, and staggered forward to drop to his knees in front of me. His whole body was shaking and his sclera were reddened from tears as he extended his open arms. He was in one piece, dressed in jeans and a green dress shirt. I thought I was hallucinating.

How the hell did he get out of the cage?

The panic receded instead of intensifying. He was my only stability now in the confusion and examinations and questions. I didn’t know what the hell I’d been thinking trying to escape. Why bother? Kylo had his arms opened to me and he wouldn’t hurt me in front of so many people.

There was no escape from him. I came to full realization as I pulled away from my own father to slip into my captor’s arms and was comforted when they locked tightly around me. I’d never get away from him, regardless of what therapist I visited and what steps I took to wrench us apart. I sagged in Kylo’s grasp and cried into his shoulder as he leaned back against the wall with me in his lap.

His lips were near my ear, warm breath on my skin. “You forgot the key in my pocket,” he whispered. “Silly girl. I’ll decide your punishment later.”
“Dr. Ren, Rey needs space!” Rose admonished.

I clung tighter. I never wanted to leave him. The memories were worse when I was surrounded by other people who asked me to relive them. He didn’t.

“Let them be,” Dr. Holdo said. I heard her chair move. “This is her path to healing, not ours. But Kylo—what happened to being sick, hm? Eugene had to pull a double to cover you.”

“I’ll make it up to him.” Kylo kissed the side of my head. A laugh vibrated in his chest and he leaned forward, offering a hand. “Odd introductions aside, it’s nice to finally meet you, Mr. Kenobi.”

“Oh… sure,” dad muttered.

They shook hands and my father left after touching my head gently with Dr. Holdo. Rose followed them unwillingly and I was alone in the room with Kylo, curled against him and getting a hold of my sobbing. I didn’t know what came over me when I tried to run away. He had been yelling and… I was afraid.

“I’m so sorry,” I whimpered.

He shifted a bit to rebalance me in his lap, supporting me in the crook of his elbow to look at my face. I trembled while his fingers brushed my hair aside and he wiped my tears away with his thumbs. He looked placid but I knew it was a farce. Any conglomeration of emotions could be stirring inside him at that moment behind his slate grey eyes and none of them would be good for me.

Kylo smiled and cupped my cheek. “I know, kitten. However, this has had a positive effect: no one thinks to peg me as a potential suspect. Our emotional reunion should keep that nonsense at bay. All you need to do is answer the questions the way I told you and keep your head low. The copycat will be looking to kill you—even if the police don’t tie your kidnapping to the Lake Mead murders, he certainly will.”

I fingered his shirt, gnawing on my lower lip. “I want to go back. I can’t do this.”

“It’s too late now. You have the freedom you wanted so desperately. Isn’t liberation its own unique form of captivity, though?”

“…Yes.”

“Mhm.” His gaze drifted down the hospital gown to my knees. “Go see the gynecologist. She’ll find evidence of sexual assault but it will bring us one step closer to sex again. Hurt as I am by your knocking me unconscious, I understand why. The lithium isn’t working.”

My eyes widened. Was that why he’d been even more aggressive than normal? Lithium was intense and Kylo used it as a last resort. It had to keep working.

“What are you going to do?” I whispered.

“Kill more people. Drugs aren’t cutting it. I’ll need a new assistant to tend to them while I’m gone and take up the tasks Miss Prost used to take care of. Another vagrant should suffice.”

Kill more people. I blinked at him, now only mildly ruffled by his casual disregard for the lives of others. He’d been trying to avoid doing that, not because he felt guilty but because it would make him easier to find. But pills didn’t work forever, especially for a mental condition. Kylo needed a more suitable outlet or he would end up losing control of himself completely.
I squeezed my eyes shut and hid my face in Kylo’s shirt, groaning. “They kept asking questions… I didn’t tell them anything but I kept remembering things. I want to forget all of it. Rose yelled at me when I wouldn’t tell her even though I should’ve. I can’t do it.”

“Good girl. The police will badger you quite a bit, too. Ignore them and relax: when they let you go I can make all the pain go away. But if you let the truth slip, you’ll have to suffer alone.”

The thought made me shudder. I felt so alienated from everyone I used to care so deeply for. He’d cut me off from them and made it impossible to ever feel a sense of closeness to them again. I needed him. If I didn’t have Kylo that meant I had no one at all.

“I want to go back,” I said.

