

## **we could plant a house, we could build a tree**

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# we could plant a house, we could build a tree

by [Like\\_A\\_Dove](#)

## Summary

Ben takes a deep breath. “It’s—it’s a project. Conceptual art. You wouldn’t get it.”

Rey presses her lips together to keep from laughing. She plans her next words quickly and carefully, determining what will get her the best reaction. “Really? Looks like you ruined a bedsheet to me.”

His reaction does not disappoint. “Get **out**.”

\*\*

Seven-year-old Rey decides it's her duty to annoy the crap out of Ben Solo every single day she's alive.

## 1997, part one

A/N: Hello all! Welcome to my modern day AU fic that's basically my love letter to 90's alt rock and emo music. In this fic Ben was born in '81 and Rey in '90, and we'll pick up in '97. Also, in reality an orphaned Rey would probably have been in the foster system, but here I've put her in a more traditional orphanage. Anyway, if you like drop me a comment and let me know!

\*\*

Always move forward  
Going "straight" will get you nowhere  
There is no progress  
Evolution killed it all  
I found my place in nowhere

"Jaded" by Green Day

\*\*

They find her dumpster diving behind a Waffle House when she's five. When they ask her where her parents are, she shrugs.

\*\*

"Look Rey, I know you're not particularly happy about this—"

Rey's crossed arms and pouty face are enough to bring Maz Kanata up short in amusement. The wizened old woman who has been Rey's caretaker the past couple of years tries not to laugh. She's always had a soft spot for the spirited ones.

"Rey," she says a little more sternly, waiting for the child to make eye contact with her through the rearview mirror. But the seven-year-old is resolute. She glares out the window at Skywalker Studios with nothing short of contempt.

Maz parks the car and climbs out, slamming the door shut behind her before opening Rey's. "Come on then, out you get."

Rey opens her mouth to argue and is swiftly silenced by a wrinkled finger to her mouth. "This is your own fault, girl," her caretaker says. "I don't care how smart you are, no school system is going to put up with you if you keep spray painting in the girl's bathrooms and doodling with Sharpie on the desks. Now, get out of this car or I will make you."

The girl's hazel eyes go a little wide and she sighs, begrudgingly unbuckling her seatbelt and climbing out of the car. Rey has never won a battle with Maz Kanata before and isn't too keen on trying her luck now.

They make their way to the front door of the studio, drizzling rain dampening their hair. An older man comes out to greet them, opening the front door for them and gesturing that they come inside. He watches Rey with curious, kind eyes.

“Rey.” Maz’s voice is firm, brokering no room for arguing. “This is Mr. Skywalker—”

“Call me Luke,” the older man interrupts, giving Rey a smile that she pointedly doesn’t return.

“—you’ll be coming here every day after school for the foreseeable future,” Maz continues. “You’ll do exactly what he tells you and you won’t give him any trouble, do I make myself clear?”

Rey is silent, deliberately looking everywhere but at her caretaker.

“Rey.”

Rey grumbles a “whatever” underneath her breath. But it’s enough for Maz. The old woman quickly lets herself out, promising to be back to pick her up in a couple of hours. As soon as the door swings shut Luke turns his full attention onto Rey. “Well Rey, why don’t we start with a tour.”

\*\*

It was either art classes or basketball. And Rey hates basketball. She’d gotten in trouble for graffiti for the third time in barely two weeks and the principal and nearly expelled her. In retrospect, Rey isn’t really sure how Maz got her out of that one. Maybe one day she’ll be grateful.

But today she’s seven and a half years old and petulant. She trails behind Luke Skywalker as the older man shows her the room where they sculpt, the room with rows of easels where he teaches painting classes, the room filled from floor to ceiling with tons of art supplies—

There’s blaringly loud music coming from the other end of the hallway, and Rey tilts her head towards the noise, showing genuine interest for the first time since she’s walked through the front doors. Luke’s gaze follows hers. “Ah.” His face is passive. “Don’t worry about that. That’s just Ben.”

Back in the entrance room the phone rings. Luke motions toward the art supply room. “Alright Rey, why don’t you grab a pad and some pencils and draw something for me.”

She doesn’t move. “What do you want me to draw?”

Luke laughs. “Whatever you want!” Then he trots toward the main room to answer the phone.

Rey walks straight past the supply room and toward all the angry noise, inquisitiveness getting the best of her. There are framed prints, paintings, and sculptures lining the walls. Some are by Luke, and others by his students, some of whom have gone on to hold art shows

in the likes of NYC and LA. Rey has never really considered being an actual artist before. But she does like to sketch.

And finally she's in front of the closed door with the pounding music. She pushes the door open and is hit hard with the smell of paint. A boy whose back is to her (she deduces that this must be Ben) is flinging paint against a white sheet that hangs from the ceiling. He's also shouting "fuck" at the top of his lungs over and over again. It makes her smile. It's the first time she's smiled all day.

The song ends and another one starts immediately after, fast paced and aggressive. And Rey finds her head bobbing along. She likes this. It fits her mood. There's a stereo in the corner of the room, banged up and splattered with every color of paint imaginable. She walks over and presses the STOP button, determined to peek inside and see the CD—

"Wha—"

Rey has never seen someone move so quickly. The boy is in front of her in the span of a heartbeat. "Who said you could touch the music?" he demands, shooing her away from the stereo. "*No one* touches the music. Who are you anyway? Uncle—"

"What's that supposed to be of?" Rey has ducked around him and is standing in front of uh, whatever the paint splattered sheet is.

Ben's mouth falls open a bit, indignant. He's fifteen, maybe sixteen, wearing a plain white t-shirt and a flannel shirt tied around his waist. Rey knows her fair share of moody teens. They're a dime a dozen at the home she stays at, and this one is no different. Slightly taller, maybe. But no different.

He takes a deep breath. "It's—it's a project. Conceptual art. You wouldn't get it."

Rey presses her lips together to keep from laughing. She plans her next words quickly and carefully, determining what will get her the best reaction. "Really? Looks like you ruined a bedsheet to me."

His reaction does not disappoint. "Get *out*." He furiously shoves her toward the door and she lets out a stream of half repressed giggles. Before he slams the door in her face she notices that the tops of his ears have turned red with anger. A second later the music starts up again.

And just like that Rey's entire perception of this place has changed. She'll come back every day for the next ten years if it means she'll get to irritate the angry boy who likes to fling paint at things. After school care is going to be *fun*.

\*\*

Later that night she's curled up in her squeaky bed in a room she shares with three other girls, flashlight on underneath her blankets. Luke had let her keep a sketchpad and all but demanded she take home plenty of pencils and markers as well.

She sketches out the boy's face. She gives him an overexaggerated scowl and messy hair.  
And she colors his ears red.

She can't wait to show it to him tomorrow.

# 1997, part two

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Will myself to find a home, a home within myself  
We will find a way, we will find our place  
Drop the leash, drop the leash...  
Get outta' my fuckin' face

"Leash" by Pearl Jam

\*\*

The next day Rey gets out of Maz Kanata's car and is practically in the building before the old woman can so much as blink.

Luke is waiting for her as soon as she steps inside. He smiles at her newfound eagerness and jerks his head toward what Rey remembers to be the painting room. "I teach an advanced painting class on Tuesdays. You're welcome to join us on an easel if you wish, or you can draw by yourself. Up to you!" He walks toward the painting room, and Rey can see a handful of students sitting at easels and preparing their paints and paintbrushes.

Rey suddenly feels very shy. She's never been too good at making friends. Her best friend had always been her own sense of self-perseverance. That's how she'd managed to survive so long without parents.

She trudges into the room behind Luke, eyes taking in the other kids. None of them are even remotely close to her age. Not surprising for an advanced class, but still—

Rey spots *him* at the back of the classroom, frowning at his easel in concentration. The seats around him are open, as if all the other students had deemed to give him a wide berth. Rey takes this as a sign that she should absolutely sit next to him.

She slips into the seat to his left, feet dangling a solid foot off the floor. She situates herself, letting her backpack slip from her shoulders onto the tile. Glancing at Ben out of the corner of her eye, she sees that he's already started painting, even though Luke is only just starting the class. His fingertips are stained black and he has headphones on and a CD player tucked into the waistband of his pants.

Whatever he's listening to is loud.

A couple of minutes go by and he still hasn't even noticed her, which is fine with Rey. Watching Ben paint is a much more useful way to spend her time. He's forgone a paintbrush completely and is just using his fingers, tracing out the basic shape of a tree. It's fascinating

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“Stop staring at me.” His eyes never leave his work. Rey jerks a little in surprise. When had he even seen her? But that didn’t matter. If he wanted her to stop staring, then she would happily continue to do so.

A solid three minutes go by before he makes a point to shift in his seat, his back turned toward her. Rey slips down, pushes her seat closer, and then clamors back on.

Two minutes go by.

Which sheer exasperation, he reaches up and yanks his headphones off, glaring at her. “Why are you being such a creepy little weirdo?”

“What are you listening to?” she asks without missing a beat, effectively ignoring his question. “And is that supposed to be a tree?”

He looks between her and his half-finished painting before taking a deep breath. “Look, I get it. You’re Uncle’s charity case. But you can’t just bother people when they’re trying to work, okay?”

“I like trees. I didn’t know they could be black.”

Ben blinks down at her, all trace of anger gone and replaced with confusion. “I don’t like to paint with colors,” he says by way of explanation. His unkempt dark hair falls into his eyes. “Don’t you have something to do? Like art?”

“I have something for you.” Rey climbs out of her seat and opens her backpack, rummaging through until she finds what she’s looking for. Finding it, she stands up and hands him the thick sheet of paper she’s folded in half.

Ben gives her a wary look before swiping it out of her hand, opening it. His expression of shock mingles with indignant fury and Rey lets out a snort.

“This is *not* funny.” He all but shoves her own drawing back in her face. “My ears are not that big!”

Rey lets out gales of genuine laughter now. “Yes they are,” she says with a chuckle, then shrugs at him. Big ears are of no real concern to a seven-and-a-half-year-old.

They watch each other for a long moment. Then Ben sighs, looking back down at drawing in his hand. “I guess your lines aren’t that bad. Ya know, for a little kid.”

Rey feels her cheeks get hot. She hadn’t been expecting a compliment, even a half-hearted one. She shrugs again.

“What’s your name, anyway?”

“Rey.”

He nods. “Cool. I’m Ben.”



“What were you listening to?”

Ben looks suspicious. “Why?”

“I liked it.”

He stares at her for a long moment and then nods to himself, making a decision. A second later he takes off his headphones and slips them over her head and over her ears. They’re way too big for her, and she has to hold them up else they’ll slip down her neck. Ben presses PLAY on the CD player. This song has a lot more guitar than yesterday’s music and is decidedly less aggressive. Rey loves it. It’s much better than the barrage of Disney and Backstreet Boys songs that she hears all the time back at the home.

She gives Ben a toothy grin, and if he’s charmed by her missing front tooth he doesn’t show it. He rolls his brown eyes at her and turns back to his painting, not seeming to mind anymore that she’s watching him.

The rest of the class passes quickly. Rey doesn’t notice Luke Skywalker watching the both her and Ben from his corner at the front of the room, deep in thought.

And when Rey gets back to the home that night, she doesn’t notice that Ben never gave her back the drawing.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone who left feedback and kudos! Y’all are awesome. This is it for ’97. We’ll pick back up next time in ’98. If you enjoyed this let me know!

# 1998, part one

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Give me my money back  
Give me my money back  
You bitch  
I want my money back  
And don't forget to give  
Me back my black t-shirt

“Song For the Dumped” by Ben Folds Five

\*\*

It’s a Friday, and eight-year-old Rey finds herself where she always is every Friday evening: at the studio. Rey now feels at ease amongst the paints and sketch pads and art students wandering around at any given moment, whether they’re taking a class or having a one-on-one lesson with Luke. Most of them know her well enough to wave and call out her name when they see her. But there aren’t any other students here on Fridays, as there are no evening classes. Which means Fridays are her favorite. Fridays are always just her, Luke, and Ben.

There’s a small break room with a fridge and microwave that also doubles as Luke’s office toward the back of the studio. A flight of stairs right next to it leads up to where Luke and Ben live. Rey has yet to hear the full story as to why Ben lives with his uncle. He refuses to indulge her whenever she asks.

Tonight she sits at the small table in Luke’s kitchen-office, face screwed up in concentration. “Forty-two?”

Ben shakes his head, watching her calmly. “Nope.”

“Forty-nine?”

He nods. “Seven times eight.”

“Uh...” She surreptitiously tries to count with her fingers underneath the table.

“No fingers,” Ben snaps, never glancing away from Rey’s face, much to her annoyance. “Get used to counting in your head. Seven times eight.”

Rey frowns in concentration, slowly doing the math in her head. According to Ben, the sooner she got these memorized, the easier her academic life would be. “Fifty-six?” she answers hesitantly.

The corner of his mouth lifts in an almost smile. Luke enters the room before he can say anything, observing the scene with fondness. “You two working on your homework?”

Ben drops his eyes, shrugs one shoulder, and then stands and makes his way over to a coffee pot by the microwave. Luke watches him, his stare tinged with sadness.

Rey feels slightly uncomfortable, as she always does whenever Ben is like this around his uncle. She’s not sure what Luke did to make Ben act so surly, but she’d give anything to have an uncle to live with. To have family who loved her enough to stay.

Luke takes a seat across from her, pulls out a sketchpad, and puts on a set of reading glasses that slide down his nose. He smiles knowingly at Rey as she pulls out her own pad and pencil, focusing on his expert movements as he draws, trying to copy them. She is already much better than she was a year ago.

The smell of coffee fills the air and a half hour or so rolls by in companionable silence.

It is soon shattered as Ben presses PLAY on his paint splattered stereo that’s sitting on the floor by his feet.

Luke freezes mid pencil stroke, face pained. “Ben—”

The teenage boy toes the volume knob with his shoe, and the music grows to an almost ear-splitting level.

“Ben, please turn that—”

“What?”

“Would you *please*—”

“What?”

“*Ben!*”

“Sorry, can’t hear you over the music!” Ben is grinning, reveling in his uncle’s irritation. But a moment later he nudges the volume knob with his shoe again and the room grows quiet.

Luke briefly shuts his eyes and takes a deep breath, steadying himself. Rey sees Maz do this all the time. “Can’t you play music that is less vicious? Something with, I don’t know...more piano or something?”

“Yeah, sure,” Ben agrees, suddenly much more amicable. Rey knows him well enough by now to be suspicious of his tone.

Both her and Luke watch Ben switch out the CD’s, Luke with wariness and Rey with genuine interest. Ben hits PLAY and...and the music isn’t angry, for once. Luke looks genuinely surprised and pleased for about thirty seconds. Then he sighs. “You couldn’t have picked something with less swearing? We have a young mind in the room.”

Ben stretches his long legs out in front of him. “On the contrary, Rey and I have been working on our swearing. Rey?” He takes a sip of his coffee and raises an expectant eyebrow at her over the *Skywalker Studios* mug.

She doesn’t miss a beat. “Ass, damn, bitch, bastard, shit, fu—”

“That’s enough,” Luke interrupts, frowning at his nephew. Ben is smirking proudly, laughter in his eyes. He looks over at Rey. “Good job, kid.”

She beams at him.

Luke sighs. “Sometimes I wonder if you two are related.” He says it flippantly, but Rey stills, eyes dropping to the pencil still clutched in her hand. Luke doesn’t know, of course, that he’d just said Rey’s greatest desire out loud.

“Of course not,” Ben scoffs, eyeing Rey. “Much too scrawny.”

“Hey!” she shouts huffily, and Ben laughs, turning his back to her for a brief second to take something out of his backpack. Rey pounces, grabbing his half-finished coffee and draining the hot drink in a few gulps. She nearly gags. Coffee might be the most disgusting thing she’s ever tasted *ever*.

Luke howls with mirth and Ben whirls back around. His eyes fall on his now empty coffee mug and his lips part briefly. In a matter of seconds the whole atmosphere has gone tense. Then he gives chase. Rey is out of her seat in a flash, massive smile plastered on her face.

“Careful!” Luke calls after them, but they do this too often for there to be genuine worry in his voice.

Ben chases her all over the studio, and every once in a while his fingers brush over her shoulder, as if he’s *almost* caught up to her, making Rey squeal and dart in another direction.

She’s about halfway through the entryway when Ben’s arms encircle her waist. He picks her up easily and sends her flying. Rey shrieks and lands hard on a leather couch, tears in her eyes from laughing. The force of her landing makes the couch smack against the wall. One of Luke’s framed pieces drops from its hook, glass from the frame shattering the moment it hits the floor.

Both Rey and Ben stare at it in horror. “Shit,” they say in unison.

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Maz picks her up not too much later. To Rey’s sheer relief, Luke does not mention the broken frame. Ben remains in the entryway, grumbling and sweeping up glass.

“Just a reminder, I won’t be bringing Rey here on Monday. The senator is visiting the home on behalf of—”

“Senator Organa?” Luke says, effectively cutting off the old woman.

Maz narrows her eyes ever so slightly. Rey knows better than anyone that she doesn't appreciate rudeness. "Yes. Senator Organa. With all due respect Luke, is there a particular reason why you're looking at me like that?"

Rey's teacher looks a little startled before quickly regaining his composure. "My apologies Maz. I just had no idea my sister was back in town."

## Chapter End Notes

Thanks everyone for the kudos, bookmarks, and comments! I love hearing what you guys have to say. Feel free to share your favorite late '90's and early '00's nostalgic memories with me as well! Writing this time period has been a lot of fun. Part two should be up soon!

# 1998, part two

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

A life is time, they teach you growing up  
The seconds ticking killed us all  
A million years before the fall  
You ride the waves and don't ask where they go

“Standing Outside a Broken Phone Booth with Money in My Hand” by Primitive Radio Gods

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That weekend proved to be particularly stressful. Rey isn't sure why keeping her action figures and Pound Puppies stored in the closet instead of on the floor by her bed is imperative to the Senator having a smooth visit, but she obeys.

Maz looks frazzled enough.

On Monday Rey waits outside the home with the other children, watching with a frown as a sleek black car pulls into the long driveway. She hasn't forgotten what Luke said the other night, about the senator being his sister. And she wonders, if she's Luke's sister, if that makes her—

Rey's suspicions are confirmed as soon as Senator Leia Organa steps out of the car. Rey recognizes Ben in the way this woman carries herself, in the way her warm brown gaze sweeps over the sight in front of her and takes note of her surroundings. In the way the corner of her mouth pulls into an almost smile. Maz walks out to greet her and the two women shake hands.

The next couple of hours are incredibly boring, considering all the hullabaloo that lead up to them. Rey isn't overly impressed with who she suspects is Ben's mom. All the senator does is walk around, talk, and ask questions. Rey distracts herself by staring at Organa's bodyguard and the gun holstered to his hip. It looks kinda cool, and Rey commits herself to trying to draw him later. Ben might think it's interesting.

She is so deep in her thoughts (markers would be fun for this project but pencils would be more precise for lines) that Senator Organa has to tap her shoulder to get her attention. She bends down so that she's looking Rey eye-to-eye and holds out her hand, introducing herself.

Maz's furious look from over the senator's shoulder prompts Rey to shake it. Leia smiles. “You must be Rey. I've heard so much about you.” She leans in a little closer. “I hear you're a family friend.”

Rey's mouth drops open a little bit and suddenly she feels incredibly shy. This only makes Leia smile more fondly. “Luke showed me some of your drawings earlier today. You're quite

talented.”

Rey only remembers to say ‘thank you’ because Maz is mouthing it frantically over Leia’s shoulder.

\*\*

Rey is spreading her Pound Puppies back out across her side of the room where they *belong* when she stills, mind puzzling over her odd day. If the senator *is* Ben’s mom, then she’s sent her son away. And maybe that means Ben was left behind just like her.

\*\*

Tuesdays are painting days.

Rey isn’t sure how she feels yet about painting. She prefers bending over a sketch pad with markers or charcoal or pencils—less messy. Besides, whatever she manages to paint always seem to pale in comparison to what Ben can do. He may denounce colors and their use, but with them he creates portraits of places Rey would love to adventure off to.

Today she settles herself in their usual corner. She pulls out the small set of paints that Maz had gotten her for Christmas the year before and waits for Ben to slide onto his stool next to her.

But he never comes, and soon Luke is clearing his throat at the front of the classroom, the other students quieting and giving him their attention. Rey bites her bottom lip and peers around, because Ben has never missed a class in the whole year that Rey has been coming here—

Something is wrong.

She shoves her paint set back into her backpack and softly exits the classroom, not noticing Luke’s eyes swivel in her direction when the door closes behind her.

She checks the kitchen-office first, because maybe he’s making a pot of coffee and lost track of the time, or maybe he has his headphones on and didn’t hear Luke tell him class was starting soon—

But he’s not there.

Feeling herself grow antsy, she marches room to room and thoroughly checks each of them. Ben isn’t in any of them, of course, and Rey realizes with a sinking feeling where he must be. She wanders to the bottom of the staircase that leads to the upper level. The level she’s never been in, has had no reason to go in.

She squares her shoulders and places a small hand on the railing, pulled forward by some feeling of protectiveness. She needs to find Ben Solo and draw him pictures of puppies swearing, or Beavis and Butthead, or—

Rey reaches the top of the stairs and looks around, taking in the small living room with its entertainment center and a TV that's playing the local news. There are art projects everywhere, half finished sculptures and drying paintings representing a smorgasbord of Luke and Ben's work. Before Rey can get too distracted, she hears music.

Following the music will mean finding Ben. Hitching her backpack up her shoulder, she walks through the living room and into a hallway on the right. There are three doors. She guesses one leads to Luke's bedroom, one leads to the bathroom he must share with Ben, and the other...the other is slightly cracked with soft light shining from underneath.

She gently pushes it open and is reminded starkly of pushing open another door a year ago. Except she doesn't find Ben flinging paint at a bedsheet, but stretched across his own bed, lying face down.

His room smells like teenage boy. She's been around enough of them by now to recognize that particular musk. In one corner a red lava lamp sits on the floor, casting an eerie glow about the rest of the room. There's a massive *Doom* poster stretching across one wall and a Stephen King novel sitting on his bedside table. A stereo sits on a bookshelf, much nicer than the paint splattered one he keeps downstairs. Melancholy music pours out of it.

She glances back to Ben. There's a fist sized hole in the wall right next to his bedpost. And on the bedside table, next to the Stephen King novel, is a small framed photo of what must have once been a happy family. A much younger Ben smiles out at her, teeth missing, with a handsome couple standing behind him. Rey has never seen the man in the photo, but she instantly recognizes the fond smile and warm brown gaze of Senator Organa.

So he *was* left behind, just like her.

Rey looks back at his face and jumps, realizing that his eyes are open, watching her. He raises his head enough to mutter, "Fuck off, kid." But there's no real malice in his voice.

She stands still for a long moment before dropping her backpack and sitting cross-legged on the floor. She pulls out a sketchpad and a black marker, tilting the paper toward the lava lamp in order to take advantage of its light. She's not sure how long she sits there, drawing and listening to the music.

She draws a tree. A black hulking tree with two figures sitting in its shade.

When she is done she looks back up at Ben and notices that he's fallen asleep, his head cradled on his arm and facing her. As if he'd been watching her.

When she's finished she silently puts her things away and stands, determined not to wake him. She also likes to just go to sleep when she's sad, sometimes.

She places the drawing in front of the framed picture of a broken family and creeps from his room, footsteps silent.



Once again, thanks everyone for reading and commenting! Would love to hear everyone's thoughts on this chapter, I know it was more angst then fluff this time. Poor Ben and Rey :( This is it for '98. See y'all again in '99! We'll be meeting some more of our beloved characters next time as well!

# 1999, part one

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Why can't you stay here awhile  
Stay here awhile  
Stay with me

“Promises” by The Cranberries

\*\*

It's a Saturday afternoon in the middle of January and Rey is sitting on top of her unmade bed. She might be forced into making her bed every other day of the week, but Rey drew a line on Saturday mornings. Those are meant for cartoons and cartoons only.

Speaking of beds...Rey pauses in her shading project for Luke and glances at the two other beds in the spacious bedroom she's supposed to share. They're empty, but not for long. Maz had put fresh linens on each the day before.

Rey has seen plenty of other kids, young and older, be adopted in her time here at this home. She refuses to be one of them. Despite the fact that every day Rey looks into the eyes of other children whose parents also left them with nothing but shattered promises to hold onto, she clings to the dream that her parents are different. Her parents would come back for her eventually, she insisted. One day. Maybe.

(Besides, there's only one family Rey would accept being adopted into.)

The door to the bedroom swings open and in walks Maz, followed by two girls, clearly sisters. The older one surveys the room with a critical eye, arms across her chest. She looks around thirteen, maybe fourteen. The younger one looks to be Rey's age. Her gaze automatically fixates on some of Rey's sketches that she has hanging on her side of the wall. Rey pauses in her shading. The sisters are wearing threadbare clothes and have one small backpack between the two of them. Rey wonders about their backstory.