He kept fretting over me, touching my hair and finicking with the gown. Looking for an excuse to touch, maybe? “You’ll readjust soon—go back to work, learn to interact with other people. But you’re not returning to Sparks with your father unless the court insists for some reason. They may if you keep acting hysterical. You’re lucky you aren’t in an asylum.”

“They all kept talking loud… and Rose keeps touching me.”

“They’ve missed you. Lucky for them, I decided to give you back with a few stipulations. After the dust has settled I don’t want you moving in with Dr. Tico again. She puts silly notions in your head, so you’ll be living with me.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?” I asked meekly. “Isn’t that against policy here?”

Kylo craned his neck to kiss my forehead. “No. You’re not my subordinate. Let’s go have your examination before they all start asking more questions.”
The news of my return spread across the media like wildfire, and soon I was the center of attention I definitely didn’t want. The police did their best to keep prying reporters away, who didn’t want to respect my desire for solitude, and I mostly hid inside to avoid their questions. All I wanted was to be left alone. I had no impulse to go out and experience what I’d been deprived of for six months.

Dad moved to live closer to me on the outskirts of the Vegas strip. He found a small house away from the hustle and bustle of the tourist trap and the authorities forced me to live there with him. If I refused they could always bring down the law: I wasn’t capable of caring for myself, which granted my father custody of me. I needed at least three months of therapy before anything would change.

But my father wasn’t a bother. He hovered around the edges, afraid to come closer and see me in the same primal state I’d been in when I escaped my prison. We ate breakfast together and watched movies at night but he didn’t ask me any questions like the others. I gradually warmed up to him again; I was regressing to my teenage years when we spent the most time bonding as I grew into an awkward adult. The fear began to dissipate. Maybe I would be normal again.

Rose came by every day to check on me as well. Dr. Holdo would visit when she had the time and I began to break free of Kylo’s foreboding influence. I would laugh sometimes. When we all had tea and talked about work or college I could smile back at them and feel kinship.

It was worse at night when I was alone in bed staring at the ceiling. Memories came to me in traumatic dreams and I woke up screaming on many nights, covered in sweat. They were realistic—I could practically feel fingers on me and the tube being forced into my stomach. I’d drink water and pace in the kitchen but I could never get a full night’s rest.

Beverly haunted me the most. I knew I could never tell them that I had seen her again. The police had a faint glimmer of hope that we had been taken by the same person and they were right but that would implicate Kylo. I claimed I’d never seen her, lying right to her widow’s face.

“Why don’t we talk about your night terrors, Rey?”

Shit—I’d zoned out in front of the psychiatrist again. I blinked a few times, rubbing my eyes, and shot him an irritated look. He was balding and middle aged and I hated talking to him. He treated me like I was crazy and though I technically was, I didn’t appreciate it. I didn’t tell him a damn thing in the two months I’d been forced to deal with him. I kept it all inside.

“I’m fine,” I said. “It’s time to go, anyway.”

“I guess so.” He wrote something down in his notebook. “Don’t forget that you are here until I give the order that you can return to work. It may happen in a month or it could take another year. If you keep balking it will take much longer than it should.”

It was even more frustrating than being held captive. Dr. Franz could decide when I could start at St. Luke’s again and if he wanted to, it could take the rest of my life. I rose from my chair and left his stuffy office, irritated beyond belief. Psychiatrists were so conceited.

There were two people waiting in the lobby, one of which was Kylo. He was sitting serenely in his chair gazing at the wall and smiled when he saw me come down the hallway. He’d recently gotten out of work and still had his green scrubs on underneath his black jacket. I smiled back at
him and said goodbye to the receptionist before we left together.

It was almost October and the weather was improving. The oppressive southwestern heat was on the run to give way for more bearable humidity. I walked along beside Kylo without saying anything and several people on the sidewalk cast us glances. He attracted attention. It was more noticeable when he wore sunglasses and still had his scrubs on from surgery.

We got into the black Porsche. He hung his sunglasses on the front of his shirt and entered the crawling traffic. I stared out the window at the people strolling around on the sidewalk.

He’d taken five people hostage to account for the drugs not working anymore. The tremors had stopped completely and he was more lucid than ever before but it obviously came at a steep price. I wrung my fingers in my lap, relieved I didn’t have to ever see their faces.