“You three will share the bathroom across the hall, and we eat our meals at the same time every day—” Maz steps about the room and explains the daily schedule to the sisters and Rey allows her thoughts to trail off. She jumps when Maz says her name. “If you have any more questions you can always ask me. I'm sure Rey would be happy to help you two ladies get settled in as well, won't you Rey?”

Rey nods, sitting up a little straighter under the older sister's penetrating gaze. Maz makes her way back toward the door, shooting Rey a pointed look over her shoulder as she leaves.

The older sister immediately turns her back to Rey, unpacking the few possessions from the backpack and spreading them across one of the beds. Rey isn't too bothered by this.

She remembers her first day at the home years ago all too well. She'd bitten someone.

The younger sister takes off her coat and lays it across the bed closest to Rey before slowly making her way over to her. "I like your pictures," she says hesitantly, eyes swiveling back and forth between Rey and her drawings.

"Thank you."

The other girl holds her hand out, and Rey finds herself slowly taking it and giving it a shake. "I'm Rose Tico." There's surprising confidence in her voice. She jerks her thumb over her shoulder. "That's Paige, my sister."

"We won't be here long," Paige snaps, not bothering to turn around.

Rey says nothing in response. She's heard that one many times.

Instead Rey opens the drawer to her small bedside table and pulls out markers and a couple of coloring books. They might be childish but...

Rey hasn't ever had anyone to share them with.

She pats the empty spot beside her and Rose wastes no time clamoring up onto her messy bed. The two girls sit side by side for hours doing nothing but coloring and chatting.

\*\*

"—and she likes drawing! I mean, honestly her sketches suck so far, but I was shit too when I started. And she's really into science. She knows how to make ice cream with a t-shirt! I didn't even know that was possible."

Ben is listening to her enthusiastic spiel with an amused gleam in his eye. It's Friday evening and they're sitting in the kitchen-office. Ben is already on his second cup of coffee since Rey arrived. He raises his mug to her in a congratulatory fashion. "I'm glad you found a friend, kid." He tone is only slightly mocking.

Rey curls her upper lip at him and rolls her eyes, an expression she picked up from him. "Um, I'm your only friend too, remember?"

She's pointed this out to him many times before. Usually he takes it in aplomb. But not tonight. Tonight he takes a sip of his coffee and frowns down at the floor. Rey feels the icy tendrils of guilt begin to creep up her spine, but before she can offer up an awkward apology, Ben puts his mug down with a thud. "You mentioned ice cream."

Rey blinks. "Ben, it's freezing outside."

"So? People drink coffee in the summer."

"Yeah, weird old people."

But Ben is already putting on his coat. "Are you coming or not?"

And Rey sighs. Technically she's not supposed to leave the studio unless she's with Luke, but her art mentor is currently holed up in his bedroom with the flu. "You don't think Luke will get mad at us leaving?"

Ben is impatiently holding her own coat out to her. "Eh, what uncle doesn't know won't hurt him. But if he asks, we walked."

This doesn't make Rey feel much better, but she takes her coat from Ben and wordlessly follows him out of the studio to his car. Rey doesn't have to know much about cars to know this his is garbage. She climbs into the passenger's seat, inwardly groaning at the automatic seat belts. The car smells like stale cigarette smoke.

Ben groans. "I left my CD's inside." He immediately starts fiddling with the radio and lecturing Rey on the importance of driving with good music at the same time. He finally lands on a station that he deems acceptable. "The college station plays alright stuff sometimes." A woman's voice fills the car. It has a dreamy quality, and both Ben and Rey find themselves bobbing their heads to the rhythm.

Ben's driving leaves a lot to be desired, but he gets them to the local ice cream parlor in one piece. He buys them two cones. She orders the cookies and cream flavor, him the coffee. Typical.

Holding her cone in her right and Ben's in her left, Rey takes delicate licks of her treat. She won't admit it to him, but she's never properly gone out for ice cream before. Maz always buys their ice cream from the grocery store. A silence stretches between them that Rey hates, and she knows Ben well enough by now to recognize where it's stemming from.

"Sorry about that friend jab, from earlier," she grumbles clumsily, refusing to look over at this profile.

Ben is quiet for a moment, and then she catches him shrugging out of the corner of her eye. "You're not wrong." He slows the car to a stop as they hit a red light. "My only real friend is a ten-year-old."

"I'm nine."

He heaves a deep sigh. "Ugh, that makes it *worse*."

Rey snorts, lips pressed together to keep herself from smiling. She eyes his ice cream that's she's commandeering so that he can drive. Eyes it, and takes long, hurried licks, turning and looking at Ben so that she can fully enjoy his reaction.

"What—Are you eating my fucking ice cream?"

Rey giggles. His facial expressions are always so vibrant. "Coffee is disgusting."

"How *dare*—" Quick as a flash he's snatched her ice cream from her right hand and shoved it into her face. She squeals. But her retribution is found a moment later when she squishes his own cone into his right cheek. "Take *that!*" she cries in triumph.

“Rey, you got ice cream on the seats!” The scandal in his voice makes her grin.

“Your car is shit anyway.”

He gives her a withering look. “Maybe I shouldn’t have taught you to swear.”

The car behind them starts blaring their horn; the light has turned green. Ben sticks his head out the window and screams foul, obscene things at the driver. Rey files all the insults away for future use and wipes the ice cream off her face with her coat sleeve. Her cheeks are already sticky.

When they finally arrive back at the studio, they stay in Ben’s car until they’ve finished what’s left of their salvaged cones. It’s the best ice cream she’ll ever have.

## Chapter End Notes

RIP Dolores O’Riordan :(

I’ve been looking forward to introducing Rose! She’ll become a main player in this story. Hope everyone liked! If you did, I’d love to hear your thoughts! And thank you everyone who has made time to comment/leave kudos so far! Y’all are the best.

# 1999, part two

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

For most love comes for free  
They don't pay the high cost  
Of mental custody I'll pay bail for a guarantee  
Please make space for me In the time yet to be

“Excuse Me Mr” by No Doubt

\*\*

It's warm outside. Finally.

It's another Saturday. Rey is about fifteen feet up into the massive oak tree that's in the home's backyard, one leg dangling off a sturdy branch and the other balancing her sketchbook. Her tongue is barely jutting out between her lips in concentration, her gaze flicking back and forth between her drawing and Rose and Paige. The two sisters are sitting in the shade of the tree, reading. A small, portable stereo sits on the grass next to Paige, blaring music. It's one of the view possessions the sisters had had with them in their shared backpack.

Rey pauses and frowns down at her work. Rose's hand isn't proportional to the rest of her body and Rey *can't quite fix it*—

She tries not to huff in frustration.

The music stops and Paige quickly starts the CD over again. Rey sighs. More Gwen Stefani. Paige is *obsessed*. Rey imagines the look on Ben's face if he knew how much No Doubt Rey is subjected to while at home... It makes her smile a little.

A few minutes pass and Rey erases Rose's hand for the third time.

Birds chirp. Rose gasps at something exciting she's come across in her book on spaceships, promptly reading the section aloud. Rey and Paige perk up slightly from what they're doing, providing vaguely interested commentary. Rose grins, diving back into her book. Her joy is palpable, and Paige and Rey share a companionable smile over the top of her head.

When the spring sun is almost too warm, Paige rummages around in her backpack and pulls out bags of Goldfish. Rose takes hers without looking away from her book, and Paige tosses Rey's snack up to her with practiced ease. Rey catches it with one hand.

It's peaceful. It's kinship.

Saturday's are starting to rival Friday's as Rey's favorite day of the week.

\*\*

Several weeks later marks the beginning of May, and Rey finds herself walking out into the garden Luke keeps behind the studios. It's a Wednesday, which means Rey has a sketching class. She is, once again, the youngest of all the students, picking a grassy spot away from most of the others. She makes herself comfortable and gathers the supplies she knows she'll need. Luke is gesturing to the nature around them, undoubtedly encouraging them to sketch whatever inspires them—

Suddenly Rey is uneasy.

Ben typically sits in on this class with her, painting or doing homework or listening to music or napping. And he never misses. In fact, the last time he missed a class was because—

Rey drums her fingers against her knee, fretting. There's the same familiar twinge she'd felt last time, that something is wrong with Ben.

She moves to gather her things when Luke is swiftly there, looking down at her with a raised eyebrow. Rey stares up at him fiercely, because hadn't he let her leave last time? But Luke gives a firm shake of his head and Rey stills, hand slowly pulling back out her sketchpad, cheeks flushing with frustration.

The rest of the class drags by and Rey draws nothing, body tense the entire time.

Luke dismisses the class when the sun starts to set. The evening is warm and pleasant, and the students who don't drive themselves lounge outside in the gardens while waiting for their rides.

But Maz won't be here for another half hour, at least.

Luke keeps an annoyingly close eye on her, but eventually he gets distracted by other students showing him their work. He briefly looks away and Rey dashes inside the studio, backpack bouncing against her back.

It's quiet in the entryway for a brief, brief moment.

There's a shattering sound and then loud shouting. Rey finds herself rooted to the spot, apprehension making her too nervous to move. But then the part of her that needs to check on Ben kicks in. She marches through the entryway and heads straight for the kitchen-office. The shouting becomes louder.

“—*have* to get a control on your anger—”

“Because you're such a great fucking example—”

“Your mother and I—”

“I don't give a *shit* what you and—”

Rey pauses right outside the door frame, suddenly feeling very much like a nine-year-old. This has nothing to do with her, this really isn't any of her business, she should turn around leave—

There's a rustling of footsteps, and before Rey can decide either way, Ben is standing in the hallway looking down at her. There's blood all over his left hand and the expression on his face is inscrutable. A second later a man emerges behind him, looking flustered. Rey immediately recognizes him from the family portrait that had been on Ben's nightstand.

This is Ben's father. And he looks deeply uncomfortable.

"Uh, you lost, kid?"

The endearment makes Rey bristle.

"Rey." Ben's voice is soft and controlled. "Go grab some wet paper towels for my hand."

She moves to obey without a word. As she walks into the kitchen-office she hears Ben address his father in low, hushed tones.

When she makes her way back to Ben his father is already gone.

\*\*

Luke is *furious*.

She'll have to spend the rest of the week dusting and sweeping and mopping the studio. "You can't keep going around behind my back without my permission," he'd said. Rey has never seen her mentor this upset with her before, and his disappointment makes her wince with guilt. But Luke's tone doesn't hold much anger, and Rey has a feeling she's getting off rather lightly.

"You smashed my favorite mug!" he admonishes Ben as they sit around the table in the kitchen-office. Ben is dabbing at the gouges and cuts across his knuckles and across the back of his left hand. Rey has never seen this much blood at once before. "And Han left before I got to even—"

Ben fixes a hard look on Luke before jerking his head subtly to Rey.

Once again he is keeping her out of the loop. She slumps a little in her seat.

The phone rings and Luke throws up his hand in exasperation. "That's probably your mother. If that doesn't stop bleeding I'm taking you to the emergency room for stitches." He leaves, footsteps retreating down the hall toward the entryway.

Silence. Ben stands, tossing blood soaked paper towels into the trash and gathering fresh ones.

And Rey decides to ask for the umpteenth time, "Why do you live with Luke?"



Ben sits in the chair across from her, dark hair sweaty and falling into his brown eyes. He shakes his head slowly, not looking at her. “I don’t know, Rey,” he says slowly. “I think...I think you’re too young to be caught up in all of this.”

Rey sticks her chin out and sits up as straight as possible. She feels it again, that inherent need to protect Ben Solo. That need to shoulder whatever it is that burdens him. “I just want to know more about you.” She shrugs and waits knowingly.

Ah, that gets him.

He sighs and looks at her closely for a long moment. “Alright, *fine*.” More blood seeps through the fresh paper towels he has pressed against his hand. “People can give you shit sometimes, you know, when you’re a senator’s kid. When I was in eighth grade a couple of other guys and I, we, uh, we got in a fight...” Ben won’t meet her eyes.

“You started it,” Rey concludes, fiddling with a strap on her backpack. Her eyes dart to the clock on the microwave. Maz will be here any minute.

Ben nods, looking down. “They said some stuff, anyway it doesn’t matter what they said now. I put them both in the hospital. Paralyzed one. I didn’t mean, I didn’t...It just happened.” He stops, and Rey realized he’s waiting for her reaction. Waiting for her horror.

Rey has been called many names in her nine years of life. Ugly, homeless rat, scrawny little turd. One time an older boy at the home had called her a “spawn of methhead fucks” which she thought was at least slightly original. Insults typically roll off her back. But if someone said horrible things about Rose or Ben or Paige in front of her...she could easily imagine the fury she might feel.

She remains quiet and Ben hesitantly continues. “The whole thing caused a lot of bad press for my parents, especially my mom. She thought it might be better if I came and lived with my uncle. Got out of the political eye.” He looks at his bleeding hand and winces. And says nothing else.

Rey takes a moment and runs over everything he’s told her. She thinks of Ben shoving ice cream in her face. Ben is good, she thinks. He has changed, and all that other stuff is in the past. He is different now. She thinks this because she’s only nine years old.

Rey shrugs at him. “That’s it?”

His lips part in surprise and he looks as if he’s about to speak when Luke walks back into the room, looking deeply irritated. His expression reminds Rey of Ben.

“Your ride is here,” he says to Rey. And then his gaze pins itself furiously to his nephew. “You need stitches. And you’re making me a new mug.”

I live for the angst y'all.

Thanks to everyone who has left comments and kudos! I truly enjoy reading what everyone has to say. One more installment for '99 before we jump into the new millennium. Fun times. Thanks everyone for reading. If you liked let me know!

# 1999, part three

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

You're all I ever wanted  
You're all I ever needed, yeah  
So tell me what to do now  
'Cause I want you back

“I Want You Back” by \*NSYNC

\*\*

The days have grown hot as May pushes into June.

Rey follows Luke as they get out of his car at the local high school and head toward the football field. She’s wearing a jean skirt and a maroon polo shirt that Rose had let her borrow so that she could look somewhat nice. She keeps on her grubby sneakers, however.

Luke keeps glancing over his shoulder in order to make sure she’s near him, looking a little frazzled and out of place amongst the crowd. It makes Rey smile. She quickens her pace so that she’s right by her art mentor’s side.

“And he doesn’t know I’m coming?” She already knows the answer to this question. She’s asked it countless times. But she’s filled with anxious excitement, hands twisting in the hem of her shirt.

Luke shakes his head at her fondly and obliges her by for the umpteenth time. “No, Rey. He doesn’t know.”

They find their seats minutes later. Senator Organa stands and greets her brother with a smile and a hug. Then she bends down and hugs Rey, who pats her back awkwardly in return.

“You’re very sweet, Rey.” Leia stands up straight and smooths out her skirt. “Ben will be pleased you’re here.” She then starts peppering Rey with questions about Maz and the home and her art. Rey answers each question shyly, very aware of random people around them staring at the senator and her imposing body guard.

They’re sitting off to the side and a little toward the back of the field, and Rey is beginning to suspect that this is in case the need for a quick getaway arises. There’s a stage set up toward the front of the field, and someone walks onto it and begins speaking into the microphone. Out of the corner of Rey’s eye she sees a man trot up to where she, Luke, and Leia are sitting. He waves off the senator’s bodyguard and slips into the empty seat next to Rey.

“Perfect timing,” Leia says, raising an eyebrow.

The man smirks, and it hits Rey that he's Ben's father. He looks different then the last time she saw him. Less uncomfortable. He smirks and greets Leia and Luke with a wave of his hand. Then his gaze swivels to Rey, and she sees Ben in the way he tilts his head and grimaces slightly.

"Sorry about the last time we met, kid. Didn't have time for a proper introduction." He sticks his hand out. "I'm Han."

Rey hesitantly shakes it. His hand is warm, and she finds herself liking him a bit.

The person at the microphone introduces themselves as the principal and Ben's high school graduation ceremony begins.

\*\*

Forty-five minutes later and Rey is so bored she could rip out her own hair.

She'd stopped paying attention about five minutes into the ceremony and had only perked up when Ben's name had been called. She'd stood and cheered along with the rest of Ben's family as Ben walks across the stage and accepts his diploma. Rey thinks briefly of her own future graduation, and whether there will be people who love her applauding for her in that audience.

Now the valed-whatever is giving a speech and Rey is trying her very hardest not to fidget. She hadn't thought she'd need her sketchbook when Luke had picked her up at the home earlier today, and she's regretting not having it now.

Han gently nudges her side with his elbow and she glances up at him. He slumps down in his chair and lets his head roll against his shoulder, eyes closed and letting out very loud, very exaggerated snores.

Rey giggles, and Luke gives her a firm look that could rival one of Maz's. Except the effort of trying to hide her laughter makes the situation all the funnier. Rey snorts. And then Han is laughing too.

Luke sighs.

\*\*

The ceremony finally ends and after the graduates toss their caps it doesn't take very long for Ben to spot his parents, loudspeakers blaring music in the background. Only so many people walk around with an armed bodyguard, after all. Ben looks very grown up to Rey, in his cap and gown. Graduating from school seems like such a very long time from now.

Luke and Rey hang back and watch as Ben hugs Leia first. She stand on the tips of her toes and strokes his head. Rey thinks she sees Leia say something into Ben's ear, making him smile softly. The senator steps back, leaving Ben and Han to shuffle awkwardly toward each other. Han pulls his son into a blink-and-you'll-miss-it hug and then both step away.

Ben looks over toward where Luke and Rey are standing. His mouth parts in surprise. “What are you doing here, kid?”

The adults all look at her expectantly, and Rey’s brain goes blank. Saying ‘because we’re friends, duh’ or ‘Luke mentioned it to me and I wanted to come’ somehow doesn’t feel right. But Ben saves her from answering by walking over to her and ruffling her hair. She swats at his hands, protesting.

There’s nothing but pure affection on Ben’s face.

\*\*

If Rey thought the ceremony was boring, she was not prepared for Senator Leia Organa taking pictures of her son at his high school graduation.

First Leia takes pictures of just Ben holding his diploma, then of Ben and Han, then Ben and Luke, then Ben, Luke and Han. Then she makes her bodyguard take pictures of her with Ben, then her Ben and Han, then her, Ben, Han, and Luke.

It’s a long process, and Leia’s spends half of it pleading with Ben to smile for at least *one damn picture*.

And Rey is thinking that at least *she’s* not subjected to any of this nonsense when Leia turns a predatory gaze onto her. In a flash she’s smoothing out Rey’s wild hair with quick, motherly gestures. And then she’s commanding Ben to crouch down next to Rey and for them both to smile.

“Make funny faces,” Ben hisses quickly under his breath. Rey complies when she sees him stick out his tongue, puffing out her cheeks and crossing her eyes right as Leia snaps the picture.

“Very funny,” the senator says, holding up the camera again. “For real this time, please.”

Ben pulls his ears out and Rey holds up to fingers behind his head. For the third picture, they both pretend to be choking each other.

A loud buzzing noise comes from Leia’s camera, indicating that it’s run out of film. Ben relaxes in his crouch. “Finally.” He stands, and Rey can sense the afternoon winding down to a close. Soon Ben will leave with his parents and Luke will take Rey back to the home, and her day with her almost-family will be over.

“Thanks for coming, kid.” Ben’s soft voice makes her look up. He’s giving her a half smile. “You’re handy to sabotage pictures with.”

Rey shrugs and toes the grass with her sneaker. “Just promise you’ll come to my graduation too, no matter how boring it is.”

He lets out a laugh. “Sure, Rey. I promise I’ll come to your high school graduation, no matter how boring it is.”

She holds out her pinky, and they pinky swear.

The loudspeakers switch to a new song in the background. *"You're all I ever wanted..."*

Ben groans.

## Chapter End Notes

I skipped my own high school graduation ceremony, so hopefully this was somewhat accurate.

Thank you so much to everyone who has read and reviewed so far! Your comments mean the world. It's always great as a fanfic writer to know there's support for what you're putting out there. Anyway, that's it for '99! See you guys again in the new millennium.

## 2000, part one

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Got a lotta heartache  
He's a fuckin' weasel  
His issues make my mind ache  
Wanna make a deal

“Dysentery Gary” by blink-182

\*\*

Rey has three specific memories of her time before the home.

The first one is an image of a red cupcake being placed in front of her with four lit candles shoved into the top. It's April 10th, something that had been drilled into her child's mind. Two people sing happy birthday to her. They've been home all day, playing games with her and giving out hugs and she feels pleased, *special*—

A warm hand smooths her hair away from her forehead. There's a raspy voice. “Make a wish, Rey.”

And Rey wishes for another day like this. It doesn't even have to be her birthday. Just another day like this one. Another day as a family.

\*\*

Her tenth birthday comes and goes quietly. The home typically has a birthday party at the beginning of every month celebrating the kids whose birth months it is. An individual celebration for every single kid would be too expensive, but Rey has never really minded. Of course, April had been no different.

But the day of her actual birthday, April 10th, Maz had given her a beautiful new set of paints, making Rey promise not to mention it to the other kids. “Won't do having the others know you're my favorite,” she'd said pointedly.

This had made Rey smile and, truthfully, Maz's words were almost as nice a gift as the new paints. Rey would never say so, of course.

Paige and Rose had eaten pizza with her in the evening and they'd watched *The Craft*. It had been a nice birthday, all and all.

In truth, no birthday would ever compare to the first one she could ever remember.

\*\*

Ben is moving out of the studio.

Rey is trying very hard not to pout. She pleaded and begged Maz to let her spend her Saturday here, insisting that there was a project for Luke she needed to work on and Maz had relented.

In truth, it's so she won't miss *this*. She slumps on the couch in the entryway, watching as Ben goes back and forth with boxes and half crumpled posters and framed paintings.

A box suddenly slams down at her feet, the books and knick-knacks inside rattling about. Rey looks up and sees Ben blinking down at her slowly, mouth pressed in a firm line.

"You're moping. Quit it."

She crosses her arms over her chest and vehemently shakes her head. "Am not." But then she spies a picture frame in the box. The framed picture of Ben's family she'd seen on his nightstand. And it really starts to settle—that Ben won't always be here at the studio anymore. Not like before. Her bottom lip trembles just a tiny, tiny bit.

And then Ben is crouching down in front of her, the corner of his mouth curled in an almost smile. "Rey. Come on. I'll still be here all the time and you can pester me as much as you want, like usual."

She refuses to meet his gaze. A hot feeling is moving up her chest and she finds that she can't say anything. She feels...embarrassed. Embarrassed that this upsets her so much.

Ben sighs, and then there's a massive hand on her slim shoulder. She tilts her head up just a little, just so he knows she's giving him all her attention. He's giving her a knowing look and she almost wants to shrink away.

"Rey," he says softly. "I'll still be here for all the classes I have to take." His voice takes on a hard edge. "I still have plenty to learn, according to Luke." He sucks in a deep breath. "Tell you what. Every Friday I'll be here. And we'll hang out like we normally do. And nothing is going to change, okay? I swear."

He holds his pinky out to her and Rey stills. He *knows* how serious pinky swearing is. She smiles and hooks her pinky with his. Ben gives it a vivid shake and Rey giggles, most of her anxiety melting out of her. Ben lets go and grabs the box he'd dropped to the floor, hoisting it back up with a slight grunt.

"If you're done moping, I want to see how your self portrait is coming along. Give me ten minutes and I can look over it with—"

"Solo!"

Both Ben and Rey jerk their heads toward the front door. In strides a young man who can't be any older than nineteen. He's a bit shorter than Ben, but his stride radiates confidence. His dark curls bounce against his forehead as he moves.



Rey doesn't think her heart actually stops beating in her chest, but it sure does feel that way because this boy is *beautiful*.

"Dameron," Ben grumbles as a way of greeting. "I told you I didn't need any help getting my stuff to the apartment."

The young man waves off Ben's statement, completely nonplussed. "Never hurts to swing by and see, ya know?" He grins and sweeps his gaze across the room, taking in the hanging art appreciatively. Rey suspects helping Ben is not his sole motivation for coming by.

Ben shifts the box in his hands, frowning. "I'm almost done," he says simply, and Rey can tell he's irritated.

Dameron shrugs. But then his eyes fall on Rey. "Who's this?" he asks stepping up to the couch and looking down at her.

"My friend." Ben's expression is beginning to darken.

Dameron shoots him a teasing smile. "A friend?" He looks back to Rey. "Why am I not surprised my roommate has friends that are eight?"

"I'm ten," Rey corrects, sitting up a little straighter. She's about to point out that she's nearly done with elementary school too, thank you very much, when Ben nearly drops his box.

"When did you turn ten?" he questions, looking surprised.

"Last weekend." Rey shrugs and moves off the couch, brushing imaginary dust off her jeans.

For a moment Ben looks genuinely upset. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it's just my birthday?" she says slowly, suddenly feeling a little self-conscious. "They're not a big deal."

"No party?" Dameron looks genuinely appalled.

"I've never had my own birthday party," Rey states. And she immediately learns that, apparently, this is *not* a normal thing.