It made me wonder, though—why was he letting me live? I could be dispatched easily and he wouldn’t have to worry about me telling the police what he had done and continued to do. I glanced at Kylo’s impassive expression as he weaved between cars, shifting gears like he was driving in NASCAR. He was much calmer now and didn’t burst into fits of rage like he used to.

I had the relationship I wanted and five innocent people were paying the price. That made me sub-human. That made me worse than Kylo.

“He threatened to keep me out of work even longer again,” I muttered, studying my hands.

The car came to a gradual stop at a light and Kylo raised an eyebrow toward me.

“Who, Patrick?”

“You can’t call him that. It’s Dr. Franz.”

“We went to medical school together. I helped him pass more than a few classes.” He pressed his lips into an irritated line and ruffled his hair. “Ignore his threats. I’ll make sure you’re cleared next month.”

“Maybe he’s right, though. What if I’m not ready?”

“He’s a quack. He doesn’t know gyri from sulci.” His own words tickled him and he snickered to himself.

I scowled. “I’m not picking up on the brain humor but I’m glad my crisis is funny to you. Soon I have to start watching people die and touching them and dealing with their emotional problems. What if something triggers me and I have a meltdown? All my hard work will have been for nothing.”

Kylo aggressively shifted gears as he pulled up outside of Rose’s apartment. He threw the car in park and took off his seatbelt to stretch an arm across the center console and stroke the back of my head. His grey eyes were watching me in an unsettling way and I didn’t like his smile.

“Then I suppose you’ll become a well-educated housewife,” he said. “Not that there’s any shame in that. I’m happy others reproduce because children repulse me.”

“I noticed,” I hissed, pointing at my lower abdomen. “I need to be able to go back to work so I can support my father when he gets older. I can’t be a burden on him forever.”

“Yes, and I’m not entirely comfortable with him owning you. It’s distressing that he can make decisions and I have to smile and go along with them. I wouldn’t have opted to put you in therapy
It’s an unconcise and useless pseudo-science.”

I rolled my eyes. “My father is my only family and until they decide I’m sane he gets to make those kinds of choices. And don’t talk shit about psychiatry. That was almost my specialization.”

“Talking solves nothing,” Kylo said. “Pills work. Action works. Discussing feelings and all this Jungian, Freudian bullshit twists people into a false sense of reality.” He looked out the windshield, grinding his jaw. “I saw plenty of psychiatrists and psychologists throughout my youth and not a single one of them could ‘cure’ me of my illness. Some people will always be stricken with disease.”

“That’s rich coming from the brain doctor.”

“I can physically remove a problem. Psychologists rely on discussion and shooting in the dark to supposedly help their patients.” He rubbed his chin, agitated. “And they’re such patronizing people, scribbling on their notepads and smirking to themselves. A tumor is a tumor and I can destroy it. A mental disturbance could be any number of things and science that cannot be quantified is not science.”

I blinked at Kylo, shocked by his outburst. He was really angry. Had I struck a nerve?

“I’m guessing you had a couple of bad psychologists?” I asked.

He shrugged dismissively and nodded toward the building. “A handful. Dr. Tico is waving to us.”

Dealing with Rose and her new boyfriend, Isaac from work, wasn’t important to me. I was making some headway with Kylo and I wanted to know more. I had seen his family again but was afraid to press them for answers, worried it might look strange. Mr. Solo was still suspicious of his son.

“Why were they bad?” I pressed. “Because they didn’t help you?”

“One of them was a bit too deep inside my head.” Kylo squinted. “Dr. Vertis is here? Good lord… he’ll be pestering me all night for a recommendation.”

Knocking on the window interrupted us. I turned to see Rose with her palms flat against it, beaming at me from outside with Isaac at her side. He smiled at me as my friend helped me out of the low-hanging car and Kylo emerged on the other side. Isaac immediately did what Kylo had feared and went to chat with him about work while I watched from Rose’s bone-crushing embrace.

“We made rigatoni!” she squealed. “Well, Isaac made rigatoni. I don’t know how to cook.”

We all went upstairs to my old apartment. It was bittersweet being there without any signs I’d ever lived in the place. Rose had left my room open if I ever decided to move back in and kept my door firmly closed. I wanted to live with her again but I knew Kylo wouldn’t allow it.