"We've got to give you one—" And the young man who is supposedly Ben's new roommate launches into a stream of ideas, voice growing louder and more animated in his own excitement. *Every* kid should have their own birthday party at least once, he says, and how has she *never* had one before and—

There's a loud thud as Ben places his box down again. "Dameron, there's a couple of boxes up in my room still. It's to the left and upstairs. Go grab them, if you're here to help."

The beautiful young man pauses in his description of laser tag, looking startled for a moment. "Oh. Yeah, sure!" He takes a few steps forward before immediately backtracking. He sticks his hand out for Rey. "We haven't been properly introduced, my lady. I'm Poe Dameron."

Feeling enormously shy, Rey takes his hand and returns his shake. “I’m Rey.” And she beams up at him because oh, he looks like a Disney prince.

He grins at her before bending down and placing a quick kiss on the back of her hand. “Pleasure to meet you, Rey.” And then he’s off, darting around the corner toward the stairs. She feels an intense blush on her cheeks, the place on her hand that Poe had kissed tingling.

Is this...is this a *crush*? Because Paige and Rose had talked about them before and how you knew you had a crush when a boy you think is cute makes you feel funny and—

“Rey.” Ben’s voice snaps her out of her reverie. “I’m sorry I missed your birthday. I wish you would’ve told me.”

“Why?”

A flash of annoyance crosses his face and he rolls his brown eyes. “Because we could’ve done something to celebrate. Ice cream or something. You only turn double digits once.”

Rey supposes this is true. “I don’t know. I’ve never done anything like that before.”

Ben watches her for a long moment before an idea seems to hit him. “Well...what would you like? We could do something—”

“For what?”

She’s playing a little, and his eyes narrow. “For your birthday,” he grinds out.

She’d *like to go to Six Flags*. She’d *like* a puppy. She’d *like* for a hand to come back and smooth hair away from her forehead and tell her to make a wish with her birthday candles.

Rey taps her chin, thinking. Then she gives him a sly smile. “I want to come over and see your new apartment.”

To say that Ben looked shocked would’ve been an understatement. “You—what?”

“When you’re all moved in, I want to come see your apartment.” She puts her hands on her hips and leans forward. “I want to see how terrible your decorating skills are.”

“You’re a little shit, you know that?”

“And you’re a big shit.”

Ben Solo snorts and lets out a hearty laugh. A sense of pride washes over Rey. She always gets it when she manages to make him laugh.

At that moment Poe comes bursting back into the entryway, box in hand. This box must hold Ben’s stereo, because music is coming out of it and Poe is singing along very, very loudly. He winks at Rey as he walks past her and Ben and out of the studio.

Ben is shaking his head, exasperated. “Alright. You can come see the apartment when we’re settled in. Now, about your portrait—”

Poe bursts back into the entryway, arms cradling the biggest, fluffiest ginger cat that Rey has ever seen.

“Dameron! No pets—”

But Poe is already dropping onto his knees in front of Rey. “Would you like to meet BB-8?”

## Chapter End Notes

We finally get to meet Poe! I’ll be expanding on how he and Ben even know each other, much less how they ended up as roomies, in the next update. Also, kitty BB-8! I plan to have a lot of fun with that.

I gave Rey Daisy Ridley’s birthday. <3

Once again, thanks so much for all of your lovely comments. They really do help inspire a girl! If you liked, let me know? :)

## 2000, part two

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I'm a lot like you so please, hello, I'm here, I'm waiting  
I think I'd be good for you and you'd be good for me

“El Scorcho” by Weezer

\*\*

Rey has butterflies in her hair.

Not literal ones, of course. Rose and Paige and argued for ten minutes on how Rey should style her hair. They finally agree on keeping half of it down and pulling the rest back into several sections, each one secured with multiple butterfly clips. And Rey had let them fuss with a patience she didn't know she possessed.

And it's all because today she's seeing Poe Dameron.

It's been a couple months since she made her birthday request and today Ben is *finally* fulfilling it. Rey has been bouncing around all day with nervous energy, dressed in a simple t-shirt and overalls.

She's been looking forward to this Saturday ever since Ben told her about it on Tuesday, and she waits by the front door with Rose and Paige for him to arrive. When she hears a knock on the door she calls for Maz and waits impatiently for her caretaker to stroll through the front room. Several older boys are crowded around a PlayStation 2 that had just been donated to the home, so the front room is filled with noise. Maz gives Rey a pointed look as she answers the door and Rey tries not to roll her eyes. (She had answered the door for the pizza man once last year and had never heard the end of it.)

The door opens and Ben moves inside, quirking his mouth when he see Rey. “What's up, kid.” His eyes fall to her hair and he quirks an eyebrow.

She moves to introduce him to Rose and Paige, when she notices that the two sisters have shrunk back, eyeing Ben apprehensively. Rey glances back at Ben with a confused frown. He's just a big idiot dressed in black?

Although, she supposes he *is* pretty tall for a boy. And intense. She throws her arms around his midsection and pulls him into a hug, and he pats the top of her head fondly. But before she can introduce him to her friends, Maz is hurrying him through the front room and to her office, no doubt to lecture him and make him sign paperwork.

“That's *Ben*?” Rose asks, voice colored with shock.

“Yeah,” Rey answers simply, arching an eyebrow and frowning. She doesn’t quite like Rose’s tone and finds herself shifting toward the defensive.

“He’s just...kind of imposing.” Paige is gazing in the direction that Ben and Maz walked in, eyebrows furrowed.

“You just have to get to know him,” Rey says, standing a little straighter and looking her two friends in the eye. “He’s actually the best. Really.”

Rose looks doubtful, but Paige shrugs. “If you say so. Anyway, have fun, Rey.” The sisters move to sit with the older boys around the PlayStation 2 and Rey wanders to Maz’s office, fuming just a little. It bothers her that they didn’t instantly take to him, for some reason. It’s almost like because they had instantly been put off by Ben, they’d instantly been put off by a little bit of her as well. Like the time when Rose hadn’t liked the Nirvana CD that Rey had played for her. Except this stung a little worse.

Before she can dwell on it any further, Ben is walking out of Maz’s, the old woman right behind him. She shoos him away toward the front door and pulls Rey to the side by her sleeve.

“Be on your best behavior, girl. Understand?”

Rey huffs. “Of course.”

Maz looks at Rey for a long moment before pressing a piece of paper in her hand. “Ben’s Senator Organa’s son, and ultimately I trust his character. But if you need me, call. And if you’re not back by 6—”

“Maz,” Rey whined, trying to pull her sleeve out of the woman’s grasp.

“Be good,” Maz grouches, yanks her into a hug, and then turns back toward her office.

As Rey is making her way back through the front room to where Ben is waiting for her by the door, one of the older boys, Jimmy, who Rey neither likes nor dislikes calls out to her. “Have fun, hyena bitch!”

Rey freezes, face already twisting in a cringe.

‘Hyena bitch’ has been a term the other kids have called her ever since she’d first come to the home. ‘Hyena’, because they’d found her dumpster diving. ‘Bitch’, because she’d bitten someone her first day. Rey’s not sure who came up with it, but the nickname had stuck. And oddly enough, through the years it had become more a term of endearment than anything.

But Ben doesn’t know that.

He says nothing. But one moment the PlayStation controller is in Jimmy’s hands and the next Ben is lifting it over his head and smashing it with thundering force. The controller breaks on impact, bits of plastic and knobs and wiring going everywhere. There are multiple gasps throughout the room, including one from Rey.

And then Ben is striding back toward her like nothing happened, hand gesturing toward the door. She quickly exits, heat flooding to her cheeks and unable to make parting eye contact with her friends.

When they're in Ben's car her anger takes over.

"Now we only have one controller for the whole home, you *fucking asshole*." She crosses her arms against her chest and glares vehemently at Ben Solo, who seems to have no reaction to her outburst.

Until she sees the tips of his ears turning red.

He finally sighs, putting the keys into the ignition and starting the car.

"I'll buy you a new one," he grumbles.

\*\*

Ben and Poe's apartment is in a gated complex fifteen minutes away. They climb two flights of stairs to reach it. Rey is buzzing with anticipation.

After Ben unlocks the front door and opens it, he steps back and lets her walk in first.

The first thing she sees is a bunch of orange fur.

BB-8 is meowing in greeting, twisting his body around her legs and nearly making her trip. She laughs in excitement and immediately drops to the floor to greet the cat. She wishes they could have pets at the home.

He nuzzles his head against her chin, whiskers tickling her cheeks. She runs her fingers through his thick and impossibly soft fur, scratching and rubbing behind his ears. BB-8 closes his eyes and starts up a deep, rumbling purr.

Rey hears Ben give a slight huff of impatience as he steps around them.

There's a wonderful smell in the air and she can hear Poe in the kitchen, singing obnoxiously along to whatever he's listening to. Rey spends a few more moments petting BB-8 before finally standing and making her way into the kitchen.

Poe is opening up boxes of pizza and pouring soda into plastic cups. "There she is!" he exclaims when he sees her, stepping around the countertop to where she's standing. He takes her hand and kisses it with a flourish, and Rey can't keep the grin off her face.

Behind Poe, Ben is watching with arched eyebrows, both corners of his mouth twitching.

Poe hands her a slice of pizza and encourages her to eat while he walks her around their, admittedly, tiny apartment. The living room has a couch and a TV, and about three different stereos. She spots what she thinks is a record player in the corner, and to her delight Poe leads her right up to it, showing her the sleeve for the record it's currently playing.

“Pinkerton?” she reads.

Poe nods. “A classic, if you ask me.” He ushers her out of the living room and shows her where the bathroom, then the bedrooms.

Poe’s is clean and simple, bed made and with framed posters of fighter jets. After that he disappears back into the kitchen, leaving Rey to wander across the hall to Ben’s room. It smells like paint. He appears behind her when she walks in. “Did you really need to see our rooms?”

“I said I wanted to see your apartment. And I meant it.”

“You’re still such a weirdo, you know that?” he admonishes, but Rey can tell he’s not actually annoyed. She notices a computer in the corner and points to it. “That’s new.”

Ben doesn’t answer right away. Then he leans his large body against the door frame and nods. “My dad gave it to me as a graduation present.”

“Cool,” Rey says around a mouthful of pizza, slightly envious. She only gets to use the computer at school, where they practice their typing and play educational games like *Carmen Sandiego* and *Reader Rabbit*.

“You think Poe is cute, don’t you?”

Rey nearly drops her pizza. She looks up at Ben in abject horror. His face is unreadable.

“Do *not*,” she denies hotly, but her heartbeat spikes in growing panic.

“You did your hair.” Ben’s mouth twitches again and Rey realizes with a jolt that he’s actually trying not to laugh. And then he breaks, snorting and lifting his hand to cover his burst of laughter. “You actually did your hair,” he says with mirth.

She moves to viciously stomp on his foot, but he darts out of the way too quickly, really laughing at her this time.

“I hate you,” she snaps, feeling furious and embarrassed.

His laughter trails into an amused sigh, and he pats her head. She notices that, despite his mocking, he’s careful not to mess up her hair.

“Don’t worry kid, your secret is safe with me.”

\*\*

They spend the next couple of hours eating pizza and chatting, and Rey comes to find that Poe Dameron is not just the most beautiful boy she’s ever seen, but he’s also totally, totally great.

He wants to be a pilot, his favorite color is orange, and he’s a year older than Ben. He has a cat that he rescued from the pound, and moved in with Ben because they’ve known each

other since they were five.

“Our moms are friends,” Ben explains. He’s sitting on a chair in the living room while Rey and Poe take up the couch, BB-8 curled up in Poe’s lap.

“And I’m one of the few people who doesn’t think Solo will murder them in their sleep,” Poe quips, smiling.

Ben’s expression darkens, and Rey looks between the two of them, confused. “Do people actually think that?”

Ben shrugs and Poe echoes the gesture, looking unbothered. “Doesn’t matter.” He chucks Rey’s chin. “As long as you stay true to yourself and stand up for what’s right, it doesn’t matter what people think of you.” And Rey absorbs this advice with relish, because Poe’s smile is so *white* and—

But Ben’s face has darkened further.

Rey feels it again. That pull to cheer him. “Well, I *also* don’t think you’d murder anyone in their sleep. Because you’re the best person I know.” She says it simply, because it’s true to her. And Rey has always been able to be completely honest with Ben Solo.

He smiles, just a little. “Thanks, kid.”

\*\*

Ben swings by a Best Buy and buys a new PlayStation controller on the way home.

## Chapter End Notes

Rey’s [hairstyle](#). Shout out to [Peachesplumpear](#) for reminding me of butterfly clips! I can’t believe I forgot about those! They were practically my only hair accessory for an embarrassing amount of time. Also, *Reader Rabbit* was the shit.

Well, I believe that’s it for 2000! I hope everyone liked this chapter! Also, just to clarify, because I’ve had several people ask, yes this will eventually be a romance. I am complete Reylo garbage. Thanks again for all the comments! They’re super encouraging. If you liked please let me know!



# 2001, part one

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Bones sinking like stones  
All that we've fought for  
Homes, places we've grown  
All of us are done for

“Don’t Panic” by Coldplay

\*\*

Rey has found herself at the most awkward family dinner *ever*.

It’s a Friday night in the middle of February, and Rey is sitting in a booth at an upscale Mexican restaurant close by the studio. Ben sits next to her and his parents sit across the table, Leia sitting up straight and Han slouched and uncomfortable.

And she thought the most exciting thing about tonight was going to be the new episode of Boy Meets World.

Ben has his elbows propped up on the table, his eyes pointed up toward the ceiling. He’s been extra surly lately, snapping at anyone about anything, and tearing up his own artwork if he’s unsatisfied with it. In fact, he’s been in such a bad mood this past week especially, that she had been tempted to say ‘no’ when he all but begged her to tag along tonight.

But she didn’t.

And by the way this dinner is going, Rey is beginning to understand why he’s been so irritated as of late.

Senator Organa has been talking about colleges for the last twenty minutes. Ben has been completely uncooperative, attempting to change the topic every few minutes with no luck.

This is Rey’s first family dinner that she can remember ever participating in, and at this point she’d rather be anywhere else. She twiddles her thumbs underneath the table and tries not to sigh. They’ve run out of cheese dip.

“Ben, your artwork is incredible. No one is disputing that—”

“You are,” Ben interrupts, “by implying that I can’t make a living off of it and therefore should go back to school.” He’s still looking at the ceiling.

“I’m not saying you can’t make a living off of your art.” Rey can just barely hear the strain in Leia’s voice. The senator keeps glancing at Rey, and Rey is getting the feeling that if she wasn’t there Leia would be making much sharper comments to her son. “I’m just saying it

doesn't hurt to have a degree under your belt if for any reason you stop wanting to do your art. I can easily set you up a meeting with the dean at—"

"No." Ben's gaze has finally dropped from the ceiling and he's staring at his mother with thinly veiled disdain.

Han flags down the waiter and orders more cheese dip and a pitcher of margaritas with extra tequila.

A few long minutes of silence pass, and Rey is beginning to wish she hadn't turned down the kid's menu with the crayons. She had asked to order off the adult menu instead, to seem more grown up. She regrets that now.

The waiter returns with more dip and the pitcher, and Han wastes no time pouring himself a drink. He looks just as out of place at this booth as Rey feels.

She wonders if she could sneak away and play the claw machine. She bets Ben would give her a dollar if she asks—

"Ben," Leia begins, slightly hesitant, "at least let me arrange an interview with Ackbar. You know he'd hire you—"

It's the last straw for Ben. "I said NO! I don't want to meet your fucking friend that's a dean, I don't want a fucking interview with Ackbar, and I'm not fucking wasting my time by going to school when I've been studying at one of the most renown art studios in the country for the past *ten fucking years!*"

His shouting is so loud that a hush has fallen over the other restaurant patrons.

The mariachi music is obnoxious and blaring compared to the deadly quiet that's come over their table. Rey can feel the anger and frustration radiating off of Ben. She reaches up and pats his shoulder and he finally tears his eyes away from his mother.

"What?" he snaps.

She says the first thing that pops into her head. "You have a booger in your nose."

It's not true, but it does the trick. Ben's face goes blank with surprise, and Han snorts loudly. The tension diffuses a little at their table, and the rest of the restaurant returns to their dinners.

"You're full of shit," Ben says, but his mouth quirks a little.

Rey pokes his arm. "Can I have a dollar for the claw machine?"

Ben gives her five. She manages to win a stuffed frog.

\*\*

By the time they return to the studio Ben is in a stormy mood again. He disappears into the backroom to keep working on a project he's had going on for a few weeks now. Rey can hear

him stomping about, and a second later furious music starts up.

From the other end of the hallway Luke sticks his head out of the kitchen-office. He peers down the hallway at the room Ben is in, then looks back to Rey. “Dinner went that well, huh?”

Rey groans in response.

Luke smiles a little, shaking his head. “I told you not to go.”

Rey rolls her eyes at him and starts to wander down the hallway toward Ben, content to watch him paint for the time being, when there’s a honking outside of the studio.

Rey groans again. Maz is here.

She bolts out of the studio and across it’s small but tidy front lawn toward Maz’s car, waving for her caretaker to roll down the window.

“What is it?” Maz asks, attempting to peer around Rey. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” She puts her hands on the door and bites her lips. “Can I stay another couple of hours?”

“Nope.”

“Please, Maz? It’s important.”

“Not important enough. If you wanted to stay later you should have called me before I left. Come on, get in.”

Rey looks back over her shoulder toward the brightly lit studio. Ben is in there, upset and frustrated and in a piss poor mood.

“Get Paige to pick me up.”

Maz doesn’t look swayed. “She’s busy studying. You know she won’t want to.”

But Rey is prepared for that answer. “She owes me. If she argues, remind her of the rat incident.”

“The *what* incident—”

“Please please please!” Rey cups her hands together and bobs on her feet, pleading. “Only for a couple of more hours!”

Maz watches her for a long moment before letting out a breath and relenting.

Rey shouts ‘thanks’ over her shoulder as she rushes back into the studio.

When she finally makes it to the back room where Ben is, he’s slumped on a stool, staring at the easel in front of him.

The painting is a forest in wintertime. There's snow covering the forest floor and pulling down the branches of the trees, and the sky is dark and dotted with stars. Two figures stand facing each other amongst the trees, but the painting isn't finished, so Rey isn't sure what they're doing.

"Are they fighting?" She shouts a little to be heard over the music.

Ben doesn't seem surprised that she's behind him, even though there's no way he could've heard her come in. "I don't know," he answers, clearly unsatisfied. His fists are clenching and unclenching at his side, and Rey can practically see the conflict on his face. To rip it apart or not to rip it apart.

It's too beautiful to be destroyed, Rey thinks.

The angry, bumping music isn't helping. She turns and walks right up to Ben's old, paint splattered stereo and presses STOP.

Ben freezes and turns to stare at her, and Rey remembers the first time she'd found him painting in this room. How hilariously furious he'd been when she'd messed with his music. This time, though, this time he simply watches.

She swallows and turns back to the small table the stereo sits on. There's a massive, slightly crooked stack of CD's next to the stereo. Rey begins to rifle through them, feeling Ben's burning gaze on her back. He's testing her, she realizes sharply.

She chooses a CD that she hadn't realized Ben owned. Paige had shown it to her and Rose not long ago, and Rey found it peaceful to sketch to.

She pops it in and presses PLAY. The opening chords start and Rey turns back to Ben. They listen for a moment and he nods, looking a little more relaxed. Rey grabs an extra stool and sits next to him as he begins to mix colors. An hour passes, the only major movement being Rey getting up to replay the CD.

Ben fleshes out the figures amongst his forest trees. They *are* fighting, Rey comes to realize.

There's a soft knock on the door, and Luke is informing her that a very crabby Paige is here to pick her up. "I'd hurry. She is not happy."

Ben is still frowning deeply when Rey says goodbye. He nods, giving her a little wave, focus never really leaving his work. There's paint smeared on his fingers and hands, and he's even managed to get a little on his nose.

For a moment she considers giving him a kiss on the cheek, because it would take him aback and perhaps make him laugh. Nervousness wins out, however.

Instead she places the stuffed frog on top of the stereo and leaves.

Thanks so much for the lovely response to the last chapter! It made me laugh how many of you wanted Ben to get a girlfriend so we could see jealous!Rey. Y'all must be masochists just like me.

We'll be meeting another major character next chapter! Very excited to be bringing them into the fold. If you liked, let me know!

# 2001, part two

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It feels good to know you're mine  
Now drive me far away, away, away  
Far away I don't care where

“Be Quiet and Drive (Far Away)” by Deftones

\*\*

It smells like crayons and fresh paper and...*school*.

It's September 4th. Rey walks into her new middle school to start sixth grade, and Rose's hand is clutched in hers. With her other arm Rey clutches her new massive, multipurpose binder to her chest. Ben had sketched a dragon on the front of it in Sharpie, and thinking about it makes her feel kinda fierce.

Especially since there are massive eighth grade boys lumbering about.

One of them accidentally shoves into her, and she pitches into Rose a little bit as they make their way down the main entrance, each one keeping an eye out for their respective homerooms.

Rey spots hers and stops.

“That's my class,” she states, trying not to give away how absolutely terrified she feels right now.

Rose visibly swallows and then nods. She glances down a massive hallway to their right and, for the umpteenth time, looks at her schedule. “I t-think I'm that way.”  
The two girls reluctantly release each other's hands.

“I'll find you at lunch,” Rey says, shifting her worn backpack so it sits more comfortable on her shoulders. “And we have earth science together third period, don't forget!”

Rose manages to give her a weak smile and, before she can step away, Rey quickly pulls her friend into a tight hug. “It'll be fine,” she says as she lets go. “Nothing bad is going to happen and no one is going to do anything to you. Or I'll fuck them up.”

The loud swear makes several students walking by Rey and Rose turn their heads sharply in their direction. Rey feels their stares and stands a little taller. She's grown a bit over the past six months.

Rose has a genuine smile on her face now. “Thanks Rey.” She grabs Rey's hand and gives it a quick squeeze. And the two girls part ways.

\*\*

Third period comes quickly, which is good.

Middle school has been nothing if not overwhelming so far. There are used tampons clogging up toilets in the girl's bathroom, and a seventh grade couple with braces were kissing each other near Rey's tiny locker. The smacking noises they created made Rey want to puke.

She walks into fifth period and goes to make a beeline to Rose, who is sitting in a desk in the middle of the classroom. Rey is about halfway there when she realizes that each desk already has a name on it.

Ugh. Assigned seats.

Rey finds hers in the back of the class and tries not to huff as she sits down. Rose is close, but not close enough to effortlessly pass notes back and forth like they'd done all throughout fifth grade. Rose waves and gives her a smile and Rey returns it.

Eventually she sighs and pulls out a Lisa Frank folder covered in dolphins and opens it, scrawling EARTH SCIENCE on the inside of the folder.

A boy slips into the seat next to her right as the bell rings. He's a little out of breath, as if he'd had to run in order to make it to class on time. Rey watches him, eyebrows raised slightly.

When he notices her watching he flushes. "Couldn't find the class," he grumbles under his breath, embarrassed.

Rey shrugs. It's of no importance to her, really.

The teacher stands at the front of the classroom and takes roll call.

And that's how Rey discovers that the boy sitting next to her is named Finn.

\*\*

She manages to find Rose at lunch and the girls eat the sandwiches Maz made for them at a table toward the back of the crowded cafeteria.

"History has been the most boring so far," Rose says, pulling out her textbook and flipping through it. She lands on a section detailing the Revolutionary War and after about thirty seconds is actively reading, sandwich forgotten. It makes Rey smile. Rose is a sponge for information and is much better at schoolwork than Rey is.

Rey is more easily distracted.

She finishes her sandwich and checks the time. Ten more minutes. She pulls out her sketchbook and flips to a drawing she'd started last month. She's been taking her time on it because it *must* be perfect. It's of Ben, sitting and drinking coffee and looking irritated about something or another. It makes her smile. He's been in New York City for the past month, showcasing some of his paintings in a gallery. She's so *proud* of him.

She misses him terribly.

Rey sighs as she looks down at the sketch. She's hoping to give it to him for his birthday in November but—

“Nice sweater, faggot.”

The rude slur makes Rey look up. Finn is walking by, lunch tray shaking a little in his hands. Two eighth graders walk by and snicker, as if they hadn't just humiliated someone on their first day of middle school.

Rey *had* noticed that Finn's sweater was a little silly while she was sitting next to him in science. It's hand knitted and very, very green. And slightly too big for him. And maybe kind of hideous.

And he should be able to wear it if he wants to.

“Ignore them,” she says loudly, catching Finn's attention. “I like your sweater,” she lies.

He looks flabbergasted, before squaring his shoulders and puffing his chest out a little. “Thanks. My Nana made it for me.” He glances at the empty seat next to her and shifts his weight between his feet.

Rey looks at Rose, noticing that her friend has stopped reading her textbook and is watching Finn with dark red cheeks.

Rey jerks her head and pats the seat next to her. “You can sit with us.”