He had become a lot friendlier than before to compensate for being M.I.A. when I disappeared. He was nicer to Rose than he had ever been before and listened to Isaac talking about work for the entire dinner. I picked at my plate and chatted about other current events with my best friend. I was slowly returning to my old self against all odds.

Around nine PM we left. Rose hugged me and hesitated before doing the same to Kylo, which made both him and Isaac a little uncomfortable. He awkwardly patted her on the arm and pulled me down the stairs to the car while Rose kept waving spastically from upstairs. I was glad she found comfort in Isaac. He was a great guy and their personalities meshed well.
It was a quiet drive back to my dad’s house. I mulled over my earlier conversation with Kylo about his encounters with psychologists. Which one had upset him so much?

“Call the police.”

The car had stopped. I looked up at Kylo, frowning.

“Excuse me?”

He got out of the car without another word. Perplexed, I scrambled out of my side into the cool night and looked at the house, trying to figure out why on Earth I was supposed to call the cops.

The door was ajar and my father’s car wasn’t parked in the driveway. I stared blankly at the scene under the moonlight as Kylo approached the house with his hands in his pockets. Why was the door open? Dad must’ve forgotten to lock it. And his car… It had to be at the bar down the street.

I teetered forward, pulse pounding, before I broke into a run. Kylo shouted for me to stop but I bolted inside and up the stairs to check his bedroom. He was asleep. He was fine. He was just—

I burst through the bedroom door and screamed.
I’d never gotten the chance to meet my mother. She died giving birth to me, sacrificing her life to make mine. There were pictures for me to look at and admire—she and I looked a lot alike—but the only family I had growing up and into adulthood was my father. He was always there for me, even when I pushed him away or pitched a fit.

And as I stood before his grave listening to the priest drone about the passage of life into death, I came to the painful realization that I had killed both of my parents. First I took my mother away from dad and then I led a serial killer to his front door to torture and murder him. I didn’t know who this copycat killer was or why they chose my father, but they had to know Kylo somehow. This was his fucking fault.

A breeze ruffled my black dress and people murmured to one another behind me. Time was passing but I didn’t care. I stared blankly at the grave stone, utterly alone, and wondered if I was going to be next. Would the copycat killer put me out of my misery? I could barely sleep at night. After almost four long months I wasn’t making much headway in my recovery.

“Hey… let’s go back to my place.”

Rose had approached and was touching my hand. Her eyes were puffy and red and Isaac lingered a few feet away, uncomfortable with all the emotion. A lot of dad’s friends had come out to the funeral.

I looked at my father’s grave again. What an embarrassment I was to him. I’d done what everyone said was impossible and became a doctor only to have it taken away from me in one fell swoop by a raving lunatic. Kylo was the root of all the evil in my life and I had become what he wanted: a silent, obedient victim. I was so traumatized that I couldn’t tell anyone the truth. Not even my dad.

He would never know, but I would make sure everyone else did.

Kylo was at work—it wasn’t exactly easy for a brain surgeon to get time off. I was briefly free from his ominous presence and had my best friend at my side with my father buried in the dirt. One killer was still free but I would be damned if I let another keep treading water. Then I’d find the other one; whoever killed my father, and I’d make them pay for it.

I closed my eyes and took a steadying breath, letting all my repressed memories and fears wash over me. It was time to stop running. I would have to tell them everything.

“It was Kylo.”

Rose frowned. “What do you mean, Rey?”

I could vividly remember him throwing me on the floor of the general population room the first night. He raped me in front of a group of people. My cheek rubbed on the hard, cold floor and his hot breath spilled across the back of my neck.

“Do you remember the night I disappeared?” I asked, gazing off into the distance.

“Like it was yesterday,” Rose shifted closer. “He… he said he brought you home. The police went through his house a bunch of times.”
“I was in his basement. He keeps women in cages and he used to keep men for that creepy morgue tech. Remember Armitage Hux? They worked together, but Armie was obsessed with Kylo—until Kylo got sick of Armie and killed him with camphor.”

I looked up to see if Rose was still listening. Her eyes were wide and terrified and I paused.

She shook her head. “Keep going. Tell me everything.”

It was cathartic to relay some of the more mild points of my captivity. I didn’t regale her with the gritty details and lightly touched upon the gruesome bits. After a solid half hour of talking I was crying and unable to stop myself, and Rose was crying too. She covered her face and turned away, running her hands through her hair and trying to get a grip.