He looks enormously relieved, hurrying forward and placing his tray down. “Thanks!” He slips into the seat and shoots his hand out toward Rey. “I'm Finn.”

She shakes it. “I know. We have science together.”

Finn is smiling. Then he turns to Rose, who is still staring.

Rey wonders if that's how she looks at Poe Dameron.

\*\*

When the school bus drops Rey and Rose off at the home, Rey recognizes a familiar crappy car parked in the massive driveway. Squealing with excitement, she takes off running toward it, backpack bouncing against her.

“Ben!” she cries, and he gets out of the car with a grin on his face. She flings herself at him and hugs him ferociously, feeling all anxiety and stress that had come from that day ebb away. He bends down and returns her hug, large hands patting her upper back.

“It's good to see you too, kid.”

Rey pulls back and beams up at him, not noticing Rose giving them a wide berth and eyeing Ben with apprehension. “Luke said you wouldn't be back until this weekend.”



Ben shrugs and leans back against his car. “Nope. Came back today. I got you something.” He opens the driver’s door and grabs something sitting on the passenger seat. He throws a wad of cloth at her. She holds up a white t-shirt that says I ♥ NY.

Typical. “You’re stupid,” she grunts.

Ben just chuckles before ruffling her hair and effectively ruining her buns. She slaps his hands away and he smiles down at her warmly.

She guesses he missed her too.

“Get in. I told Luke you’re skipping class today. We’re getting pizza.”

Rey presses her lips together, trying not to let on how absolutely thrilled she is that he’s here. She trots around to the passenger’s side of the car and gets in, nearly vibrating with excitement.

The automatic seat belts are still absurd.

\*\*

“What’s the occasion anyway?” Rey asks as they park at a local pizzeria.

“You made it through your first day of middle school.” A soft beep comes from the car as Ben locks it. “And middle school fucking sucks.”

“You don’t have to tell that to me twice,” Rey grumbles, remembering the clogged toilets and smelly boys.

“You’ll make it,” Ben says smoothly. They walk into the restaurant and there, sitting in a booth and waving them over, is Poe Dameron.

Rey gasps in sheer delight, before quickly schooling her expression and risking a glance at Ben.

He’s watching her with amusement.

Ten minutes later Rey is sipping cherry Coke and telling the two men all about her day. She’s using her hands to talk, smiling and looking between Ben and Poe. She grabs a breadstick and dips it in the marinara sauce. And then, because she just can’t resist, she makes a flicking motion and watches sauce splatter on Ben’s left cheek. It’s not a lot, but it’s enough.

Ben looks furious for a brief moment. Then he retaliates by dipping his own breadstick in sauce and then using it as a glorified paintbrush on Rey’s cheek and neck, a wicked gleam in his eye.

Poe’s mouth is hanging open as he watches their antics. After he moment he says, more to himself, “I think I’m beginning to understand you two’s friendship.”

\*\*

Before they start the drive back to the home, Ben pulls out a massive CD case from the floorboard and proceeds to flip through sleeve after sleeve of CDs. “I’m in the mood for something harder, alright kid?”

Rey nods, trying not to bounce up and down in her seat with happiness. She reeks of marinara sauce.

He slips a CD into the car radio and turns the volume up. They keep the windows rolled down as the music comes blasting out of the speakers. And then Ben is pulling out of the pizzeria parking lot, hands drumming against the steering wheel in time with the music.

Ben is technically driving her back to her home. But Rey is pretty sure home is right here.

## Chapter End Notes

FINN! And I couldn’t help it guys, I gave him a Nana. FINN DESERVES A SASSY, NICE GRANDMA OKAY.

Once again thanks to everyone for your lovely comments for the last chapter! Writing about middle school sucks almost as much as actually attending middle school. Here we go with puberty! Joy.

If you liked let me know! One more chapter for 2001...

## 2001, part three

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

**TRIGGER WARNING:** This entire chapter deals with 9/11.

\*\*

Quiet descends over Rey's earth science class.

Finn pokes her arm, looking extremely confused. "Wait, Paris attacked?"

"No, there was a terrorist attack," Rey corrects him softly.

His face falls. "Oh."

A whispering starts up as other kids lean across the aisles to speak to each other, and other students raise their hands to ask questions. Rose turns around in her seat and catches Rey's eye. The look they share is grim

\*\*

The cafeteria is much less crowded than it was this time last week. Rey and Rose sit at their usual table, both picking at their lunches, uninterested. Finn's Nana had come to pick him up early from school. In fact, every few minutes another student is summoned over the loud speaker to the front office for early dismissal.

Rose is fidgeting, clearly thinking about her sister, who's down the street at the local high school. Rey doesn't interrupt Rose's thoughts in order to start a meager conversation. Instead, she chews listlessly at her peanut butter and jelly sandwich and listens to a seventh grade girl at the table behind them cry on her friend's shoulder. Her sister lives in New York City, according to the snatches of discussion that Rey had been able to pick up.

She thinks of Ben, and how he'd only left NYC a week ago, how he'd only come back early to see her after her first day at middle school. If he hadn't come home early, what would she be doing now? Probably panicking and itching to call Luke. Probably crying on Rose's shoulder, just like that seventh-grade girl.

The loudspeakers crackle throughout the cafeteria and another student is being called to the front office. And Rey wonders if her parents would've come and picked her up early from school. If they had come back.

After lunch is over the school decides to dismiss the rest of the student body, and Rose and Rey find their bus and clamor onto it wordlessly. The bus driver has tear streaks running down her cheeks. The two girls sit in their usual seat and clutch hands.

Rey has only read about war and violence like this in textbooks, only seen them in documentaries and movies. She is only eleven years old, but even an eleven-year-old can pick up on the fact that things have changed. For good.

\*\*

Paige and Maz are waiting in front of the home to meet them. Rose rushes to her sister and the two girls embrace. Rey keeps her head turned towards them as she walks over to Maz, trying not to feel a stab of envy.

She does love Maz. The old woman pulls her into a quick hug before ushering the three of them inside, looking gloomy and frazzled. Rey follows a few paces behind the others, watching as Paige whispers urgently to her younger sister, watching as Maz opens the front door and waves them in. Watches as Maz closes the door behind them before moving into the main room, where the rest of the kids are gathered around the TV watching the news. It takes a total of two minutes for someone to do something that has Maz fussing. Rey loves Maz. But it's not the same.

\*\*

Luke has canceled classes at the studio tonight, which comes of no real surprise to Rey. It sours her mood even further, however, and she sits slumped in the main room, too depressed to even draw.

With her chin in her hand, she listlessly watches the towers fall over and over again with everyone else.

There's a knocking—no, a *banging* at the front door. Maz gets up and answers it, looking deeply irritated for a moment before stepping outside to speak to the visitor instead of inviting them in. Rey's curiosity spikes, and she moves to the front door where she can hear Maz talking lowly and hotly to someone. The door is cracked just so, and when she peers through...

"Ben?" Rey opens the door wider and there he is, looking haggard and mildly distraught. He and Maz both freeze in their conversation, both heads turning to look at her.

And of course, Rey knows that the only reason he's here is to see her. To check on her. And today has just been so horrible, and she is only eleven years old. She bursts into tears.

Ben crouches down and opens his arms wide. She flings her arms around his neck, sobbing. "I didn't think anyone cared!" she wails, curling small fists into his t-shirt and getting snot on his collar.

He's shushing her and rubbing soothing circles between her shoulder blades. "Of course I care, kid. Of course I do."

They stay like that for a good few minutes, until Rey pulls away, sniffing and rubbing at her eyes. The tears are gone as quickly as they'd come, and Rey is instantly mauled by the sheer *humiliation* of crying like that in front of Ben—

But he's already standing straight and speaking to Maz again, hand resting protectively on Rey's shoulder.

Her caretaker relents. "Fine! Fine. But you have her back here by seven or I'm finding you myself."

\*\*

Ben plays no music. They drive to the studio in complete silence. But Rey can feel the tension rolling off him in potent waves. He honks his horn and shouts at another driver for no reason. Rey stares at his profile, watching as he works his jaw.

"I haven't heard from my dad yet," he finally admits quietly. Rey feels his dread work its claws through her chest and stomach. It is her dread too.

\*\*

Luke is shocked to see her when they walk through the entryway. "Rey!" he exclaims, looking back and forth between her and Ben. "I could have sworn I called Maz..." He trails off, gaze lingering on his nephew.

"I wanted her here with me," is all Ben offers up. Rey feels a blooming of warmth take over the spot in her chest where the dread was residing. Luke doesn't seem surprised at Ben's answer, instead stepping aside and letting Ben storm past him toward the kitchen-office.

"Your mother called again," Luke calls after him gently, and Ben stills, bracing his hand against the wall.

"Still no word from Han."

And Ben is moving again, and as soon as he disappears around the corner there's a shattering noise.

He makes Rey wait outside the kitchen-office while he sweeps up another broken mug.

\*\*

Rey watches as Ben grinds coffee beans. He's all nervous energy, bouncing on the balls of his feet as the smell of the ground beans fills the room.

"Do you want me to put on music?" she asks.

"No," he snaps sharply, but Rey isn't offended. He pours the grounds into a filter and then pops it into the coffee maker and presses a few buttons, fingers shaking just so. Rey worries on her bottom lip, wishing beyond anything that there's something she can do for him. But she knows the best thing right now is to just be here with him. He seems calmer with her near, somehow.

The phone rings and Ben sprints out of the room and back toward the entryway, Rey on his heels. They reach the phone before Luke, who comes rushing from the painting room.

“Hello?” Ben answers, voice breathy. There’s a pause, and then he’s sagging against the wall in sheer relief.

“Yeah, dad, I’m okay. I’m okay.” His gaze flicks first to Rey, then to Luke, nodding a confirmation that neither of them need. “Where are you?” Ben’s voice breaks, just a tiny crack.

He begins speaking to Han in earnest, and Rey wonders over to the leather couch that Ben used to toss her onto years ago. She’s a bit too big for that now.

She sits briefly before curling into a ball, listening to the sound of Ben’s voice, suddenly overwhelmingly sleepy. The events of today are heavy, and they seem to press her down into the comfortable, worn couch.

Rey thinks she’s asleep, already dreaming, when she hears, “Yeah. Of course. I-I love you too, dad.”

## Chapter End Notes

The “Paris attacked?” bit at the very beginning is literally the first thing my friend said to me after our teacher told us what happened, bless her. Honestly, I really didn’t want to write a chapter for 9/11. But it’s one of those events where if you were old enough to vaguely understand what was going on, you remember that day. It would’ve been silly to presume that the same couldn’t be said for our characters here in this modern setting.

This is it for 2001. I’m drowning us all in fluff next chapter, don’t worry.

# 2002, part one

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I've been waiting  
A long time, now  
Now here's the answer  
You're all mine now

“Down” by Stone Temple Pilots

\*\*

“Did a fairy throw up on everything in here?” Rey breathes, following a very determined Rose into The Limited Too. The other girl waves away her statement, eyes taking in the store.

They’re at the local mall on the Saturday before Valentine’s Day, and there’s pink and hearts and sparkles absolutely *everywhere* in this store. Rey glances down at her too-big Old Navy t-shirt and jeans, feeling slightly out of place.

Rose grabs her arm and points at the underwear display toward the back of the store before making a beeline for it. She starts rummaging through the selection of training bras, muttering to herself about appropriate size and color, handing some off to Rey when her arms become too full.

Rose had turned twelve last month, and, after seeing the Lizzie McGuire bra episode, had been determined to start wearing one. Besides, according to Paige, it’s time. Rose is beginning to blossom, beginning to become shapelier.

Rey is *not*.

Instead she’s only grown in height. She’s now several inches taller than both Rose *and* Finn, limbs too long for her to know what to do with. She sighs as Rose continues to pile training bras into her arms. She follows her best friend to the dressing room and stands outside the stall as Rose begins meticulously trying everything on.

“You sure we don’t need Paige for this?” Rey asks, tentatively looking at all the different sizes, shapes, and colors the training bras come in. She picks up a pink one with flowers all over it and holds it up to her own nonexistent chest, frowning.

Rose peeks her head out of the dressing room. “No,” she says firmly. “We’re perfectly capable of doing this on our own.” She smiles at the bra Rey is holding up to herself. “Oh! That’s cute! Are you going to go with that one?”

Rey finds herself blushing, although she’s not sure why. She shakes her head and tosses the pink bra to the side, and Rose returns to the dressing room. She exits moments later, three

training bras that have made the cut folded over her shoulder.

In the end, Rey ends up selecting a sporty looking white one, although she complains the whole way up the cash register that there's nothing there for the bra to support.

Rose hands her money to the cashier and gives Rey a cheerful smile. "You'll get there! Paige says she didn't really need one until she was around thirteen, but it's always best to be prepared."

The cashier pipes up and agrees, and Rey resists the urge to glare at them both. Grumbling, she places her new bra onto the counter and fishes in her pocket for the \$20 that Maz had given her before Paige dropped them off at the mall.

They leave the store and Rose pulls her aside. "What's wrong, Rey?"

Rey blinks at her for a moment before holding up the bag containing her new bra. "This was unnecessary."

"Oh hush, you were okay with going shopping for these a few days ago. What's happened? You've been a grump all morning."

Rey frowns and kicks a little at the floor, trying not to openly sulk.

Rose is right, of course. She's been in a terrible mood ever since—

Her best friend's eyes go wide in understanding. "Ben missed last night again, didn't he?"

Despite Rose's aversion to Ben, she's very supportive of Rey's friendship with him. There's a beat, and then Rey is nodding. "It's the second week in a row he's missed our Friday hang outs."

Last night she'd spent the whole evening sculpting coffee mugs with Luke, which admittedly *had* been fun. But it would've been much more fun with Ben. And when Rey had asked Luke where he was, her art mentor had been oddly coy about giving her an answer.

"I asked him about it last Monday, and he said he'd been really busy, but that'd he'd try not to miss this Friday. But he did," Rey grits out. It's not like she genuinely expected him to spend every single Friday evening for the rest of his life with her, but...

Ben has never exactly been the most sociable person. And Rey thought that Friday evenings were their *thing*, at least for the time being.

Besides, he'd pinky sworn.

And Ben Solo knew how seriously she took pinky swearing.

Rose gives her a sympathetic smile and pats her shoulder. "I'm sorry, Rey. But hey—" She holds up the leftover cash she has from her allowance. "Let me treat you to ice cream. That'll cheer you up!"

\*\*



It *does* cheer her up.

She and Rose sit in the food court eating ice cream and gossiping heartily about some of the eighth-grade boys at school that they think are cute. There's a select few that manage to not smell, to not have braces, and to have nice hair, which make them prime crush material for sixth grade Rey and Rose. None of them compare to Poe, of course, but they're acceptable.

Rose is making a game of MASH on some scrap paper that Rey had in her backpack, tip of her tongue poking out between her lips as she concentrates.

"Make sure you put Poe Dameron in twice under the husband selection," Rey says, smiling to herself as she finishes off the last of her ice cream.

Rose rolls her eyes at her. "Rey, that's cheating."

"I'll let you put Finn in twice—"

She cuts herself off because, low and behold, there he is. Poe Dameron himself, standing across the food court, chatting animatedly to a guy and girl that Rey doesn't recognize. And, standing a couple of feet away, arms crossed and with a bored expression, is Ben.

Her mouth falls open when she sees him, and Rose quickly looks in the direction that Rey is staring in. And, as if he can feel her eyes on her, Ben's head swivels in her direction, eyes widening when he sees her. He smiles then, and raises his hand, waving at her.

And Rey...Rey does *not* wave back, because Ben Solo is a horrible person who breaks pinky promises.

She's about to huff and dramatically turn away, when Poe sees her too. "Rey!" he exclaims, voice managing to carry across the busy food court. "Rey!" He's waving enthusiastically at her and then walking in her direction, Ben and the two mystery people following behind him.

Panic sets in. "Quick!" Rey snatches up her and Rose's Limited Too bags and the MASH game and shoves them all in her backpack, feeling her cheeks turn hot. Rose watches the approaching group, dumbstruck. "Is that, is that Poe Dameron?"

Rey nods, blush deepening.

"I totally get it," Rose breathes in awe, looking up tentatively as the young adults come to a halt in front of their table.

"Fancy seeing you here, Rey!" Poe says happily as Rey gets out of her seat in order to hug him. "I feel like I haven't seen you in forever."

"Because you haven't," Rey says, smiling and tucking hair behind her ear. "How's BB-8?"

"A nuisance," Ben answers before Poe can even open his mouth. He's watching Rey closely, eyebrows furrowed a little.

"Ben isn't a cat person." Poe jabs the guy standing next to him good naturedly.

“I like cats fine,” Ben snaps. “But yours is a fluffy orange demon from hell.”

Poe shrugs, not bothered. He puts his hand on the shoulder of the mystery guy. “Rey, this is Mattis, and that lady right there is Jessika. Guys, this is Rey. She studies with Luke at the studio.”

“Hi,” Rey says shyly, and the two strangers echo her greeting.

There’s a long pause before Rey jumps. “This is my friend Rose! Rose, this is Poe, Mattis, Jessika...and Ben. But you know him already.” She gestures flippantly at him and sniffs, causing Poe to raise his eyebrows and laugh.

“Solo, what’d you do to piss off our Rey?”

“I suspect,” Ben begins, voice low, “it has something to do with me not being at the studio last night.”

Rey sticks out her chin and refuses to answer.

“Oh!” Jessika pipes up, looking sheepish. “Sorry, that was my fault. I convinced him to see a movie with me.” She leans against Ben and wraps an arm around his waist, and Mattis grabs Poe’s hand at the same time. And Rey realizes, with an incredible sinking sensation, that this is a double date.

A horrible, hollow feeling begins to take root in her stomach. Poe Dameron is on a date with a boy, which is of course upsetting in that her girlish dreams of marrying her own Disney prince are currently flushing themselves down the hypothetical toilet. But it’s nothing compared to the instant, overwhelming hatred she has toward Jesskia, who had somehow convinced her Ben to not hang out with her on a Friday night for the first time in *years*.

Who does this lady think she is?

Rose, intuitive as always, quickly stands and begins gathering their empty ice cream containers. “Well, it was nice meeting you all, but my sister is picking—”

“Rey.” Ben steps forward, trying to place himself directly in her line of sight. “Look, I’m sorry if—”

“I don’t fraternize—” she uses a word that had been on her vocabulary quiz that week “—with people who break pinky promises.”

And she marches away, feeling justified and silly and furious all at once, Rose hot on her heels.

“Rey!” Ben calls after her. A second later she hears Jessika ask, “Wait, who is she again?”

Rey is almost out of ear shot when she hears Ben reply with a sigh. “Basically my sister.”

\*\*

Rey storms into her shared bedroom when they finally get back to the home, immediately turning to her CDs, grabbing the one she wants and putting it into Paige's stereo. Her mood is black, and she jabs the PLAY button with more force than is necessary.

Paige and Rose step inside a moment later as loud guitar and drumming fills the room. Rey turns away from both of them, grabbing her sketch book from her nightstand and slamming it down next to her pillow. She hops on top of her bed, the mattress squeaking underneath her. She flips the sketch book open to an empty page, determined to get some of her anger out through drawing. But she presses the tip of her pencil so hard against the paper that it snaps.

Rey grabs her pillow and screams into it. This has been the *worst* day, from buying a bra she has no boobs for, to seeing that tall, stupid—

“What's gotten into her?” Paige asks, staring at Rey in curiosity, one eyebrow cocked upward.

Rose is chewing on her bottom lip. “We saw her crush at the mall today on a date with a dude.”

“Ah.” Paige is now nodding in understanding. “That'll do it.”

And Rey feels a rush of confusion and horror dawn on her because...because...she had completely forgotten about Poe.

## Chapter End Notes

Okay, so maybe not as fluffy as I originally thought this chapter would be, but I couldn't resist some beginning-of-puberty-dramatics. I also answered the call and gave Ben Solo a (kind of) girlfriend. Rey's inner “wait, excuse me who is THIS?” moment amused me to no end.

A few things. [Mattis Banz](#) and [Jessika Pava](#) are both Resistance members (according to Wookieepedia). Also, I keep meaning to mention that I have a [tumblr](#) and would love to have more people to fangirl over Reylo with over on that garbage website! Last but not least, I've got a piece in the upcoming More Than Love Reylo Fanfic Anthology that's happening on Valentine's Day, and I'll be taking a small break from updating this fic in order to finish it. It's like, the complete opposite of this story in basically every way and I need a few days to dive into that headspace. I love Ben and Rey in this fic but damn, they're distracting! I'm hoping to have that piece finished over the weekend, so y'all shouldn't have to wait much longer than normal for the next chapter.

Anyway, thanks everyone for reading! If you liked let me know!

## 2002, part two

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Don't confuse  
Baby you're gonna lose  
Your own game  
Change me  
And replace the envying  
To forget your love

“Plug In Baby” by Muse

\*\*

In retrospect, Rey vastly preferred Valentine’s Day when she was eight.

Now, as a middle schooler, everyone suddenly takes it so *seriously*.

She walks towards her science class with her hands shoved into the pockets of her hoodie, watching a seventh-grade couple make moon eyes at each other by the lockers. The girl is clutching a giant teddy bear in her arms, smiling stupidly up at the boy. Rey is fairly positive this same girl had a different boyfriend a month ago.

A girl in her pre-algebra class nearly runs Rey over in her rush to get to the girl’s bathroom, sobbing hysterically about some guy named Justin. Rey finally slides into her seat next to Finn in a few minutes later, slamming her massive binder on top of her desk with more force than necessary.

“Everything okay over there?” Finn asks, twirling his pencil between his fingers.

“Uh huh. Just grossed out by all the PDA out there.” She jabs a finger toward the classroom door leading out to the hallway, and Finn grins at her.

“Right? If I see one more couple making out in front of my locker I’m gonna lose it.”

Rey nods in agreement and disgust as she pulls out her completed homework. She doodles a little in the top corner as the warning bell rings.

Finn slips a valentine onto the corner of her desk. She freezes, eyes flicking from it to Finn’s face. “You didn’t.”

He shrugs, pulling out his own finished homework. “They’re funny.”

She picks it up and opens it. Steve Irwin, the Crocodile Hunter, grins up at her on shiny, metallic paper. It says *Wallaby my Valentine?*

Rey giggles, rolling her eyes at Finn and flicking an eraser at his face.

\*\*

Finn gives Rose one that has a picture of Steve Irwin and a crocodile on it, saying *We make a good team*. Rose spends the entirety of the bus ride home comparing it to the one he'd given Rey.

"Yours is more romantic," she points out for the umpteenth time, holding both valentines up in front of her, eyes narrowed. She sighs and slumps a little. "I mean, he gave you one asking if you'd be his Valentine. Mine just says we're friends."

Rey is growing more and more uncomfortable by the minute. "I don't think that's what he's trying—"

"You two do sit next to each other in class, and I've noticed that he's more willing to talk to you instead of me."

"That's not true!" Rey protests, trying and failing to pull the valentine Finn had given her out of Rose's hand. "He likes you fine! You two are friends. We're *all* friends."

"He likes you more than me," Rose argues softly, leaning her head against the window and looking as if she wants to cry. "I just know it."

"They're supposed to be funny," Rey counters desperately, but her reassurances are falling on deaf ears. Rose tucks her own valentine into the pocket of her jeans and then hands Rey back hers. Rose then crosses her arms over her chest, pouting.

Rey supposes Finn *does* talk to her more. But that's only because she sits next to him in science. And at lunch too. And sometimes he finds her in between classes and walks with her down the hallways. But they always just talk about cartoons or pizza.

Although, now that she thinks about it, she doesn't see Finn going out of his way to chat with Rose nearly as much. She feels a blush beginning to form on her cheeks. No, there's no way Finn could possibly like her like *that*. She'd burped in his face once!

There's no way. No possible way.

She glances back down at the valentine he'd given her.

Yeah. No way.

\*\*

It's a Tuesday, and Rey marches into the painting classroom at the studio, shoulders squared. She takes up her usual stool and easel and starts to pull supplies out of her ratty, hole ridden backpack.

She ignores Ben when he slips into the stool next to her. She ignores him when he clears his throat, loudly, multiple times. She ignores him when he waves a hand in front of her face. She

even ignores him when he gently tugs on a lock of hair that's fallen out of her ponytail.

"For the love of god!"

Rey and the rest of the class jumps at Ben's sudden outburst. She can't help but peer at him at this, and the look of sheer exasperation on his face is almost comical. "For the love of *fucking god*, will you please stop acting like I'm not here?!"

Rey and the rest of the class stare at him, but Ben's eyes never leave her face.

Finally she sniffs haughtily and starts to mix colors, a deep frown forming on her mouth.

"Sorry, I didn't realize I was still cool enough to talk to now that you have *Jessika*."

He blinks. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

"You missed two Fridays in a row," she snaps with a huff, trying and failing to picture what she wants to paint on her empty canvas. "After you pinky swore."

Ben winces a little, and she realizes that he hasn't even bothered to get out his own paints yet.

"Yeah. Yeah, I know. I'm sorry about that, kid."

"That's nice."

Ben looks like he might actually explode. She watches him out of the corner of her eye as he runs his fingers through his hair multiple times. He heaves a great big sigh. "I got you something," he mumbles, tips of his ears turning red.

Her curiosity piques, despite herself. Rey lowers her paintbrush and finally turns to fully face him. "Really?"

Ben nods. "Yep. I did."

"What is it?"

He shrugs one shoulder. "I'll show it to you after class...if you're nice."

Rey's eyes immediately narrow. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

"No."

She raises an eyebrow.

"Okay. Yeah."

She turns back to her canvas. "I'll think about it."

\*\*

But she thinks she's fully forgiven him about half an hour later, when she subtly flicks paint on him for the third time and he doesn't bat an eye.

\*\*

When class is over she follows him out to his car, bouncing from one foot to the other in excitement. She wonders, briefly, if he got her a valentine like Finn did. But no. Ben would never give a valentine to her.

He pops open his trunk and rummages around for a moment before pulling out a large plastic bag and tossing it to her. She nearly drops it in her scramble to catch it, eyes widening as she opens it. Inside is a brand new backpack, a really nice one with about a billion pockets. Plus, it's huge, so she can easily fit all of her stuff inside. It still has the tags on it and everything.

"You like it?" Ben asks, slamming the trunk shut and leaning back against his car.

Rey barely manages a nod, genuinely speechless. She surges forward and flings her arms around his waist. "Thanks Ben," she says, voice muffled against his shirt. She feels him tug on her ponytail and she pulls back, craning her neck to look up at him. He's giving her a half smile.

"You're welcome, kid. Sorry I've been such a shit friend lately."

Rey waves away the apology, already busy moving her things from her old, barely-holding-it-together backpack to her new one. "Yeah, yeah. Just don't let it happen again, shithead."

He laughs, and gently prods at her leg with his foot. "Come on. I'm hungry and we've still got a half hour before Maz picks you up."

\*\*

Ben drives them to McDonald's, cranking the stereo up and singing at top volume to the song emanating from the speakers. He actually has a decent voice, although of course Rey would never tell him so.

"Is this new? I don't think I've heard it before." Rey has to shout to be heard over the thumping bass, and a second later Ben is turning down the volume just enough to answer her.

"Came out last year. It's a fantastic CD. I'll let you borrow it."

Rey nods casually, but beams on the inside. Ben won't even let Poe touch his CDs.

He buys her a Happy Meal despite her protests that she's not a kid anymore, and they eat their dinner in the parking lot, listening to song after song.

"You know," Rey says around several fries stuffed in her mouth, "I thought you'd be with Jessika tonight."

He swallows some soda and gives her a confused look. "Why?"

Rey blinks slowly at him. "Um. Because it's Valentine's Day."

She watches as horror slowly dawns on Ben Solo's face. "It is?"

“Wow. You’re a *terrible* boyfriend.”

When Maz asks her why she’s in such a great mood on the drive home later, Rey just holds her new backpack close and smiles.

## Chapter End Notes

And we’re back! I ended up not finishing my piece for the Reylo Valentine Anthology until last night, about two hours before it was due. Talk about cutting it close! O.o

Once again, thank you all so much for your lovely comments on the last chapter! I absolutely love reading what y’all have to say. All the speculation on where this fic is going is so much fun for me to read. A couple of y’all are right on the money ;) Anyway, one more chapter for 2002. Someone is turning 21...

If you liked let me know!



## 2002, part three

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I know I know for sure  
That life is beautiful around the world  
I know I know it's you  
You say hello and then I say I do

“Around the World” The Red Hot Chili Peppers

\*\*

The bell rings, and seventh grade Rey slams her binder shut in bliss. It's the end of the school day on the Tuesday before Thanksgiving, and Rey is looking forward to having the week off.

She leaves her class and joins the rest of the students streaming outside toward the buses. There's a tap on her shoulder and she turns, expecting to see Rose only to see Finn instead.

“Freedom!” he cries, grinning down at her. He'd grown a good bit over the summer and is taller than her now, a fact he won't let her forget. Rey isn't finished growing either, but doesn't want to dash his hopes.

She returns his grin, shifting her backpack a little on her shoulder and glaring at anyone who dares to brush against it. She's trying to keep it as clean and new looking as possible, even though she's already had it for eight months. “What are you planning on doing over the break?”

Finn shrugs. “Was probably gonna play Kingdom Hearts. And help my Nana make Thanksgiving dinner. It's our thing,” he says, a little sheepish. Rey's grin wanes into a small smile. She'd love to have a grandma to cook dinner with, but doesn't want to make Finn feel bad by saying so. Maz despises cooking and has ordered Thanksgiving dinner from a local restaurant ever since Rey has lived at the home. A home cooked Thanksgiving meal is a foreign concept to her.

“Anyway, what about you?” Finn stops once they reach the line of buses, a blush forming on his dark cheeks. “Any plans?”

“Just finishing up Ben's present. His birthday is today, but I won't actually see him until this Friday.” She tries not to let on to how glum she is by this fact. Ben will be out celebrating his birthday tonight, and the studio will close for the rest of the week. In truth, as much as she'll enjoy not having school, Rey will be bored out of her mind by the time Friday comes around. She's counting down the minutes until then. Ben is supposed to be taking her out for ice cream, and, unbeknownst to him, she'll give him his birthday present.

If she can finish it in time, of course.

Finn nods. “Cool.” There’s an awkward energy here, and Rey is gearing herself to ask what on earth is bothering him, when he plunges forward.

“Did you want to come over to my house on Saturday?”

“Say that again?”

Finn takes a deep breath, and repeats himself, more slowly, and with eyes pointed to his feet. “Did you want to come over to my house on Saturday? My Nana says it’s okay.”

Rey freezes, mind going a mile a minute. He’d been planning this, because he’s already asked his Nana. And no where in that invitation had he mentioned Rose...

“We could play Kingdom Hearts, or watch a movie, and my Nana and I always make turkey sandwiches and they’re really good and you’d totally love them, I know it, but if you don’t want to that’s totally okay—”

“What about, uh, Rose?” Rey asks, biting her lower lip in sheer apprehension.

“Oh.” Finn blinks at her. “I mean, yeah! She can totally come too. Of course. Absolutely.”

Speak of the devil. Rose appears at Rey’s side, looking jostled and irritated. “My history teacher gave us homework over break. Can you believe that?! Of all the things to do...” She trails off, as if picking up on the sheer adolescent awkwardness that’s swirling through the air. “What’s up with you guys?”

“Wanna come over and hang out at my house on Saturday?” Finn asks before Rey can say anything. She feels instant relief that he’s taking it upon himself to include Rose because, well...

Rose’s eyes light up in excitement. “Sure! That’d be awesome. We have to ask Maz, of course, but—”

“My Nana is going to call and talk to her when I get home,” Finn says, and Rey resists the urge to groan. Finn has *definitely* been planning this.

“Cool!” Rose has a very happy smile on her face, but Rey is trying not to openly grimace.

They exchange their goodbyes and Rose and Rey find their bus, Rose chattering animatedly about Finn the whole ride home.

Rey loves Finn to death. She can talk about anything with him, and she always finds herself laughing when he’s around. And she’d thought he’d felt the same. But ever since they’d started seventh grade she’d started to get the vibe that perhaps he liked her a little more than she liked him.

She can’t bear to bring it up in front of Rose. And she can’t bear to hurt Finn’s feelings by telling him she doesn’t feel the same way.

Her life is the *worst*.

\*\*

Luke is helping Rey complete Ben's birthday present. She'd painted him a lightning storm, because Ben has a weird thing for aggressive landscapes. And Rey has been trying to do more painting lately. She still prefers sketching, but she knows Ben will appreciate this all the same.

"You know, Rey," Luke says, observing her as she meticulously adds the finishing touches to a storm cloud. "I think this is some of your best work so far. The watercolor was a nice idea."

"Thanks," Rey says, turning her face up to smile at Luke. Normally this kind of praise would leave her beaming, but she's too focused on perfecting this piece as much as possible.

She has about twenty minutes before Maz (or Paige, who's been roped into driving duties since Maz technically bought her the car she uses) picks her up, and she's placed Ben's gift aside so that it can dry. She's made Luke swear he'll keep it properly hidden from Ben. She's scrubbing paint off her hands when loud singing fills the entryway.

Luke lets out an audible groan. "Rey, stay in here, okay?"

She nods, waits for Luke to leave the room. Then she immediately follows, careful to keep her footsteps quiet. But when she hears Ben's voice, she abandons all pretense of sneaking around and trots openly into the entryway.

Poe is practically hanging between Ben and Mattis, who're holding him upright. "Such pretty pictures!" Ben's roommate says dreamily. "So many—oh, hey Rey!"

Ben's head whips up, eyes glassy. "Hey, kid," he greets her, voice much louder than usual. Rey can feel laughter bubbling up and threatening to overflow out of her, but she keeps herself in check. Luke, however, looks like he might explode in anger.

"Ben, do you really think being drunk in an art studio is a great idea?" Her art teacher watches as Poe extricates himself from Ben and Mattis and begins to stumble into the elongated hallway, wide eyes taking in all the paintings and sculptures as if he hasn't seen them before. (He has, multiple times.) Mattis sighs and follows him, giving Luke and Rey an uncomfortable smile and wave before disappearing after Poe.

Luke mutters something about getting water and disappears into the kitchen-office, leaving Rey and Ben alone in the entryway. Rey is reminded of the one time Paige had returned from a party absolutely reeking and throwing up everywhere. Maz had given Rey and Rose a long, long lecture on the perils of drinking that evening.

But Rey thinks Ben seems to be handling his liquor much better than Paige had.

Ben slumps down onto couch, humming happily. After a moment his head rolls over toward Rey and he stares up at her. "You know, kid. You're gettin' taller."

Rey snorts and crosses her arms over her chest. "That's typically what happens when you grow up."

Ben snorts. “You’re not a grown up, kid.”

She prickles a little at this. “I will be,” she says testily. “I’ll be thirteen in a few months.”

He grunts, closing his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Still a kid.”

This irritates her a lot for some reason, and she presses her lips together to keep from snapping at him. The silence between them stretches on for so long she thinks he might have fallen asleep.

His eyes suddenly open. “We’ll have to do something special.” There’s another pause. “Since you’re turning into a teenager.” Then he hiccups.

It’s such a strange, oddly pathetic sound that she’d never have expected to hear come out of Ben Solo. He hiccups again and Rey snorts, some of the laughter she’d held back earlier overflowing.

He smiles at her mirth, expression on his face dopey. And then, with a slight slur, he starts singing. “I know, I know for sure...” He sucks in a deep breath and, at the top of his voice —“DING DANG DONG DONG DENG DENG DONG DONG DING DENG!” He stretches out the last syllable and tears start streaming down Rey’s face from laughing so hard.

He shouts it again and again, watching as Rey bends over and clutches at her sides. She suspects, when he does it for the fourth time, that he’s specifically doing it just to make her laugh.

Maz picks her up not too long after that, and Luke ushers her out in a hurry, horrified at the idea of Maz coming inside and seeing his nephew in this state.

“Happy birthday, Ben!” she calls over her shoulder.

He’s stretched out on the couch now, half his legs and feet hanging over the edge. “Thanks,” he calls back. “Love ya, kid. Happy Thanks-Thanksgiving.”

Rey is wistful for the rest of the week.

## Chapter End Notes

I gave Ben Adam Driver’s birthday, which is November 19th.

Honestly, as soon as I considered the idea of Poe taking Ben out to celebrate his 21st, I knew Poe would get way more intoxicated than the birthday boy. He just would, bless.

That’s it for 2002! We’ll pick back up again in 2003. I’m excited for the next chapter. It’s actually one of the first major scenes I thought of when I first conceived this fic. It’ll be fun to finally write it out. Thanks again to everyone for always leaving such awesome

comments. I've always had the best readers, I swear. Anyway, if you liked let me know!  
I always find y'all's thoughts super encouraging.

## Friday, November 22nd 2002

### Chapter Notes

Since a few of you asked about Rey giving Ben his birthday painting, and because I'm trash and love writing these two, here's a drabble for your Monday! (No song this time because I can't pull myself away from Kendrick Lamar's Black Panther album. Like at all.)

"I told you, you didn't have to get me anything."

Ben and Rey are sitting at a stop light, and Ben glances back at the wrapped painting sitting in the backseat for the umpteenth time.

Rey, who is intensely nervous but desperately wants to seem cool and noncommittal, shrugs one shoulder. "It's not much, really."

Ben makes a point to look back at the gift again. It takes up half of his backseat. Then he gives her a pointed look as the light turns green. "Uh huh."

They reach the ice cream parlor about two minutes later, and Ben parks right in front of the building before turning to her. "Can I open it now, or should I wait to open it inside?"

"Doesn't matter."

Ben stares at the gift for a long moment before getting out of the car, retrieving the wrapped gift, then walking inside purposefully.

And Rey panics because she had no idea he would *actually open it in public*. She follows him inside and orders a simple sundae, heart hammering as she and Ben make their way to a booth with their treats.

They sit, and five seconds later Ben is tearing the paper off Rey's painting like a little kid on Christmas morning, brown eyes lit up with excitement.

They soften seconds later, when he pulls the last of the paper off.

Ben stares at the painting for a long time. Too long. He hates it, Rey thinks, and is about to insist she didn't actually paint it, please ignore her artist's signature at the bottom right corner

---

"Rey," he breathes, gaze never leaving the painting. "It's beautiful."

She swallows and sinks down a little in the booth, intensely bashful. "T-Thanks."

His head jerks up and he finally looks at her. “Wait, is this why you’ve been refusing to sit next to me in Tuesday painting classes for the last couple of months?”

Rey puts a large mouthful of ice cream in her mouth and nods, trying to seem nonchalant. Ben looks intensely relieved for a moment before gently placing the painting to the side and sliding out of the booth. “Bring it in, kid.”

She swallows her ice cream and gets up, letting him wrap his arms around her in a hug. He is warm and solid and smells faintly like paint.

When Ben pulls back he’s giving her an odd look. “You really *are* getting taller, Rey.”

## 2003, part one

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Oh and all I taught her was everything  
Oh I know she gave me all that she wore  
And now my bitter hands  
Chafe beneath the clouds

“Black” by Pearl Jam

\*\*

It all happens very quickly.

It’s a Wednesday in early March and Rey and Rose are walking toward lunch, deep in a discussion over Neopets. Neither of them take much notice of the eighth-grade boys in football jerseys lumbering by, or the look the biggest one casts toward Rose.

But both of them definitely notice when said boy calls out something mocking about Rose’s eyes.

Both girls still at the slur. Rey’s eyes dart to Rose’s face, takes in the humiliation and shame there.

“Hey, you racist fuckface!” Rey screams, darting forward and dodging past Rose, who had made a grab for Rey’s hand. The biggest boy, the one who had called out the insult, turns around and appraises her with a raised eyebrow.

Rey marches right up to him, massive binder clutched in her hands. She’s been meaning to get a new one for awhile now; the plastic is peeling up in the corners and showing the cardboard underneath. But she’s been too fond of the dragon Ben had drawn on it in Sharpie to get a new one. She’s thankful for that now as she lifts the binder over her shoulder and *swings* with all her might. The binder hits the boy’s face with a satisfying crunch and blood starts gushing out of his nose at once.

She’d thrown a lot of her rage into that first blow, and so isn’t prepared when the boy whips back toward her and punches her in the face. She goes down instantly, Rose screaming in the background. But Rey is up on her feet again despite her twirling vision. Somewhere inside is still that feral little five-year-old they’d found scavenging for food in a dumpster. She stomps viciously down on his foot and nearly purrs at the howl of pain it elicits. Her left eye is already swelling and hindering her vision, so the next jab she aims at this shitbag accidentally lands on one of his buddies, all of whom are trying to crowd her.

One of them, she can’t be too sure whom anymore, socks her in the stomach and she goes down again, this time too woozy and ill to get back up. Someone is standing over her,



shouting and waving their arms, and she realizes after too long of a beat that it's Finn. Rose is crouched beside her, trying to say something. Seconds later several teachers are pushing the boys back and Rey slumps against Rose, exhausted and bewildered.

\*\*

Rey and the boys who had ganged up on her all get the same punishment, and Maz had screamed at the principal for over an hour because of it. She's suspended for the rest of the week and will have to serve an additional two weeks of detention. As they leave, Maz tells the principal (who had threatened to call security) that Rey is going to have the best two days off of school she's ever had.

In that moment, Rey isn't sure she's ever loved Maz more.

She misses art class later that evening, and even though Maz has already called Luke and explained the situation, Rey isn't at all surprised when Maz comes to her after dinner to tell her that Ben is on the phone.

She accepts the offered cordless phone and puts it to her ear. "Hey, Ben," she says, trying not to let her tiredness seep into her voice.

"Are you okay?" His voice is clipped and sharp.

"I'm fine, honest." It's true that her black eye looks *ghastly*, and there's some bruising over various parts of her body, but otherwise she's alright. The doctor had given her a careful once over.

She hears Ben grunt. "I want their names, Rey. I want to know who did this."

She sidesteps this question, instead saying, "You punched a hole in the wall, didn't you."

There's a pause. "No."

"You're lying."

Another pause. Then a deep sigh. "I already went to Home Depot for the stuff I need to fix it."

And Rey smiles, even though he really *should* get a better grip on his anger. It pleases her to know that he's so thoroughly on her side. She slumps down on the edge of her bed. "I'm sure Luke is happy."

"I don't know, he was pretty mad too."

This makes her smile widen. "I've never seen Luke Skywalker really angry."

"Count yourself lucky." There's a bitter edge to Ben's voice, but before Rey can commit on it he continues. "Listen, I won't be at class tomorrow. I have to run a painting downtown to drop off at a gallery I'm being featured in, but I will absolutely be there Friday, okay?"

“Alright.” There’s slight disappointment at knowing she’ll go another day without seeing him, but she manages to sound relatively chipper when they exchange their goodbyes.

\*\*

Ben looks like someone has punched *him* in the stomach when he first sees Rey’s face come Friday.

Before he can even open his mouth, Rey grins and points to her nose. “He looks just as bad. Apparently, I broke his nose!” she exclaims with utter delight. Rose had told her that lovely tidbit yesterday. Word of the fight has already spread all over their middle school, and Rey is being heralded as nothing short of a hero for taking on multiple bullying football players at once.

Ben’s gaze softens a little at her mirth, but he doesn’t crack a smile. He jerks his head toward his car. “I figured we could go to Blockbuster. We can rent something scary, if you want.”

“Just don’t make me watch Chucky again.” Rey is already half way to his car. “Or I’ll break your nose. My track record is pretty formidable so far, just so ya know.”

Still no smile, just a quirk at the corner of his mouth. They both clamor into the car and Ben hands her his CD case wordlessly, letting her pick. She picks an old CD she knows is one of his favorites and slips it in the CD player.

When it starts, Ben finally cracks a smile.

He cranks the ignition. “Alright, kid. Start thinking of what kind of candy you want.”

\*\*

It takes several minutes, but Ben eventually relaxes. He hums along to all the songs and at a stop light reaches over and ruffles Rey’s hair. She protests, but her words are halfhearted. The consistent smile on his face is worth it.

They pull into the Blockbuster parking lot and park in front of the store. And that’s when Rey sees them, lingering off to the side and talking amongst themselves. The eighth-grade boys from the other day. She spots the biggest one easily; there’s a large bandage stretched across his nose. It feels as if a large bucket of cold water has been splashed over her, because she doesn’t have to be a fortune teller to know how these next few minutes are going to play out.

Ben pauses mid-sentence, noticing her sudden shift in mood. “Rey, what’s...” He trails off as he follows her gaze toward the group of boys. Rey sits stock still, waiting the few seconds it takes for Ben to put two and two together. His whole body stiffens.

“Is that them?” His voice is very low, and a tendril of fear curls deep in Rey’s chest.

“I—”

But he’s already reached over and popped open the glove department. In a flash he’s found a pair of brass knuckles and slipped them on.

“Ben!” she shouts, reaching to grab his shoulder, but he’s already got the driver’s door open.  
“Ben!”

He’s outside in a flash, but leans into the car briefly and locks eyes with her. “Stay in the car, Rey. Do you understand? *Stay in the goddamn car.*” He slams the door shut, and the whole car rocks with the force of it.

Ben strides over to the group of boys, and Rey watches in horror as he grabs the biggest one, the one whose nose she broke, and drags him into the shadows of the building.

It won’t even be a contest. Ben is massive compared to these boys. Rey has never really thought about it until now, but he must work out regularly. Even though he’s an artist, his whole body is straight muscle.

With trembling fingers she reaches out and turns the volume up and up, until all the screaming and shouting are drowned out by the music. The song is slower and sad, and she tries to dwell in it. Tries to let it distract her from what she knows is happening.

The plays from beginning to end before one of the other boys darts out of the shadows and half runs, half limps into the building. Rey can see him shouting for a manager. A minutes or two later Ben finally marches back into her line of sight, slipping the brass knuckles off and into the pocket of his jacket. There’s blood splattered on random patches of his skin, and his knuckles look absolutely *awful*. But aside from that and some light bruising on his jaw, he looks alright.

They leave, Ben zooming out of the parking lot and merging into traffic at record speed. Rey makes it about a full forty-five seconds before the tears start to stream down her face.

Ben notices and pulls the car over without a word. They sit for long minutes with nothing but Eddie Vedder’s voice to break the tension.

Rey reaches over and turns the music off, chest heaving in emotion. Finally, not being able to stand it anymore, she lets out a furious scream of pent up frustration. Ben jerks, as if struck.

“You can’t *do* shit like that Ben!” she shouts, high emotions making it come out as a half sob. “You just *can’t*! I get that you’re angry! I’m angry at them too! But I’m the one who they hurt, and I *stayed in the goddamn car.*”

Ben squeezes her eyes shut. “Rey—”

“You’re going to get in trouble, Ben! They’ll press charges and you’ll go to prison—”

“Just jail, probably,” he corrects softly.

“You’ll still be *gone*!” she shouts, turning toward the window and leaning her forehead against the cool glass. Neither of them say anything for a long time. Eventually Rey turns back toward him, wiping the tears and snot from her face with her shirt sleeve. “When you let your anger get the best of you like that, it’s not just you you hurt. You hurt me too.”

He's watches her closely, eyes searching her face. He presses his lips together and takes in a deep breath. "I'm *sorry*, Rey." And did his voice break a little or did she just imagine it? "I'm sorry. I really am."

"Sorry you hurt me. Not sorry for what you did to those boys," she points out.

His face hardens, but he doesn't deny it.

Rey scoffs and turns away from him again, and Ben picks that moment to turn the car back on and pull back onto the road.

By the time they reach the studio she's feeling less volatile. She doesn't demand to be taken back to the home, but instead follows Ben inside and into the kitchen-office.

Ben slumps down at the table and puts his head down, so Rey starts brewing a pot of coffee for him.

They end the evening with Ben sipping out of a mug she'd made herself as Rey wipes dried blood off his cheek.

## Chapter End Notes

I love Ben, but dude has some serious issues and we will absolutely be exploring those in this fic.

Thanks so much to everyone who has left comments and kudos! You guys are the best and I enjoy talking with y'all. I hope I didn't scare any of you away with this chapter! The next chapter is a birthday party, so at least there's that? O.o

If you liked let me know!

## 2003, part two

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

But separate's always better when there's feelings involved  
If what they say is "Nothing is forever"  
Then what makes, then what makes, then what makes  
Then what makes, what makes, what makes love the exception

“Hey Ya” by OutKast

\*\*

The boy that punched Rey in the face still hasn't returned to school by the time Rey's thirteenth birthday rolls around. Ben had given him a broken jaw, broken ribs, and multiple contusions and fractures. He'd mostly left the other two boys alone, the main injury between the two of them a twisted ankle that had been self-inflicted by tripping.

Ben had turned himself into the cops the morning after the incident, been arrested at the police station, then immediately bailed out by Leia, and is currently awaiting his court date. He and Luke are also not on speaking terms, which has made attending her after school art classes incredibly awkward for Rey.

But Ben isn't currently sitting in jail, and he won't be going to prison. And Rey is intensely, intensely relieved.

She is torn over whether she should be guilty for feeling this way.

\*\*

It's technically her first birthday party.

Maz drives her to the studio the Saturday after her actual birthday, and when she walks inside, Paige and Rose have stretched a massive “Happy 13th Birthday Rey” banner across the entryway. The sight of it, hand made and covered in glitters and flowers, makes her chest feel warm. She grins at the two sisters as they rush over to greet her.

Rose flings her arms around her and squeezes tightly before letting her go. “Are you excited?” she asks, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet. She grabs Rey's hand and tugs her forward before Rey can answer. “Wait until you see your cake!”

“Rose!” Paige snaps, stepping into their path. “It's supposed to be a surprise.” Paige's hair is slightly out of place and there are bags underneath her eyes. She graduates in just over a month and has been stressing over finals for *months*.