“I knew it!” she spat. She was trembling. “I knew it was him all this time but the police said they didn’t find anything incriminating. Of course he had a hidden fucking room in his basement.” She looked at me again, wiping tears from her eyes. “We can go to the police together. I’ll never leave you alone again.”

I stepped back. No. There was one more thing I had to do before we told the authorities.

“Wait until tonight,” I said. My face was streaked with dry tears that cracked when I smiled. “I need one more night with Kylo.”

“Are you cra—” Rose caught herself before her slip and gestured to my dad’s grave. “No, this stops now, Rey. It’s time to go tell the police and get him thrown in jail where he belongs. I’m not going to stand here and cry over your grave next, okay? I’m done with people dying.”

“I need him to feel the pain I’ve felt. Have the police outside his house at six.”

“Rey! Rey, wait!”

She was chasing me but I managed to slip away and get into dad’s car. I took off out of the cemetery and barreled down the highway toward Kylo’s house, shaking with excitement. So what if he got hauled off to prison? That wasn’t enough for someone like him. He needed to learn his lesson.

The keys shook in my grasp as I let myself into his house. I was running off adrenaline and hoping it wouldn’t fade before I did what I wanted. I slipped inside and made my way to the garage to look through the tools, pulse pounding in my ears. A big mallet caught my eye and I carefully took it down from the rack, turning it over a few times in my hands. Perfect.

I stalked upstairs with the mallet dangling from the fingertips. The sun was sinking over the horizon and Kylo would be coming home soon to check on me. I turned the corner in the hallway down to his bedroom, steeling myself for what was going to come.

All was quiet. I crawled onto his bed and set the mallet behind me on the floor, leaning on the bed, where it wouldn’t be noticed. I was nervous but not afraid. It was 5:30 in the afternoon and Kylo was—

“Rey? Are you here?”

Home.

“Upstairs,” I called softly.
His footsteps were heavy. He was tired. I sat with my hands calmly in my lap as Kylo entered the bedroom, brow drawn together in confusion. His gray eyes roamed across the room before he began stripping off his scrubs. I smiled vaguely at him, rage boiling beneath the surface.

He shook his head. “They wouldn’t give me the time off today but I have tomorrow free. You’ll need to go to the bank to have your father’s possessions transferred to you, yes?”

“I think so.”

“You don’t have a guardian now, either.” Kylo took off his watch, smirking down at me. “If we marry, that situation can be remedied. I’ll make sure to pull you out of therapy so you can get back to work and we can live here together with no more interruptions. What do you think, kitten?”

I smiled back. It was stuck on my face. “Sounds great. We’ll both be Dr. Ren.” Rey Ren. Fucking stupid.

Kylo didn’t ask or even suggest sex—he took it when he wanted it, and he was too goddamn preoccupied by his desire to pay attention to the mallet on the floor. He crept into bed and on top of me and his mouth was on mine. My body hummed with anticipation as he pressed himself between my legs and I obediently hooked my calves around his waist.

It had to wait until he was in the throes of passion. He pushed my dress up roughly and buried his face in my neck, only pulling my panties down a bit to gain access to the only part of me that mattered. I gripped his back and sank my nails into his skin but let one hand drape off the side of the bed. My fingers brushed the edge of the mallet as Kylo groaned into my skin and settled into his rhythm.

He made me eat food out of a dog bowl. He sterilized me like I was an animal. He injected me with countless drugs and I could still feel a longing for some of them.

Kylo was unfettered evil. He had no reason for what he did. He just liked watching women squirm. And he was inside me, a monster with the same human urges as any other.

“I’ve been looking forward to fucking you all day,” he whispered in my ear.

I closed my fingers around the cool hilt of the mallet. “I’m sure you have.”

It whistled through the air and came down almost as hard as the book had on top of Kylo’s head. All his taut muscles gave way from the impact and he crumpled, crushing me under his unconscious weight.

I wriggled out from underneath him like a worm, still brandishing the mallet. He was moaning in pain, already emerging from the blunt force trauma, but that was exactly how I wanted him. I rolled him off the bed to the floor and he turned over on his back to blink up at me in surprise.

I kicked his left hand away from his chest and stomped on his wrist. I let the hilt swing in my fingers and pointed it at his face. Kylo’s eyes were widening as he gained control of himself again.

“You ruined my life,” I said. “Now I’m going to ruin yours.”

“Wait!”

Pulsing with rage, I swung the head of the mallet on his left hand and didn’t hold anything back. Kylo’s bones splintered with a satisfying crunch and he stiffened and howled in agony underneath me. I leaned more weight on his wrist, leaning over and repeatedly smashing his fingers, aiming to destroy them.
“You’re never going to perform surgery again!” I hissed, panting from the exertion. “Your hands are supposed to be for healing, but you tainted them!”

Kylo was crying from the pain and I felt a sick sense of pleasure at the sight of it. All the mornings I woke up and stared at my reddened, puffy eyes in the mirror, wishing I could escape.

I brought down the mallet on his other hand several times to destroy those fingers in a bloody mess. They disjointed and crackled from the sheer force and Kylo started howling and thrashing beneath me but I kept a foot on his chest so he couldn’t move. I slammed the mallet down until my arms trembled, screaming back at him, letting all of my pent-up hatred and rage through each swing.

“And you’re never going to put your hands on a woman again!” I shrieked. “You’ll never hurt anyone else—I’ll make sure of it!”

Footfalls on the stairs preceded the police but I was in a frenzy. I kept bashing Kylo’s hands until the police poured into the room and dragged me away from him, kicking and screaming. He was likewise yowling in agony and one of the police called for a medic while the others tried to contain me. They ripped the mallet out of my grasp and pushed me down to the floor to handcuff me.

I was brought downstairs to the kitchen and sat in a chair while they swarmed around the house. Rose came to sit with me and argued with an officer to let me out of my cuffs but he wouldn’t budge. I didn’t mind. I’d gotten my revenge. I had taken what Kylo loved most. Too bad I couldn’t have smashed his dick into a pancake like his hands.

He would never perform surgery again. He wouldn’t be able to draw. He’d lose his license—twelve years of medical school down the drain. Hell, he couldn’t even masturbate now. He’d lost the ten digits that caused me and so many others so much fear and loathing—maimed beyond repair.

“Why the hell did you do that?!” Rose demanded. “He might be able to sue you!”

I shrugged, smiling at the countertop. “That won’t bring his hands back.”

And the police swarmed through the house, talking about calling the FBI, and while Rose kept chastising me, I just kept smiling. It was small victory but it was the sweetest I had ever tasted. I was finally free.

Chapter End Notes

the ending was left this way because i intended on doing a sequel, but then i didn't lmao. hope you guys enjoyed this <3
“Doctor Kenobi, your two o’clock patient is here.”

My secretary, Olivia, was peeking into my office with a small smile. She was a sweet kid, trying to pay her way through nursing school, and really good at her job. I smiled back and gestured for her to let them come inside. I had my own private practice now—Doctor Rey Kenobi, psychiatric medicine.

The freedom was the best part. I could do things on my own terms, make my own money, and not have to watch people suffer and die in a hospital bed. I rose from my chair and smiled when my patient came in and shook his hand. At first I wanted to practice internal medicine, but my experience with Kylo drove me to diagnose and treat the people who needed serious help.

I sat down and clasped my hands. “How have things been, Felix? Any mood problems?”

Felix Weiss was a long-time patient who was taking Effexor and Risperdal. He was my age, thirty, and came from Mexico with his father when he was young. Now he owned a security company and did quite well with it. But I could sense something else in him; the same thing I ignored in Kylo.

Psychopathy.

He shrugged, smiling. “I’ve been doing well, Doctor Kenobi. In a few weeks I’m flying out to Vermont to meet with some friends.”

“Oh, what for?”

“A bit of a reunion.” His phone vibrated and he glanced at it with a frown. “Oh… Ah, I have a call to take. Do you mind if we end early?”

It was extremely early, but whatever. I still got paid. I stood and shook his hand and Felix left the room, murmuring to someone named ‘Penelope.’ Confused, I sank back into my chair and entered the info into his chart. Whatever. He owned an enormous company so he had stuff to do.

After my last patient, I headed back to my house. It had been a quiet three years since I escaped from Kylo and my father had been murdered. It drove me insane not knowing who did it, and I sometimes considered visiting Kylo in prison to get some help figuring out who it was. Part of me became a psychiatrist in the hopes that I’d stumble across the son of a bitch someday.