“Oh.” Rose looks sheepish for a moment. “Right, sorry. I got so excited I forgot.” The two sisters start chatting, and Rey takes advantage of them being distracted to look around the

newly decorated art studio. There are streamers everywhere and about a billion balloons in every color possible. There's a small pile of gifts on a picnic table that Luke probably had in storage. Her friends had put so much effort into making this happen, and she hadn't even asked them to.

In fact, when the idea had been mentioned by Rose a few weeks ago, she'd vehemently protested. She doesn't *need* a birthday party, birthdays really aren't that big a deal. But Rose had simply smiled and nodded like she totally agreed. The next thing Rey knew, she was getting a birthday party.

"You only turn thirteen once," Rose had admonished while helping Rey pick out invitations. Rey hadn't been able to argue, since Rose and Finn had both had birthday parties too. She'd conceded and picked the invitations featuring puppies and kittens.

Rose takes her hand, jolting Rey back to present, and brushes aside a few streamers. "Ta da!"

"You...you guys got me a piñata?"

\*\*

Rey pretends to use the bathroom, but instead goes to the kitchen-office. That's where she knows she'll find Ben, and sure enough he's sitting at the table, reading a graphic novel and sipping coffee.

"You're missing my birthday party, jerk," she says bluntly, leaning against the door frame.

Ben looks up and smiles when he sees her. "Hey, kid." He sets the graphic novel aside and finishes the rest of his coffee in one gulp before standing. He doesn't move beyond the table, however. "Luke told me to stay in here. He thought I might, uh, scare your friends."

Luke is absolutely correct in this, and both Paige and Rose have mentioned that they'd rather not be around Ben. But this is Rey's birthday party, and she figures she gets the final say.

"They're not scared of you," she lies, and he gives her a look that says he doesn't buy it. "Besides, it's my party. There's a piñata!" She holds her hand out to him and cocks her head to the side. "Please?"

He sighs and walks over to her, taking her hand.

Nothing dramatic happens when they walk back out into the entryway. Poe has shown up with Mattis, much to Rey's delight, and right behind them is Finn, who is handing Now That's What I Call Music CD's to Luke for him to put on. When Finn sees her, he bounds right up to her without really noticing who is standing beside her. Ben quickly releases her hand and steps to the side. He's so tall that streamers brush his hair.

Finn flings his arms around Rey and hugs her close, babbling about how he's so happy to be here and how he can't wait for her to open the gift he got her and—  
When Finn notices Ben his eyes go comically wide. Rey realizes that the two of them have

never met before. Nevertheless, Finn seems to know exactly who Ben is just by looking at him.

“Um.” Finn holds his hands up pleadingly. “It was just a hug, I promise!”

Ben’s eyebrows shoot up and he looks very alarmed, and then very awkward. He grumbles something underneath his breath before slinking out of the entryway and back toward the kitchen-office.

Rey smacks Finn in the arm. “Dummy! You made him uncomfortable!”

“I made *him* uncomfortable?! He’s the scariest guy I’ve ever seen!”

Finn is exaggerating, of course, but... Rey can’t really blame him for feeling this way.

She sighs and rolls her eyes, but doesn’t argue. Hours go by. She opens her gifts and tries not to get teary when everyone sings happy birthday to her. Paige and Rose present her the cake with a flourish. It’s shaped and decorated like a paintbrush, and Rey realizes that that’s why neither of them had come to bed until very late the night before.

She destroys the piñata, and watches in confusion when it finally breaks open and nothing falls out. Then she laughs and laughs and laughs at Luke when he sheepishly admits he forgot to put the candy inside.

Finn grabs her and pulls her into the middle of the crowded room as loud, loud music fills the entryway, and Rey can hear Luke swearing as he hurries to lower the volume. But someone, maybe Poe, shouts at him to leave it because this song is catchy as hell. And it is.

She dances with Finn and Rose, laughing and feeling blissful in a way she’s never really known before. Is this what it’s like to have a family who love you enough to celebrate you?

She giggles at her two friends, who know every word to this song, and pauses for a moment to catch her breath as they keep dancing.

And there, past all the streamers and under the banner, is Ben, standing by the entrance to the hallway with his arms crossed over his broad chest. He watches the scene with something sad in his gaze, as if he’s an outsider looking at a place where he doesn’t belong but wishes he did.

Some of the bliss she’d felt just moments ago leak out of Rey and she swallows, unwittingly taking a step in his direction. He looks at her then, brown eyes catching hers. And he shakes his head, ever so slightly. Rey sucks in a breath and frowns; she’d like nothing more than to march right up to him and drag him out into this entryway with the rest of the partygoers. Because maybe he doesn’t belong here in this place with these people, but he does belong beside her—

Finn tugs on her shirt sleeve, grabbing her attention briefly. When she turns back to look at Ben, he’s already gone.

\*\*

The party ends when the sun sets, and Rey dutifully watches one by one as everyone leaves. She thanks and hugs everyone who came, the warm feeling in her chest spreading all throughout her body.

Rose and Paige stay to help Luke clean up, and while they're distracted Rey cuts off a hunk of cake and hurries out of the entryway and into the hallway.

Ben is reading the same graphic novel and is sipping his umpteenth cup of coffee.

"I brought you cake," she says as a way of greeting, sitting the plate down by his coffee cup before drawing up a chair across from him.

There's a brief moment of silence.

"I wish you had actually been there," she says very quietly.

"I know you do, kid." Ben's voice is equally as quiet. "But, it was for the best."

A wave of indignation rolls over her, and she's about to hotly deny this, that Ben isolating himself isn't good, when he reaches down and grabs something from under the table. It's something wrapped in a plastic bag (the best gift wrapping Ben can provide).

"Ben, you didn't have—"

His eye roll shuts her up, and with a smile on her face she grabs the parcel and unwraps it hurriedly.

She shrieks when she sees what's inside, and Ben grins stupidly.

"An iPod?! Holy shit, Ben, do you know how expensive these things are?"

He blinks, amused. "Yeah. I do."

She rushes around the table and flings her arms around his neck, which is slightly uncomfortable given the fact that he's still sitting. There's a soft, pleased look on his face when she pulls away. "I put iTunes on Luke's computer and uploaded all my CD's," he says. "I've already put all of them on there for you too."

Scrambling, Rey opens the box as quickly as her fingers can move, marveling at the gadget's sleek look. "This is awesome, Ben."

He opens his mouth to say something, and then closes it quickly, as if thinking better. "You're welcome, kid. We can go to the record store sometime in the next couple of weeks and you can pick out some new stuff. Can't have you slacking on your music while I'm gone."

Rey stills, some of the excitement ebbing away.

"How long?"



Ben shrugs. “Won’t know until after the hearing. The lawyer says that because my record is clean I’ll probably only get charged for a misdemeanor. So, just a shitty fine and some months in jail.” He says it so casually, as if the fact that he faces jail time doesn’t bother him at all. As if the fact that he beat the pulp out of thirteen-year-old boy doesn’t bother him at all.

Rey purses her lips and stares down at her gift, thinking. She wants to argue with him, admonish him, but... She just can’t bring herself to wreck this moment by thinking about him leaving. Not yet. Because he’s still here. For now.

So instead of saying anything, Rey simply hugs him again. He lets out a breath of surprise as she holds him close. And, before she can lose her courage, she kisses his cheek.

The tips of Ben’s ears turn red, but otherwise he says nothing. In fact, after a moment he rubs his cheek at the spot she kissed. “Are you...what is this?”

“Rose gave me lip gloss earlier.” Rey busies herself pulling the earbuds out of the box and plugging them into her new iPod, trying not to let on to the explosions currently happening in her stomach.

She’d felt stubble on his cheek. And he’d smelled good.

## Chapter End Notes

I can’t believe Rey is already a teen. I feel like I was just writing about her having missing front teeth!

Thanks so much for all the awesome feedback you guys gave me on the last chapter! It was an intense installment and to be honest I really fretted over how everyone was going to react, so thanks everyone for all your inciteful comments and kind words!

My piece in the [Reylo Valentine's Exchange](#) goes live tonight at midnight (about three hours from now, from the time I’m posting this). All the pieces are anonymous until Wednesday, I believe, but you guys should definitely go and check out all the awesome works! I personally can’t wait to dive in to all this new Reylo fic we’re about to be blessed with. If anyone manages to correctly guess which one is mine before the writers are revealed on the 28th I’ll write a Reylo ficlet for a prompt you give me!

You guys are the best. If you liked let me know! ^.^

## 2003, part three

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I thought she'd be there holding daisies,  
She always waits for me  
She thinks she missed the train to Mars,  
She's out back counting stars

“Stars” by Hum

\*\*

Rey has three specific memories of her time before the home.

The second one is fresher than the other two, because it's of the last time she'd seen her parents. There's a woman's face in this memory, faded through time, but still pale and sallow. Rey can't remember the color of her eyes anymore, or the way her mother's hand had felt pressed against her shoulder.

Her father is there too, his image even more faded than her mother's. He'd run his fingers through Rey's dirty and uncared for hair and patted her head. They were both so thin, she remembered thinking. So thin.

She had thought, in her childlike reasoning, that perhaps she'd share her cookies with them later.

Her mother leans forward and presses a kiss to her forehead with dry lips. “We won't be gone long, Rey. We'll be back soon.”

Her father had smiled at her as he'd opened the front door to leave. “We promise,” he'd said. They'd both waved at her then, and she'd waved back and grinned at them. They did this often, leaving her on her own for a time. But they always returned.

She'd turned back to her only Barbie doll as the door swung shut behind her parents.

They'd never come back.

\*\*

Ben's last day of freedom before his eight months of sentenced jail time falls on a rainy Friday in June. Rey counts all her lucky stars that school is already out for the summer, because it means that she gets to spend the whole day with him.

He picks her up after lunch and takes her to the local record and CD store, and they listen to music loudly in his car, as if it's just any other day.

It's too easy for Rey to trick herself into thinking that that's the case.

Ben parks the car and they walk into the store, Rey chattering about the books on her summer reading list and the assigned book report she has to do on one of them. Ben has read all of them, of course.

"I can help you write the report, if you want," he offers as the door dings behind them.

They both pause at his honest slip up, but neither points it out. Rey just clears her throat and jerks her thumb at a box of records sitting on a table marked CLEARANCE. "I'm gonna go look at those," she says, and he nods, face a little grim.

She looks through the records in the box without really taking them in, trying to get a handle on the emotions squeezing her chest. It's going to be alright, she tells herself. She goes back to the start of the pile and starts flipping through them again. Most of these records are for bands and musicians she doesn't recognize, but one cover image makes her pause.

"Hey, Ben!" she calls, and sees him immediately turn to her from where he's checking out newly released CDs across the store. Rey holds up the record for him to see. "Wild, huh?"

The record is neon green with a zebra on the cover. Ben walks over to her, a couple of CDs in one hand, and takes the record from her with the other. "Oh, wow. I forgot this band existed. This was a great album though." He gently bumps Rey's nose with it. "Good find, kid."

She beams up at him before turning back to the box, pleased. "Where would you be, without my scavenging?"

They spend a good hour or so in the store, sometimes looking at things together and sometimes apart, always catching the other's attention if one of them finds something interesting.

Rey picks out several CDs for herself. Some of them by bands she likes, some of them per Paige and Rose's suggestions, some of them just because they looked cool. Ben insists on paying for all of them, adding them to his own pile of CDs and records at the cash register.

Will he even have time to listen to all this new music before he—

Rey squishes down this thought viciously, following Ben out of the store and back to his car.

\*\*

He buys them milkshakes, and when the rain lets up he rolls down all the windows to his car and turns the volume on the car stereo all the way up. People stare at them when they sit at stop lights, but Rey doesn't care. She sips her cookies and cream milkshake and watches Ben out of the corner of her eye.

His eyes are on the road and he is smiling, effortlessly so.

It isn't fair.

\*\*

They spend the evening at Ben's apartment with Poe and BB-8. The massive orange cat meows happily as soon as Rey walks through the front door, aggressively butting her leg with his head.

Poe gives her a massive hug, admonishing her over how he doesn't have to bend down to hug her anymore because of how tall she is now, and Rey thinks, Ben still has to—

She stomps on this thought too.

"I'm making cheeseburgers!" Poe calls, walking into the tiny kitchen and grabbing a too-clean-to-be-regularly-used apron. "Sound good?"

"Yes!" Rey calls out cheerfully.

Ben emerges from his room carrying a handful of supplies he'll need for painting. He casts Poe a doubtful look. "Should I wait before or after you burn them to order pizza?"

Poe waves his hand at Ben dismissively, and Rey marvels at how Ben's roommate is never bothered by Ben's...Ben-ness.

But then again, neither is she.

\*\*

Ben ends up ordering pizza after Poe burns the burgers.

While they wait for it to arrive, Ben puts on the record that Rey had discovered at the store earlier.

He and Rey sit at the round little kitchen table and work. Ben, on a painting that he's trying to finish up before...well, before.

And Rey, with her sketchpad and pencils tipped so that he can't see what she's doing, sketches Ben as he is sitting there. The look of concentration on his face, the slope of his nose and his cheekbones. He'd gotten a haircut recently, and his hair just brushes his forehead. Rey traces her pencil over the pad, expertly working his form into the paper. Soon, Ben Solo starts to appear, created from her hand.

She erases a part of his mouth and adds a curve to his lips, as if he's almost smiling. And she makes sure his ears are true to size, still a little too big for him.

"How's yours coming along?" Ben asks, making Rey jump. But he hasn't looked up from his own work, and she relaxes.

"Eh. Not bad," she says, attempting to sound aloof. He raises his head and quirks an eyebrow at her, but says nothing.

They continue on, and she finishes the first draft of this sketch, pleased with what she has so far. She already knows, however, that she'll look at it tomorrow and find a million things that need fixing. She'll have to make sure to take careful note of Ben's face and body on Monday, when she'll next see him, so that she can correctly edit—  
Rey's fingers still when she remembers again.

She swallows, and the record playing in the background switches to something that sounds almost sad. Maybe *hopeless*, is the better word.

The crashing, horrible realization that she won't see Ben Solo again until next year rolls over her. She bites her bottom lip, watching him. She's never been separated from him for this long before and—

Tears prick at the corners of her eyes and Rey sets her pad aside and rises quickly, suddenly needing to be alone. She scrambles toward the bathroom, vision blurring.  
“Rey?” Ben's voice is concerned.

“Just have to pee!” she calls back, hoping her flimsy excuse is enough. She moves into the hallway and immediately leans against the wall when she knows he can't see her anymore. She takes a few deep breaths to calm herself, gaze falling on the open door to Ben's bedroom. Before she realizes what she's doing, she's standing in the doorway.

Ben's room looks a lot more lived in since the last time she's seen it. There are shoes strewn across the floor, a t-shirt thrown over the chair that sits by his computer. And there, not above his bed but on the wall beside it, as if he lays on his side and looks at it, is the painting she gave him for his birthday last year.

It's the last straw for her, and the tears start pouring down her cheeks with alarming speed. She turns, thinking she'll make her way to the bathroom with teary, blurred vision, and clean herself up a bit. But she walks straight into Ben, who must have been standing right behind her.

Rey remembers the way he'd always crouched down to be in front of her before. Before she'd gotten taller, before she'd been in middle school. Before he'd beat up those boys.

He only leans down a bit now, hands on her shoulders to steady her. She's weeping, torn between the horrible emptiness she feels at him leaving, and the fury she feels knowing his awful decision is why he's leaving in the first place.

He is speaking to her, and she tunes in, emotions heaving. “I won't be gone long, Rey.”

She presses her lips together as Ben wipes the continuous tears from her cheeks with big, gentle hands. “I'll be back soon. I promise.”

Rey has heard that before.

She nearly hits him. But she doesn't, instead stepping out of his grasp. She looks up at his face briefly, sees the hurt there.

Is this what it means to love someone? To feel such anger over what they've done, but to also feel so deeply, incredibly sad at the simple thought of them being gone? But no. Loving someone couldn't possibly hurt this much. Could it?

There's a loud knock on the door announcing the pizza man, and Rey uses that excuse to further move away from Ben and back into the living room. She wipes at her eyes, hoping Poe doesn't notice her tears. Although, he'd probably heard everything. She sees her sketchpad open at the table, showcasing her drawing of Ben. She quickly closes it, cheeks burning, hoping neither Ben nor Poe had seen it.

Ben walks slowly out of the hallway and slumps back down in the chair he had been sitting in, watching her.

She sits too, refusing to meet his gaze.

A minute later, Poe doesn't hand her a slice of pizza, but BB-8. The large cat curls into her arms starts up a steady purr as she strokes him, holding the cat close. He nuzzles her hand before licking at her knuckles soothingly.

Ben is still watching her. Finally, he says, "I liked your sketch."

\*\*

They don't talk much on the drive home, and Rey longs for how easy and effortless things had been when he'd first picked her up. But they can't ignore what's happening tomorrow anymore, and when Ben finally pulls into the long driveway of the home Rey can barely bring herself to look at him.

They sit in silence.

Rey's fingers curl around the handle to the door, and she forces herself to take in a deep breath. "I'll see you...later." She gets out quickly, tears already threatening to fall again. She can hear Ben getting out of the car too, and she slams the door shut but doesn't move.

"Rey."

Her bottom lip trembles, and maybe she should just walk on into the home. Maybe that's what he deserves.

But no. She cares about him too much to do that to him.

"I'll miss you, Ben."

She looks up at him over the car, sees him visibly swallow. But his voice is even when he says, "I'll miss you too, kid."

He walks around the car to stand in front of her, but doesn't reach for her like he had in the apartment. Instead, he waits. And suddenly the weight of *eight months* presses down on Rey, and she moves forward and hugs him close, face pressed into his chest.

She steps back and looks up at his face, shrouded a little in shadows. She memorizes what she can see and tucks it into her memory, determined not to let Ben's face fade like her parents' had.

\*\*

Rey does not leave her room the next day.

## Chapter End Notes

My brain is Reylo mush right now y'all. My buddy works at a bookstore and snuck me The Last Jedi novelization (no, I'm not posting screencaps or anything, ain't trying to get her fired), and I spent a good chunk of my day reading it. It's a full course Reylo meal LET ME TELL YA.

And then I wrote this angsty nonsense and just. I need a good cry. My babies.

My piece for the Reylo Valentine's Anthology is somewhere in this [post](#), for those of you still curious on trying to figure out which one is mine. If ya guess correctly I'll write you a ficlet ;)

If you liked let me know!

## 2004, part one

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Made off  
Don't stray  
My kind's your kind  
I'll stay the same

“Maps” by Yeah Yeah Yeah’s

\*\*

Rey resists the urge to groan when she sees it.

It’s the second week in January and eighth grade Rey is standing by her locker, backpack on the floor, and trying in vein to zip up a jacket that fit fine last year but is too small this year. It is particularly tight across the chest now. But she pauses in her struggle to watch two girls hang a poster on the wall across from her locker. A poster for a Valentine’s Dance that’s happening at the end of next month.

And she knows as soon as—

“Rey!” Rose appears at her elbow, gaze pinned to the poster. “We have to go.”

Rey nods. “You’re right. We’ll be late for class—”

“No, the *dance*, dummy.”

Rey knows exactly what Rose had been referring to. “Why? We haven’t been to any school dances since we started going here.”

Rose looks at her for a long moment, as if she’s currently summoning all her patience. “Rey. We talked about this.”

This is true. When Rey had flat refused to attend the Winter Formal, Rose had demanded they go to the next dance their middle school put on because, as she had put it, *they needed the experience*.

Rey personally disagreed. She could think of about a million better things to do with her time. She had hoped that Rose would forget about this particular conviction, or that maybe she wouldn’t notice the posters for the upcoming dance everywhere. But Rey should have known better.

She gives in to the urge to groan. “Do we have to?”

“Yes. We’ll take Finn too. It’ll be fun!”



Rey relents, because Rose has been down ever since Paige went back to college after the holiday break, and if this gets her best friend out of her funk then so be it.

“Fine.”

Rose grins and does a happy jig. “Yes! This is going to be the best time ever. I saw this hairstyle in J-14 the other day that I could do for you. It would totally suit your bone structure.”

Just a typical Friday morning.

\*\*

After the bus drops them off at the home from school, Rey rushes toward the small shed that Maz keeps most of their holiday decorations in and grabs the bike Maz had gotten for her last summer.

She makes the twenty-minute ride over to a familiar apartment complex with no real trouble, leaning her bike at the bottom of the staircase and taking the steps two at a time. She fishes for her keychain in her pocket and unlocks the apartment door with a key Poe had made for her.

BB-8 is already mewling loudly at her when she enters the apartment and closes the door behind her. His meows grow louder and louder as she makes her way into the kitchen, grabbing the cat food from the cupboard. She squeals when the large, fluffy cat nearly trips her as she makes her way over to his food bowl.

“Hey, watch it!” But the BB-8 has already buried his face in his bowl, crunching on his food happily. While he’s eating she fills his water bowl with fresh water, then sits on the floor beside him and strokes her fingers through his thick, soft fur, telling him about her day. Poe is gone all day on Fridays and Saturdays, so he’d asked Rey if she’d be willing to come over and feed BB-8 for him. Of course, she had been more than happy to oblige.

She spends a good fifteen minutes on the floor petting the cat before standing and sweeping her eye over the kitchen table. She smiles when she sees it. Poe has left her a hastily scribbled thank you note next to an envelope. She grabs the envelope and tucks it into her jacket before taking the pen Poe had left out and doodling a quick sketch of Poe and BB-8 eating pizza together.

Then she leaves, waving at the elderly neighbor who likes to sit on her balcony and enjoy the weather. The woman waves back, shouting at Rey to be careful as she flies down the stairs toward her bike.

Just a typical Friday afternoon.

\*\*

That night she and Rose go over to Finn’s house, where they’re fed home cooking and stories about what Finn had been like when he was a little kid. Finn moans and flushes with

embarrassment in all the right spots. However, he puts his foot down when his Nana gets up to grab his baby book.

Rey laughs, because this has happened every single time she and Rose have come over to Finn's house.

After eating dinner, they hang out in the bonus room that Finn has turned into his own sanctuary. There's a computer in one corner and an Xbox and PS2 in another, with a squishy old couch for them to sit on in the middle.

Finn suggests they watch *The Ring*, which he'd rented. Rose and Finn jump at every little thing, eventually knocking over the snack bowl and spilling popcorn everywhere. This makes Rey laugh so hard that they must pause the movie and rewind in order to see what they missed.

And at the end of the night, when Finn's arms linger a little too long during their hug goodbye, Rey makes a mental note to talk to Poe on how to let someone down in the kindest way possible.

When they get back to the home, Rey sketches on her bed and Rose watches *The OC* while doing her nails. Both girls always stop what they're doing and give their utmost attention to the TV whenever Seth Cohen is onscreen.

It's a typical Friday evening.

\*\*

Rose has fallen asleep, not at all bothered by Rey's bedside lamp still being on. And Rey, beginning to feel sleepy herself, begins her before bed routine.

She grabs her iPod and sticks in her earbuds, scrolling to the band she's currently obsessed with and selecting them. Then she quietly opens up the drawer to her bedside table and pulls out a calendar. She flips to today and makes a massive X through it with black marker. She writes "212 days down" at the top of the marked-out day and flips the calendar shut. Then she snatches the envelope she'd gotten at Poe's earlier from her discarded jacket and opens it.

In is just a piece of notebook paper. On one side is a letter she'd sent last week.

*Hey asshole. I'm sure jail still sucks. The most exciting thing that happened this week is I fell off my bike and got a gnarly scrape from my knee to my ankle. Lots of blood. Was cool. Here, I sketched out a comic of it happening. Enjoy.*

The comic is gone; the bottom half of the page has been carefully ripped off. She flips over to the back and sees the response.

*Please be careful, kid. Wear a helmet and shit. Here's a sketch of this guy I met two days ago named DJ. In for armed robbery. Fascinating dude. Pretty sure he's an anarchist.*

Underneath is a drawing in simple black pen. But it looks like it came right out of a graphic novel. Highly stylized, DJ grins at her with a cigarette between his lips. Rey smiles down at it

and holds the letter to her chest briefly. Then she grabs some tape from her desk and puts it on the wall with the others.

They stretch nearly from floor to ceiling now, Ben's random sketches in black ink.

Rey grabs up a fresh sheet of notebook paper and starts her letter for this week.

*What's up dickbutt—*

## Chapter End Notes

Yes, I'm keeping Ben's jail sentence to one chapter. Don't y'all judge me, I miss him too much already.

My piece in the Reylo Fanfiction Anthology is up now and you can read it [here](#)! I've waited so long to share this with everyone and would love for you guys to give it a read. There's smut! Congrats to reylocalligraphy and Laurale520 for guessing correctly which one was mine! Give me some prompts in the comments and I'll write you two each a ficlet.

Next time we have a dance and a reunion. Will Ben see Rey in a dress?? WHO KNOWS. If you liked let me know!

## 2004, part two

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I think about you all the time  
But I don't need the same  
It's lonely where you are  
Come back down

“Name” by The Goo Goo Dolls

\*\*

Rose huffs. “Rey, for the love of everything, please be still.”

Rey sighs, but relents. Valentine’s Day, and the Valentine’s Dance, conveniently fall on a Saturday this year, and Rey straightens her spine as Rose sweeps light blue eyeshadow across her eyelids. Her hair is tugged into an up-do, with longer pieces of her bangs left out in order to frame each side of her face.

She’s already in her dress. It’s breezy and airy and falls just past her knees, with a v-neckline that shows off absolutely nothing. The thin spaghetti straps had required her to purchase a new, fancy bra. The underwires poke at her sides and Rey feels herself growing surlier by the second. Plus, this dress is covered in sparkles, a detail that had seemed delightful in the store, but now seems stupid and overtly girly in a way that Rey is not.

She hasn’t even been to one yet, technically, but Rey has already decided dances are *not* her thing.

Rose, on the other hand, is a crackling ball of happy energy. She’d picked out a red dress for herself, long hair already curled and makeup perfectly in place. And when she’s not scolding Rey for fidgeting, she’s talking about Finn.

That’s another aspect about tonight that Rey is decidedly not looking forward to. What if a slow song comes on and Finn asks her to dance instead of Rose? Just the thought makes panic rise up her throat. She should have prioritized talking to Poe about this situation, and is kicking herself for forgetting.

Which is why, Rey has decided, she’s just not going to dance with anyone at all. She’ll stick to the punch and snacks and hide out in the bathroom if need be. She’ll even fake having cramps.

There’s a long-suffering sigh. “Rey, you *moved*.” Rose uses a makeup removal wipe to quickly correct the smudge, then rummages through her makeup bag, debating lipstick shades. She eventually holds up two sticks that look identical. “Which one?”

“Uh. They look the same.”

Rose looks mildly horrified. “This one is Bright Rose and *this* one is Dusky Rose. They’re completely different.”

Rey lets out a whine of sheer anxiety and Rose’s face softens in pity. “Dusky Rose it is.” She pulls off the cap to the lipstick and jerks her head to Paige’s old, battered stereo that she’d left behind for them. Rose had turned on the radio when they’d started getting ready. “Just listen to this song. It’s relaxing.”

The acoustic guitar and soft singing don’t really calm Rey’s pent-up nerves. She thinks she might have heard this song once on the radio in Ben’s car, briefly, before he’d scoffed and turned it off. She can almost see his disgusted expression—

Rey exhales, and Rose swipes the color over her lips with dainty strokes. “See?” She pulls back and recaps it. “You just needed some calm music.”

And Rey smiles, because the music has nothing to do with it, really.

Ben comes home in less than a week.

\*\*

Finn’s Nana picks up both girls right at 6’o’clock. Finn turns a little to face them in the front seat and gives a resigned look. “You guys ready to have a thousand pictures taken?”

Rose squeals with excitement and Rey groans. Finn’s Nana had personally called Luke earlier in the week to ask if it’d be alright to utilize the garden in the back of the studio, and Luke had instantly agreed. He’d told Rey on Thursday that he wanted copies of all the pictures, a wicked and knowing gleam in his eyes. Rey had glared at him and had refused to speak to him for the rest of the evening, sticking her tongue out at him in contempt when Maz had come to pick her up. Luke knew how she felt about having to stand for pictures. He *knew*.

And yet, here they are, pulling into the studio parking lot and getting out of the car.

They walk around the side of the building toward the back garden, and Rose quietly compliments Finn on his dress shirt and pants.

“Thanks!” he says cheerfully, smiling at Rose brightly. “You look nice too.” He glances at Rey and says a little more shyly, “You as well, Rey.”

Fuck.

The picture taking is worse than Rey had anticipated. Every couple of minutes they have to stop so that Finn can help his Nana with her new digital camera. “You press *this* button to turn the flash on, and this arrow if you want to view—Well, okay. You deleted that one.”

Rose shifts a little while they wait, wincing down at her feet. She’d picked out shoes the same shade as her dress and with a fairly sizeable heel. They are cute, Rey admits. But they look scary.

Rey is in white and black Converse. Practical shoes were something she'd refused to budge on, despite Rose's protests.

Finn and Nana have descended into full on bickering, with Nana insisting she had deleted nothing and Finn explaining for the fourth time that *if you select the trashcan icon it deletes the picture*.

Rey sighs. "I'm going to the bathroom. I'll be back in a sec."

Rose nods, amused gaze never leaving Finn.

Rey maneuvers her way to the back door, lifting up the very obviously fake rock that hid the extra key. She unlocks the door swiftly and moves inside, closing the door behind her.

She takes care of her business, washing her hands and frowning at her reflection in the bathroom mirror. She looks...older. More mature, maybe. This makes her feel oddly strange, and she quickly exits the bathroom before she can stare at herself any longer.

She pauses at the backdoor, ears pricking at the sound of someone shuffling around down the hall in the kitchen-office. Her brow furrows. That's weird. Luke is supposed to be out of town this weekend and she hadn't seen his car out in the parking lot.

She moves down the hall, curiosity getting the better of her. She pokes her head around the doorway to the kitchen office and sees a very tall young man standing with his back to her, music blaring, coffee maker gurgling out fresh coffee, an entire pizza on the countertop, and every paint imaginable scattered on the table.

It's almost as if Ben Solo never left.

Rey gasps, and he jerks around at the soft sound. He's clean shaven, and his hair, longer than she's ever seen it, is shower damp. His eyes go wide in surprise when he sees her, lips parting a little.

Rey's heart is hammering. Something much purer than happiness fills all the spaces in her chest that have been empty since a rainy day last June. It escapes her mouth in a shriek of sheer joy and she rushes forward, throwing her arms around Ben and squeezing tightly, assuring herself that he really is there.

His thick arms wrap around her upper shoulders and he hugs her back just as fiercely. They stand like that for a moment. When his grip finally loosens, Rey pulls back, reluctant to let go of him.

"What are you doing here? I didn't think you'd be back until tomorrow. Why didn't you tell me you were getting out today you jerk?! I would've been here—"

"What the *hell* are you wearing?" Ben is peering at his palms and white t-shirt, both now covered in tiny, dazzling sparkles that managed to travel from her dress to him in a matter of seconds.

"A dress," Rey deadpans. "Did you get stupider in jail? I didn't think that was possible."

He stares down at her for a beat, mouth twitching as he fights a smile. Then his face softens a little. “I missed you, kid.”

Rey’s heart melts a little at finally hearing his endearment for her again. “I missed you too, Ben.”

\*\*

She tells her friends to go to the dance without her.

Rose, who never ceases to amaze Rey at how wonderful of a friend she is, squeezes her hand in understanding as she watches Ben. He’s in a deep conversation with Nana, insuring her that he’ll get Rey home safely *and* that he’ll feed her.

Rey hugs Finn, who looks sorely disappointed. “Ask Rose to slow dance,” she whispers into his ear before she pulls back. He casts her a confused look before eyeing Rose, eyebrows furrowing in thought.

Hmm. Maybe she didn’t need Poe’s advice after all.

\*\*

Ben shares his pizza with her. They sit in Luke’s living room upstairs, the TV on in the background but neither of them really paying attention. He explains that he’d gotten out a little early because overcrowding, that he’d just gotten there when she found him, and that he hadn’t called her because Luke told him she’d be at a dance.

And Rey, who still can barely believe he’s there, asks him all about jail.

“Well, they boiled dirt and tried to pass it off as coffee. And the deodorant they give you made me smell like an old man. Hux and I made the best of it—”

Rey swallows her bite of pizza and wipes at her mouth with the back of her hand. “Who’s Hux?”

“A creepy ginger fucker, but the only person whose sentence was as long as mine, and easily the only one there who could hold a conversation.” Ben’s gaze zeroes in on Rey’s mouth. “Ah, you smeared your lipstuff.” He licks his thumb and swipes it gently just under her lower lip, making her freeze.

He tries to rub the lipstick off on his jeans to no avail. “Why do girl’s lipstick always stick to me like this—”

And Rey is too distracted to feel the full sting of his words, because her lip still tingles wickedly where he’d touched her.

And he's back! Ah Ben, we all missed you, Rey most of all. I hope the reunion was up to snuff. I know a lot of y'all were leaning something a bit sweeter, perhaps, but I wanted to keep it as "them" as possible, if that makes sense.

Words can't express how much I appreciate everyone who comments and shares their love for this fic. I've had a real shit week (rear ended someone and car is in the shop, and that's not the most garbage thing that's happened), so reading everyone's thoughts brings such warmth to my blackened heart.

If you liked let me know!



**Tuesday, May 25th 2004**

## Chapter Summary

I know it's update day, but my brain is mush. So here's a drabble that literally no one asked for, written entirely to suit my own whimsy.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's after school on a Tuesday. Rey and Ben are skipping their afternoon painting class with Luke and the other students to do...

To do this.

Ben marches into Target, a man on a mission. Rey has to nearly break into a run to keep up with his long strides. Usually he matches her pace, but today is different. Today is the day Ben has been waiting for since he got back in February, and Rey is trying (and failing) not to laugh at his intensely serious expression.

Ben finds what he's looking for on a massive display in the electronic section. He grabs the first DVD on the display and turns sharply, already moving briskly back to the front of the store. Rey pivots quickly and trots to catch up to him.

"What about popcorn?" she asks, head turning as they walk swiftly past the snack aisle.

Ben shakes his head. "No time."

Rey is slightly appalled by this. There's *always* time for popcorn. But she follows him on without complaint.

When they get in line for the one open register, Rey starts rummaging through the candy display, trying to decide if she wants chocolate or something sour—

"No time for that either, kid." Ben tosses the DVD onto the conveyor belt, an impatient muscle jumping in his jaw.

"Will you calm down? Me grabbing a snack is not going to keep you from watching this movie."

She turns from the candy and catches Ben staring down at her, eyes narrowed. Rey, who turned fourteen a couple of months ago, realizes that even though she's spent half of her life around this massive idiot, she's never seen him look so furious with her.

“Might I remind you,” he bites out, “that I waited for you to get out of school for this? When I really, *really* didn’t have to. I could’ve already watched this three times by now—”

Rey throws up her hands in defeat. “Oh, quit being such a drama queen, Ben Solo.” She pulls a bottle of soda out of the mini-fridge display and puts it up on the belt next to the DVD, glaring at him the whole time.

He glares right back.

\*\*

Ben does not relax, even when they reach his apartment. He slips the movie into the DVD player and sits on the couch, back ramrod straight, eyes wide, hands clenching nervously.

Rey wants nothing more than to laugh. But he’ll probably make her leave if she does.

The opening scene begins and Rey takes a swig of her soda. She didn’t see this in theaters when it came out last December out of respect for Ben, and she’s fairly invested as well.

“So, wait, is this Smeagol *before* he turns into Gollum—”

Ben has already paused the movie. “Rey.” His voice is low.

“Right, right.”

Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King scrolls across the screen and Ben lets out a deep, deep breath.

Rey turns her head and giggles soundlessly into BB-8’s fur.

\*\*

“Geez, Pippin really is an idiot.”

Ben wallops her harmlessly with a couch pillow. “Don’t talk shit about the hobbits.” His eyes never leave the TV screen.

\*\*

“I am no man!”

Rey sniffs, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes as she watches the movie in awe. She discreetly tries to wipe at her eyes when Ben is handing her a tissue. She takes it from him and glances at him out of the corner of her eye. His mouth is curling in a barely there smile.

\*\*

When the movie is over, Rey is finally allowed to ask questions.

“So, what exactly is the Grey Havens? Where did Frodo and Gandalf actually go?”

Ben shifts a little on the couch as he turns to face her, expression methodical. He launches into his explanation, the first sentence using words like 'Valinor' and 'Undying Lands'. Rey instantly realizes she's made a grave error.

She times him. He explains the answer to her questions, without breaking topic, for a half hour.

## Chapter End Notes

I went into this fic knowing Ben had to be a Super Nerd about something. It couldn't be Star Wars, obvi, and I just didn't have it in me to make him a Trekkie. And, since Lord of the Rings is better than both of those things anyway, in my opinion, here we are.

This was such self-indulgent twaddle but honestly what is fanfic for? <3

(And thank you everyone who commented on the last chapter wishing me a better week! You're all so wonderful. We'll get back to our regular updates tomorrow! Someone starts high school ahhhhh.)

## 2004, part three

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

You'll never make me leave  
I wear this on my sleeve  
You wanna follow something  
Give me a better cause to lead

“Thank You for the Venom” by My Chemical Romance

\*\*

High school doesn't suck for any of the reasons that movies and books and TV shows have lead Rey to believe. Rey has no idea who is popular and who is not, because there's too many kids in her freshman class alone for her to possibly know everyone. The food isn't awful at all (in fact Rey is willing to humbly admit that the cafeteria pizza is pretty delicious). And for the most part, none of the upperclassman have given her or her friends any trouble. In fact, they seem not to notice she exists at all.

High school sucks because there's only eight minutes in between each class. Eight minutes to get from one class on campus to another, which is on the opposite side. High school sucks because she only has one class with Rose and one with Finn, and the homework is already overwhelming. And there are so many other students.

Students everywhere.

She shuffles through her first month with a fifteen-pound backpack because her assigned locker isn't near any of her classes, brand new massive binder clutched to her chest. At least Ben had drawn a griffin on this one. It comforted her a bit, every time she looked down during a class and saw it.

Today she shuffles into her American History Class, the one class she shares with Rose. She slides into her seat, blessedly next to her best friend, and groans while rubbing at her shoulder.

“Kill me,” she moans, and Rose offers her some gum.

They pass notes subtly all throughout class, discussing math homework and the trauma of Jimmy getting shot on the most recent episode of *Degrassi*.

Both perk up slightly when their teacher utters the phrase “research project”. And then mutually slump down in their seats when a five-page written paper on a famous American figure is assigned.

“I’ll be assigning you each your person at random,” the teacher drones, walking from desk to desk and handing a slip of paper to each student. She hands Rose and Rey theirs and moves on.

“Who’d you get?” Rey asks Rose, looking down at her assigned person with growing curiosity.

Rose frowns down at hers before glancing back up. “Edgar Allen Poe, poet. I guess that’ll help me get into the Halloween spirit. What about you?”

Rey quirks an eyebrow and turns her slip of paper around to show Rose. *Anakin Vader – Terrorist*

\*\*

Two and a half weeks later Rey is nearly pulling her hair out in the kitchen-office at the studio, books and pages upon pages of notes spread out across the long table. She doesn’t think it’s possible to stuff her brain with any more information on Anakin Vader. She could take a lengthy test on the guy and ace it for sure. However. Writing about him is like pulling teeth. She practically sketches his young, hateful, half burned face in her *sleep*, and yet she can’t seem to get a single word about him down on paper.

It’s the Friday before Halloween, and her report is due Monday. Rose finished hers a week ago, and had cheerfully offered to help Rey. But Rey had shrugged off the help casually, thinking she was on top of things, thinking this would be a breeze.

It’s...it’s not a breeze.

She lets out a long, stressed whine, eyes darting around the room, desperate for a distraction. Her gaze land on the coffee maker. Rey has only had coffee through stolen sips from Ben’s multitude of cups throughout the years. And it has always been disgusting.

But some weird desperation grips her, and she finds herself grinding beans and pouring the fresh grinds into a filter. She watches, tense as coffee slowly but surely starts filling the old pot.

Ben walks into the room, and Rey snorts, humor breaking through her anxiety ridden reverie. “I should’ve known you’d show up as soon as I started making coffee.”

Ben tosses his car keys onto the counter. “Sorry I’m late.” He gives her an odd look. “Were you making coffee for me?”

“No.”

He blinks, and she can’t tell if he’s disappointed or not.

Rey jerks her thumb at the scattering of paper and books on the table. “I’m working on a paper.”

“The same—”

“Yes, the same one from last weekend,” she grits out, wishing the coffee would brew faster. “I didn’t think I’d have this much trouble getting it done.” She crosses her arms over her chest, and flushes with slight horror when Ben pulls a chair up to the table and starts rummaging through all her notes.

“Well, first of all, there’s no organization here. Which one of these is even your actual paper?”

“The one with the koi fish in the top corner.”

Ben finds it and separates it from the others. “The coloring on this is really good. Did you just doodle this in class? Nevermind. Not the point.” He scans over what she’s written quickly, making a face the entire time.

“Is it that bad?” Rey grumbles when he finishes.

He shakes his head. “No, it’s just that I forgot how truly fucked up Vader was. He killed kids.” He picks out a red pen from her overlarge utensil bag she uses for school, and begins to circle words and cross out sentences. “You have some good lines here. It’s not bad, it just needs some editing. Also, it’s too quiet. Put something on.”

Rey nods, frown still on her face as Ben continues going over her paper. She grabs his old stereo sitting in the corner and pops in one of her newer CDs and skips to a song that’s fitting her strained mood. The feel of the music and Ben’s calm make her relax, and when the coffee is finished brewing moments later she pours them both a mug.

She sits next to Ben, pulling out fresh notebook paper per his instruction. With his help, she pieces together an essay using most of what she already has, just with a better flow and bigger words. The finished product still needs a touch up here and there, but Rey is feeling much more confident than she had an two hours ago.

“I think it’ll pass,” she says, leaning back in her chair and feeling relieved.

Ben shoots her a reproachful look. “Just a passing grade? No, this is worth *at least* a ‘B’. Let me know what your teacher gives you—”

“Ben.”

He looks genuinely worked up over her 9th grade history research paper. “What?”

Rey stands and, on pure impulse, reaches out and ruffles his shaggy hair, just like he’s done to her about a million times. His thoroughly thrown expression makes her toss back her head and laugh because really, after all this time he’s still too much fun to annoy.

Rey collects their mugs, inwardly scolding herself for not even touching her own coffee, when she realizes that Ben already drank hers anyway. She isn’t even mad.

In canon, Ben doesn't discover that Vader is his grandfather until he's much older.  
\*shifty eyes\* Also, who here watches Drake being all famous and shit, and just thinks to themselves, "Damn. That's Jimmy from Degrassi."

That is all for 2004. Next time we'll pick back up in 2005. It's gonna be fun.

If you liked let me know! You guys are simply the best!

## 2005, part one

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Brothers and sisters put this record down  
Take my advice ('cause we are bad news)  
We will leave you high and dry  
It's not worth the hearing you'll lose

“Our Lawyers Made Us Change the Name of This Song So We Wouldn’t Get Sued” by Fall Out Boy

\*\*

Rey is in the best mood *ever*.

It’s the Sunday after she turned fifteen, and she sits in the passenger’s seat of Ben’s car, nearly vibrating in excitement.

Rey can’t tell if Ben keeps glancing at her because of his sunglasses, but he looks more and more resigned with each passing minute. Wonderful! This makes what they’re about to do twice as fun.

He pulls into the parking lot of Rey’s old elementary school, and she gleams as she takes in how deserted it is. He parks and turns the car off, slowly pulling the keys out of the ignition. He sighs deeply and tilts his head up toward the ceiling of the car, as if he can’t believe what he’s about to do.

He plops the keys into Rey’s waiting hand.

She squeals with excitement and scrambles out of the car, leaving the passenger door wide open for Ben.

He climbs out of the driver’s seat with exaggerated slowness, mouth twitching up briefly at Rey’s tapping foot and snapping fingers. “Ben Solo, I’ve been waiting fifteen years for this, so hurry the *fuck* up.”

He laughs outright at that before groaning and finally moving out of her way. Rey gets into the driver’s seat, grin stretched so wide across her face that her cheeks hurt. Not that she notices. She’s about to *drive*.

She quickly adjusts the seat so that her feet can actually touch the pedals (because wow, Ben’s legs are long), then lowers the steering wheel by popping the lever underneath it. She notices Ben’s surprised expression as she moves the rearview mirror into her line of sight.

“What?”



He blinks, curious. “How’d you know how to do all that?”

She rolls her eyes at him and snorts. “I’ve only been watching you drive for years, dummy. One last thing!” Rey leans forward and grapples for a couple of CDs she’d brought that are now scattered about the floorboard of the passenger’s side. The elbow of her right arm brushes Ben’s sturdy thigh and she swallows.

“Got it!” she cries, finding the CD she wants and ejecting Ben’s from the car stereo. She hands it to him to be put away. His eyes are narrowed in disapproval, but he takes the CD and reaches for his CD case in the backseat anyway.

She pops in her specifically-chosen-for-this-moment CD and turns the volume on full blast. Then she puts the keys into the ignition and starts the car. It comes alive beneath her and with a shriek of mirth she hits the gas. The car zooms forward, and she grins as she jerks the steering wheel and whips the car into a sharp turn.

“*Jesus Christ, Rey!*” Ben shouts, hand gripping the handle above the door so tightly his knuckles have turned bone white. “Slow the fuck down!”

She obeys, but only a little.

Rey takes them around the parking lot over and over again. She parks and throws the car into reverse sometimes, just for the hell of it, a mad glint in her hazel eyes. Driving is *delicious*. It’s a freedom that she’s craved for so long, the option to come and go as she pleases, to see who she pleases whenever she pleases. To be able to drive somewhere on a Saturday evening and sit and sketch the sunset. To take Rose and Finn out for pizza. To pop in at Ben’s whenever she’s having a bad day.

Humming happily, she steers the car with her right hand and drums the fingers to her left against her bare knee. It’s exceptionally warm for a day in early spring, and she’s wearing mid-thigh jean shorts that have the ends rolled up an inch, and a black tank top that sometimes shows her hot pink bra straps. And to think, she’d almost worn her baggy Vote For Pedro t-shirt for this.

Ben finally gestures for her to park, and she obeys, easing the car into one of the multitude of empty spaces. She still can’t tell when he’s looking at her because of his sunglasses. For some reason this bothers her.

“Get all that out of your system?”

“For now.” She smirks.

\*\*

Rey screams with delight when he tells her she can drive out of the parking lot and onto the main road. She merges slowly, eyes wide, trying to take in everything around her with as much clarity as possible.

But once she's out on the road she finds that driving like this, out on the road, to be relaxing. She cracks the windows a little so that the wind blows her long hair about her face and neck. She easily keeps to the speed limit (maybe going five or so over), and isn't begrudged when Ben asks her to turn down the music so that he can lecture her.

"You always want to pay attention to your surroundings," he instructs her as they pass by forest and the blooming green of springtime, upper half of his body shifted so that he's facing her. "Don't just watch out for the brake lights of the car in front of you, keep track of the car in front of them as well. And the car beside you, behind you. There's always going to be unpredictable drivers. It's important to always drive safe, to always be a defensive driver, not an offensive one."

Rey turns her face to him a little, giggling.

His cheeks turn a little pink. "What?"

"That's the *opposite* of how you drive, Ben."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Honestly, I'm amazed you haven't killed us before now."

"I'm a *fantastic* driver, thanks!"

"Uh huh." Rey eases on the brakes as they come up to a red light. She turns her face to Ben and grins. "Milkshakes?"

\*\*

She rides the high of driving for the first time all during the next day, despite it being a Monday.

Rey sits in her Biology class, dissecting a frog with her lab partner, Jake. She's not sure what's worse, that they've had to cut off the legs of their subject that she'd affectionately named 'Hopper', or the acidic, foreboding smell of formaldehyde.

Jake volunteers to slice open the dead frog's belly, and she happily lets him, watching on in disgust.

And she notices something as she watches. Her lab partner pauses to glance up at her. A lot. His skin is brown and so is his long, messy hair. But it's clean, and he doesn't smell overbearingly of Axe. In fact, he smells nice.

Not as nice as Ben does, but nice.

Jake grins up at her when she makes a gagging nose, and it turns exaggerated when he starts to laugh. He has a nice laugh.

Not as nice as Ben's, but nice.

“Oh, Rey,” Jake begins, using his scalpel to spread open the incision so that they can start examining Hopper’s insides. “I meant to say earlier, but that sketch you did of Anakin Vader during class yesterday was really, really cool.”

Rey feels heat rush to her cheeks. “Oh, thanks! I did a project on him last semester and just found him really interesting to draw. I know that’s kinda dark.”

He shakes his head at her, frog seemingly forgotten. “It’s not! Well, I mean Vader being a terrorist and all is, but I mean I’ve never seen anyone draw like that before.”

She can feel her blush deepening at his compliment. It’s not the first time he’s said something sweet about her art before, and it makes her feel nice.

Not as nice as when Ben does, but nice.

Something nudges in the back of Rey’s head. She watches as her lab partner goes back to poking their frog, and it occurs to her in a rush that she’s compared nearly everything about Jake to Ben.

In fact...she glances around at the other boys in her Biology class, thinks of the varsity boys cross country team she’d seen running around the campus while she’d wait for the afternoon bus. Some (okay, a lot) of them were super cute. She and Rose agreed that, so far, the attractive boys were the most pleasant part of high school.

And yet, she always seems to compare them to—

A realization, not yet fully formed, inches into her thoughts and her eyes widen. She sits up straight in her lab stool, right hand clenching around her scalpel. She shuts that daunting thought out quickly and with panic. Rey is not quite ready to face what it means.