My Welsh corgi, Sigmund, came running up when I walked in the house. I squealed and crouched to rub his ears and he barked and danced in his spot, elated. He was my baby. I hadn’t really dated or anything since my captivity, even though Rose tried her best to set me up with someone. She and Isaac had twins now and she was busy with them and working at the hospital. I didn’t mind. I
spent most nights reading and watching TV with a glass of wine.

Dad was gone, so I had no one else. Sparks felt colder and darker without him and I was considering a move to the Northeast. In fact, I was flying out to Vermont around the same time as Felix to enjoy the Green Mountains and sparkling lakes. I needed some green.

I changed into my pajamas and sat on the couch to watch Dateline with Sigmund. He curled up next to me with his head on my lap and was snoring while I sleepily listened to the report.

Life was good. Kylo Ren was rotting in prison for the rest of his life, I placed flowers at dad’s grave every Sunday, and my Corgi loved me. Maybe I’d get married, but I wasn’t in a rush. I couldn’t have kids, not that I wanted them, but it was uncomfortable to tell men. I slumped in the couch, yawning. My life was mine and so was my body. That was all that mattered.

My phone rang and I frowned and lazily answered. “Rey speaking.”

“Rey, this is Felix.”

I blinked in surprise. “Um… Mr. Weiss—”

“I’m calling to deliver a warning. I spoke with a contact in Maine and she claims you are being targeted. Her husband has flown out from Maine and will be in Nevada soon—and he’s coming for you.”

What the fuck?! I jerked to my feet and Sigmund growled irately. “Who? What?!”

“Liev. You need to leave your home and find a hotel.” Clicking in the background. “I can come pick you up if that will help, but—”

“Hello there, Doctor Kenobi.”

Fear lanced through me and I spun on my heel to find a tall man standing in my living room. He had wavy brown hair and his hands were in his pockets, and he smiled at me. I stared back at him and clenched my fingers around the phone. He gave me serious Kylo-vibes.

I trembled and spoke to Felix. “…Someone’s here.”

He swore, spitting. “Stay calm. He’s going to bring you to Vermont, but stay calm, Rey. His name is Liev and you can’t get away from him. I’ll be there soon with my friend Silas and we’ll make sure you get away. Don’t panic. Do not fight back. He’ll kill you.”

Liev sauntered towards me and I saw the same evil in his eyes that I found in Felix’s and Kylo’s. I hung up the phone and began dialing 911 while the beast edged closer. He smiled coldly.

“Calling for help?” he cooed. His voice was light with a Russian accent. “Don’t bother.”

I would always fight back. I’d never let another Kylo Ren own me.

Sigmund seemed to pick up on my fear and he leapt from the couch with his short legs to snarl and grab Liev by his pant leg. I charged after my dog and leapt on Liev’s back to wrap an arm around his throat, struggling to knock him out before he could do anything else. He wasn’t as big as Kylo but he managed to swing me around and throw me on the floor and kicked Sigmund away, knocking him into the wall.

I screamed and kicked at his hands. “You hurt my fucking dog! FUCK YOU!”
Liev wrestled me down like Kylo and my screams turned shrill. I could remember him pinning me to the floor and ripping my clothes off and fucking me until I cried. That first night was the biggest red flag, when Kylo fucked me on the floor while ‘I Spit On Your Grave’ played in the background. I tried to bite Liev wherever I could until his long fingers wrapped around my throat.

He smiled. “Hello, Rey. My name is Liev Gunter, and you’ve been requested by Kylo Ren. We’re going on a road trip to Vermont.”

“The cops are coming,” I hissed.

“We’ll be gone long before then.” He glanced at Sigmund and sighed. “I like your dog. We’ll bring him along, but I’ll snap his neck if he bites me.”

The screaming and fighting did nothing to him. Liev scooped Sigmund under his arm and forced me out of the house and into a small red car. He pinned me down and stuck a needle in my bicep and I wailed and clutched my dog. No, no… It had been so long. Why was this happening?!

Liev slipped into the driver’s seat and smiled. “Off we go, then, Doctor Kenobi. Kylo can’t wait to see you again.”

“Let me GO!” I shrieked, clinging to Sigmund. “I’ll fucking KILL KYLO!”

“No, you won’t.” His brown eyes met mine in the rearview. “Sleep, Miss Kenobi. You seem tired.”

I cried and resisted the drug, which I assumed was Klonopin, until my brain couldn’t keep up. Liev smiled as I slipped into unconsciousness and awaited whatever would happen next.

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