Instead, she lets her knee brush against Jake’s, and gives him a direct smile when he catches her eye.

## Chapter End Notes

I think it’s time for our Rey to go out on a date. Don’t y’all?

I hope you guys enjoyed this fluffy update, and the last few fluffy updates. Let them nourish you, my friends. Ah, the next few chapters are going to be interesting indeed.

Once again, I feel like I can’t thank you guys enough for giving this fic a chance, for reading it and sharing your love for it. Thank you for continuing to be awesome! This has been such a rewarding experience so far.

If you liked let me know?

## 2005, part two

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Hope dangles on a string  
Like slow-spinning redemption  
Winding in and winding out  
The shine of it has caught my eye

“Vindicated” by Dashboard Confessional

\*\*

Rose is giving Rey an appreciative nod. “I like it.”

Rey glances down at her attire, trying not to shift from one foot to the other in nerves. “Yeah? You don’t think it’s, like, too casual?”

Rey can tell Rose is amused, but her best friend is too kind to outright laugh at her. “I mean, you two are just going to the mall. Besides, it’s your second date anyway.”

This is true. Jake had finally asked her out on a date the last week of school before summer vacation started, and she’d said yes so quick it’d been a little embarrassing. His dad had driven them to a nice Italian restaurant uptown, and they’d spent two hours discussing their summer plans and nervously smiling at each other. And at the end of the evening, as they waited outside the restaurant for his dad, he’d kissed her.

It had been very nice, and quick. Perhaps not *magical* like the movies made kisses out to be, but nice as far as first kisses go.

That had been about two weeks ago, and Jake had asked her over AIM if she’d wanted to hang out at the mall today as a second date. She’d waited a whole two minutes before sending back a “sure”.

Rey flicks invisible dust from her jeans and tugs at the hem of the navy-blue peasant top that Rose had let her borrow. She chews on her bottom lip nervously. “Do you think he’ll try and kiss me again?”

“I hope so!” There’s a twinkle in Rose’s eye now and she giggles from where she’s perched on the edge of her bed. “It’s been nice to live vicariously through someone other than my Sims.”

Rey laughs a little. “Are you going over to Finn’s while I’m gone?”

Rose nods, expression darkening a little. “Uh huh.”

“Is he still acting weird?”

“Uh huh.”

Finn and Rose’s relationship had shifted a little after Rey had missed the 8th grade Valentine’s Dance. Finn had started being...*softer* to Rose, somehow, and had seemed more comfortable around her as a whole. And he’d started farting around Rey again, just like he had when they’d first started being friends at the start of middle school. Rey took this as a fabulous sign.

But in the past couple of months Finn has started acting weird. And he’s entirely mum about the topic whenever Rey brings it up.

Rey sits down next to Rose on her bed. “Are you going to talk to him about it today?”

Rose sighs and shrugs, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I don’t know, Rey. Every time I try to ask him about what’s going on, he clams up and starts getting defensive. I don’t want to bring it up and him be weird for the whole time we’re hanging out.”

Rey wipes her sweaty palms against the legs of her jeans and glances at the clock on her bedside table. Ten minutes until Jake would be here. “Maybe you should ask his Nana.”

“No.”

Rey frowned. “Why not?”

Rose snorts and cracks a smile, nudging Rey lightly with her elbow. “Because, if she knows, she’ll tell me *exactly* what’s going on.”

“Precisely!”

Both girls dissolve into giggles, and some of Rey’s nerves are relieved.

\*\*

Walking around the mall with Jake turns out to be a lot more fun than Rey had been expecting. He holds her hand whenever they’re walking side by side together, and he doesn’t seem to mind that Rey’s palms are stupidly sweaty.

They walk into Hot Topic and Rey immediately leads him over to the wall covered in different band t-shirts. She starts pointing to all the ones she’d buy if she could afford it, and scoffing at the ones that featured what were, in her humble opinion, garbage bands.

Jake listens to her music ramblings with a pleasant smile. He runs his hand along a stack of Underoath shirts, although Rey can tell he’s not actually interested. “That’s cool that you’re so into music,” he says, taking her hand again. “Honestly, I mostly listen to Top 40.”

Rey blinks at him.

Oy vey.

They make their way to the back of the store, and Rey laughs at the collection of creepy dolls that are featured on the back wall. She grabs one and turns to Jake. He shrinks back warily.

“I hate dolls,” he admits.

Rey decides to spare his manhood and not giggle at him. “I’m surprised I’m not. My older brother made me watch Chucky once when I was a lot younger.”

Jake raises an eyebrow. “I didn’t know you had a brother.”

And that’s because Rey has avoided mentioning Ben at every turn. It didn’t feel right to talk about him when she was on a date with someone else.

As soon as Rey thinks this, she realizes how odd that is, but crams this thought down with all the other uncomfortable realizations she’s been having about Ben lately.

“Well.” Her gaze flicks to the ceiling speaker blaring crappy metal. “Ben isn’t *technically* my brother. I’ve just known him since I was seven.”

Jake nods. “I get it. He’s *like* your brother. My older sister has been best friends with the same girl since she was five, so I know where you’re coming from.”

“Y-Yeah.”

A confident expression crosses her date’s face and he steps very close to her. “Well, what does your *brother* think about you having a boyfriend?”

She can feel her face turning red. But she shrugs, trying to play it off as no big deal. “He’s totally cool with it.”

This is a lie.

Ben has no idea she’s out on a date right now. And she hadn’t told him about the first one either.

He would be completely ridiculous about it; this is something she knows intrinsically. She figures, what Ben doesn’t know won’t hurt him.

Jake buys her a pair of black and white spiky rubber earrings, which Rey thinks is very sweet.

They sit on a bench outside for the last half hour before Jake’s dad is supposed to pick them up. It’s hot, but not stiflingly so.

She lets him kiss her again, and this one is decidedly less chaste than the first one.

It soon turns into what Rey must imagine a make-out session is. Kissing like this is kind of odd, but not in a bad way. In fact, after a few minutes of fumbling, Jake’s mouth lands on her neck, and Rey actually finds this new sensation quite delightful.

All the talk of “neck kisses making you tingle” that Rose had shown her in the smutty Harry Potter fanfiction she read did not let Rey down in this regard.

She swatted Jake’s hand away when he tried to touch her boob, though.

\*\*

The next day Rey goes over to Ben’s for what has become their typical Summer Sunday Movie Night with Poe.

She sits at their itty-bitty kitchen table with a BB-8 purring in her lap, wearing one of Poe’s baggy sweaters since the A/C in their apartment always makes her freeze.

Ben and Poe are arguing back and forth on the best way to brown meat for tacos, and Rey watches them with amusement. There’s white paint smeared in Ben’s hair. He must’ve gotten paint on his fingers and then run his hand through his hair. Rey smiles, feeling a little warm. It’s...endearing. Yeah, endearing.

Poe wins the argument, and Ben throws his hands up in sheer irritation before walking away and sitting in the chair opposite of Rey.

“How did your meeting with Luke go?” Rey asks, running a hand along BB-8’s spine. The cat arches his back happily.

Ben sighs, holding his head up with his hand. He looks tired. “Alright, I guess.”

That means it had gone poorly. Ben had mentioned to her last week that Luke had come to him and asked if he’d like to collaborate on a project, one professional artist with another. Ben had agreed, even though he knew better than anyone how different he and Luke’s approach to art is.

“That bad, huh?” Rey gives him an empathetic smile and Ben’s lips quirk a little in return.

There’s a loud sizzling noise from the kitchen and Poe shouts in pain. BB-8 leaps out of Rey’s lap and trots over to Poe, bushy tail held high. Rey rubs at the spot on her leg where he’d accidentally clawed her, and feels the baggy sweater slip a little down her shoulder in the process.

Rey can feel the bare skin of her neck and elbow as soon as it’s exposed, and her first instinct is to wonder if Ben is looking at it or not. She glances over at him and feels her heartrate spike when she realizes with a jolt that he *is* looking.

Except his expression is growing darker and darker with each passing second.

“Rey.” His voice is eerily calm. “What is *that*?”

Her hand immediately goes to her neck and she feels her eyes go wide.

She’d forgotten about the hickey Jake had given her yesterday.

“Um.”

“Is that a *hickey*?”

She lets her hand fall away and she shrugs, feeling defensive. “Maybe. So what?”

Ben looks like he has no idea where to begin. “What do you mean ‘*so what?*’ Who the fuck are you letting give you hickey’s?! When did this even happen?” His brown eyes narrow. “What’s his name?”

Rey gets to her feet and so does Ben. “It’s just a boy from school! It’s no big deal. We were just on a date. Honestly, you’re getting upset over nothing.”

“It’s not nothing, kid!” Ben slams a fist down against the table, causing it to rattle. Rey bristles and crosses her arms over her chest, feeling her own rage beginning to rise to the surface. Ben gestures to her flippantly. “Since when do you go out on dates and shit and not fucking tell me?! I don’t know anything about this guy!”

She opens her mouth to shout back and Ben turns his body sharply to face Poe. “*You*,” he growls, pointing an accusatory finger at his roommate, “are too quiet. Did you know?”

Poe looks horrified at having been called out because of *course* Rey had told *him*. He holds his hands up and shakes his head. “Look, I’m not getting involved in this.”

Ben stares at him for a long moment, and Rey can feel the waves of fury rolling off of him. It’s almost suffocating. Then he slowly turns back to her. “I’m the only one you didn’t tell.” He states it, doesn’t ask it.

There’s hurt there. But Rey is too caught up in her own emotions to feel anything other than indignant anger. She feels her mouth curl down into a snarl. “Yeah, because I knew you’d be —” she gestures to him mockingly “—like *this*.”

Ben takes a small step toward her. “What if this guy turned out to be a piece of shit? *Turns* out to be a piece of shit? What if he touched you and you didn’t like it, or what if he *hurt* you?” He *snarls* that. “You’re still really young, you don’t—”

Rey pokes a finger into his solid chest. “I am perfectly capable of judging the character of my dates for myself, thank you very much!”

“Listen, kid, you’re only fifteen and I’m just trying to—”

“Well, you *don’t* have to!”

“Yes, Rey, I do!”

“*No, you don’t!* You’re not my brother, Ben!”

It pops out of her mouth before she can really give it considerable thought. Out of the corner of her eye she sees Poe wince in the kitchen. She shifts a little and takes a tiny step back, all the rage that had been boiling through her moments ago cooling rapidly.



Ben, to his credit, doesn't react right away. He stares down at her for a long moment, eyes unblinking. He reminds Rey of a thunder cloud that hasn't unleashed its storm. Yet.

Rey braces herself for more yelling.

He finally exhales, long and slow. "Guess I'm not."

Ben turns and walks out of the living room and disappears into the hallway. Rey continues to stand there, and finally she looks over at Poe. He's dumping burned taco meat into the trash, but catches her eye as he straightens.

Poe doesn't have to say anything for Rey to know exactly what's going through his mind.

"I didn't take it too far," she snaps. "He was the one overreacting."

Poe opens his mouth to say something when loud music coming from Ben's room makes them both turn their heads toward the hallway. Except it's not angry, pounding music like Rey assumed he'd probably play. It's something a little softer, and she recognizes the band as one he only listens to when he's particularly upset.

Sighing, Rey drags herself over to the hallway and into the open doorway of Ben's bedroom. He's sitting at his computer, worn paperback in hand.

He dutifully ignores her presence until she clears her throat. He looks up sharply at that.

"I know it's uh, a little early for me to go home, but I don't know. You can let me drive, maybe." She shrugs, refusing to meet his eye and feeling distinctly guilty. She's still annoyed by this whole situation, and Ben is being an overprotective idiot about everything, but at least they can talk during the car ride. They'll probably be fine by the time he drops her off at the home.

He nods and sets the paperback down on his desk before standing up and walking over to her. Rey expects him to reach for his car keys, but he reaches for the doorknob instead.

"Get Poe to drive you home." Then Ben slams the door in her face.

## Chapter End Notes

Oh, Rey. I think you hurt Ben's feelwings. I had a ton of those spiky rubber earrings from Hot Topic. Might still have some somewhere, actually.

As always, thank you all for reading and commenting on this fic! I love reading what you guys have to say about everything! Some of you are on point and very insightful! You guys continue to be the best <3

If you liked let me know!



## 2005, part three

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Free my mind, levitate  
Don't let any of those fuckers in my headspace  
Let me go my own way  
Burn the rest of them that try to keep me enchained

“Headspace” by Velvet Revolver

\*\*

Rey hasn't spoken to Ben in nearly two months.

(Rey is not keeping track of the days, hours, and minutes. That would be ridiculous.)

(Forty-four days, eight hours, and thirty-seven minutes.)

At first, Rey had been too caught up in her own anger to be too upset that Ben was avoiding her as much as she was avoiding him. They sat across the room from each other in their painting class on Tuesdays, and Rey snapped at Luke every time he asked her what was going on between the two of them. She'd told him that Ben was just a big, dumb idiot.

She could tell that Luke knew there was more to the story, however. But he wouldn't get it from her.

But after the first month the anger had finally started to subside. She stared at Ben out of the corner of her eye whenever they were in the same room together, and she even debated showing up at his apartment claiming she'd left some CD's or art supplies there. But her stubbornness ultimately kept her from reaching out.

But last week, when they'd reached day thirty-eight without speaking, she'd been sitting on her bed and looking at all of Ben's drawings from jail that were still taped to her wall. Some of the corners of the notebook paper were curling, and some of the subjects in Ben's drawings were less than pleasant, but they were drawn for *her*.

She'd burst into tears sitting there on her bed, and Rose had immediately woken up from her afternoon nap, crawled onto Rey's bed with her and rubbed Rey's back while she hiccupped.

“Maybe you should talk to him,” Rose had suggested. Her best friend had sighed, hand moving from her back to clasp her shoulder. “Ben has been an important part of your life since I've known you, Rey. You shouldn't let one fight get in the way of, uh. What the two of you have. You know, your friendship.”

Rey had looked at Rose then, gaze still blurry from unshed tears. “I know I shouldn't,” was all she had been able to say.

But something still kept her from calling Ben, from approaching him at the studio, from showing up at his apartment. She realized it was her own pride.

She understood then, why pride was one of the seven deadly sins.

\*\*

It's the last Saturday of her summer vacation, and Rey is using the afternoon to do chores around the home so that she can earn some spending money from Maz. She'd like new jeans for the start of the year, and maybe some charcoal for drawing and new paintbrushes.

She's dusting the main room, TV set to CNN in the background. She runs an old, stained dusting rag across a long table that Maz likes to keep knick-knacks on and tries not to let herself get too depressed over starting her sophomore year in two days. Besides, she's going over to Jake's in a few hours to have dinner with his family. She's met them a couple of times now, and they're very nice people. She tries to dwell on that, tries to feel excited, but she just...can't.

She's wearing slightly-too-big cargo shorts she'd gotten at Good Will for a couple of bucks, and a massive, purple Blink-182 t-shirt with an angry bunny on it. She'd only gone into Ben's room once the whole time he'd been in jail, and it was to sheepishly steal this old shirt of his that she figured he wouldn't miss. It had provided comfort at the time. Now, she liked the way it hung off her shoulders and exposed the black straps of her sports bra. There were tons of holes around the collar and a tear in the armpit, but Rey doesn't care. She likes wearing it. It's soft.

It's Ben's.

She's mostly been tuning out the reporters droning on and on in the background, but inhales a sharp breath when she hears them mention Senator Organa. She turns around, leaving the dusting rag sitting on the table, and moves behind the couch to stare at the TV.

“—not a great day for Senator Organa. Breaking news out of Washington has revealed that the senator's biological father is none other than Anakin Vader, the terrorist who bombed the White House Easter Egg Roll in 1969, killing over twenty children and nearly assassinating President Nixon. His speech while taking the stand during his court sentencing is still considered infamous to this day. Whether or not the senator and her brother, esteemed artist Luke Skywalker, knew of their parentage remains unknown. Neither parties have been reached for comment—”

Rey sprints upstairs, dusting forgotten, and rushes into her room. She ignores Rose's cry of concern when she flings open the drawer to her bedside table and grabs the few keys that she has. She's out of the room again in seconds, brain barely keeping up with her body as she flies back down the stairs and out the door.

There's really no time to be irritated over the fact that she can drive but technically *can't* drive as she runs to the shed behind the home and extracts her old bike. She trots it to the driveway and then gets on, pedaling harder than she ever has in her *life*.

Sheer anxiety keeps the needed adrenaline flowing through her veins. She remembers months ago when she'd written that essay on Vader, how she had taken to drawing out his portrait because of how fascinated she'd been by him and the crimes he had committed. She remembers sketching out his scowl, the shape of his eyes, and thinking vaguely that they reminded her a little of Ben.

Shame and sadness fill her, because some part of her subconscious had picked up on something that she never dreamed could be true.

Rey can feel sweat pricking at her temples, and she's pretty sure she forgot to put on deodorant in her haste to get out of the house, but she doesn't care. She doesn't care about anything other than getting to Ben's place as quickly as possible. It doesn't matter that they're technically in a fight. It doesn't matter that she hasn't spoken to him in weeks, or that she smells like sweat and dust right now. None of that matters at all.

Because Ben Solo needs her.

\*\*

The apartment is dark when she lets herself in. Rey had banged on the door for two solid minutes, and when no one had answered she'd taken it upon herself to use the key Poe had made for her a couple of years ago. BB-8 greets her as soon as she walks inside.

"Ben?" she calls out as soon the door closes behind her. She waits with bated breath, but there is no answer. The apartment is silent except for BB-8's insistent meowing.

She scoops up the fluffy cat and moves them over to the couch, turning on a lamp as she passes it. She sits. And sits. And sits. She's too nervous to put on music, and she can't bring herself to turn on the TV either. For some reason, she can't disrupt the silence that's echoing about this space.

Eventually she stretches out on the couch, intent on waiting here as long as need be. BB-8 jumps on top of her chest and circles a couple of times, trying to find a comfortable position. She winces and swats at him a little when he steps directly on her breast, but the cat takes it as an invitation to headbutt her palm and ask for petting.

Rey sighs and scratches behind his ears, shifting a little as he finally curls up on her chest. The weight is soothing, and he's warm.

She's not sure when she falls asleep.

Rey is awakened sometime later to the front door of the apartment banging open. BB-8 leaps off of her chest and she sits up hurriedly, wincing a little when the overhead light is turned on.

"Rey!"

She looks up and there's Poe, helping a very bedraggled looking Ben into the apartment. He kicks the front door closed behind him, Ben's right arm slung across his shoulders. "Rey!"

What are you going here?"

"Uh..." She moves to stand, but stalls as she continues to take in the sight of Ben. He's sweaty, his eyes are glassy, and there's a little bit of blood on his shirt. "What happened? Did he get in a fight?" She moves aside as Poe leads Ben to the couch and helps him sit down.

"No," Poe says as he straightens up. His hair is slightly mussed, and he looks a lot less put together than normal. "No, not a fight. He just smashed a bottle."

Rey's lips part and she looks back at Ben, who still has said nothing. He's watching her, eyes bloodshot, face blank. "Is he...is he—"

"Ben is very, very drunk right now. It was the least I could do." Poe rubs the back of his neck and sighs. "I'm assuming you've seen the news? Wait, of course you have. Why else would you be here."

Rey nods, wanting to move closer to Ben, to help him, although she has no real idea how. Besides, she's still frozen in place by the fact that his gaze is still fixated on her.

"Rey," he says, voice slurring badly. "Put on music."

Poe rolls his eyes and gestures for Rey to sit down instead. "It's okay, I'll put on something real quick—"

"No." Ben's voice is loud, probably much louder than he'd meant it to be. "I only want Rey to do it."

She immediately turns to the record player and their collection of records. Now, this she could certainly do, and something in her chest warms at the thought that Ben hasn't snapped at her, hasn't demanded she leave his apartment. That instead he's insisting only she can choose the music. She quickly selects a band she imagines Ben will appreciate in this moment, but when she puts it on he gives her no reaction.

Instead, Ben just stares down at the carpet, swaying a little. Rey watches as Poe manages to get him to drink down a glass of water, but Ben looks listless. She's never really seen him this way, and it scares her.

Ben is still staring down at the floor when he says, "Are you still mad at me?"

It feels as if her heart has clenched. Rey finds herself wanting to reach out and touch him, but she refrains. "No," she answers honestly. "I thought *you* were still mad."

He shakes his head before finally looking at her again. "Of course not. Just thought...just thought you wanted space."

Rey smiles a little, pathetically resisting the urge to cry. For some reason, she's not even surprised. Of course he would assume that she was the one who was still angry, and of course he would give her space until she came to him.

She once again curses her pride.

Ben groans, mumbles something about how hot it is, and grabs the bottom of his shirt. He lifts it up and uses it to wipe the sweat off his face and neck. Normally Rey would be disgusted by this sort of thing, but instead her eyes sweep down to take in the bottom of Ben's bare stomach.

She swallows at the muscle there and feels a flush start in her chest and travel to her cheeks at the trail of dark hair that runs from the bottom of his navel to the waistband of his pants. If Rey had bothered to look at Poe in that moment, she would have found him silently rolling his eyes, shaking his head, and sighing deeply.

Ben closes his eyes, lets her shirt fall back down, and leans his head back against the couch, totally oblivious to what he's just done. "You can sit down, you know."  
Rey sits, trying to erase the image of bare Ben stomach from her mind and failing miserably.

"Nice music choice," Ben says, slur still there but not as bad as before. His eyes remain closed. "But I've come to expect that by now."

Rey smiles, settling back into the couch. Frankly, Ben looks like he needs nothing more than a hot shower and a good night's sleep. But he's talking to her. He's not mad at her. He still cares.

She could kiss him.

Wait. What is happening?

A knock at the door makes all of them jump, and Poe moves toward the door and opens it a crack. "Senator!" he exclaims, stepping aside as Leia comes barging in, her massive, bushy bearded bodyguard right behind her. She moves to rush to her son. "Ben! I've been trying to reach you—"

"Did you know?" Ben's eyes are open now, and he takes in his mother, face hard.

The senator pauses about five feet away from the couch, and she works her mouth in the same way that Ben does when he's upset. "Ben, listen—"

"Did. You. Know?"

Rey watches as Ben's mother shifts her designer purse from one shoulder to the other. She looks frazzled, which is no surprise given what day she's had. "I-I did. I wanted you to be older when you found out, wanted to know you could handle the information. I didn't want this to hurt you, or for you to equate yourself to—"

"Get out."

Leia stills, eyes going just a little wide. She looks as if she's not sure what to say. She does not move.

Ben's gaze is fixed on her, and it's almost as if he's not absurdly intoxicated. "You're not moving. I said get out."

Leia looks increasingly frustrated—and maybe a little heartbroken. “Ben—”

*“GET OUT OF MY APARTMENT!”*

The silence after Ben’s outburst is deafening. His chest is heaving in emotion and his hands have curled into fists. There’s something horrible and nasty and rotting in his eyes, and Rey hopes beyond hope that Ben never looks at her the way he’s currently looking at his mother.

Leia’s bodyguard steps forward, clearly sensing all the tension permeating the atmosphere. Leia moves out a hand to still him, shaking her head. “It’s alright, Chewie. We’ll go.” She gives her son one last long, lingering look, and then leaves, hulking bodyguard right behind her.

The door shuts and Poe audibly groans from where he’s standing in the kitchen. “You know what, *I* need a drink.”

Rey laughs, and some of the tension diffuses. Something tingles in the back of her mind, as if her brain is trying to remind her of something...

Ben is staring at her again. The expression on his face, in his gaze, is inscrutable, and Rey could almost scream. She gulps, feels herself beginning to blush because why is Ben Solo looking at her like that and why oh why is her brain showing her the image of his naked stomach *again*—

He clears his throat and she nearly jumps.

“So that’s where that shirt went.”

Rey blinks at him. She thinks for a moment he’s going to ask for it back, but instead a small smile ghosts across his lips, so brief she nearly misses it. Moments later he’s fast asleep.

It’s not until an hour later, when Maz is giving her a thorough tongue lashing and grounding her for a month, that Rey realizes with a pang of panic that she forgot all about her dinner with Jake.

## Chapter End Notes

So yeah. Ben finds out through the news that Vader is his granddad in canon too. All the parenting awards for Leia. I also can’t imagine that this will be great for Ben and his relationship with Luke either.

I know I say this every chapter, but that’s only because I freaking mean it. You guys are awesome. Every comment warms my heart. I love y’all’s enthusiasm for this fic and being able to converse with you guys about this story genuinely makes my day. Thank you guys so much for continuing to read this fic and share your love for it.



This might not be all for 2005. I'm undecided. Anyway, if you liked let me know?

## 2005, part four

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

You make me laugh  
Give me your autograph  
Can I ride with you in your BMW?  
You can sail with me in my yellow submarine

“Supersonic” by Oasis

\*\*

Rey always has two servings of whatever Finn’s Nana cooks for her, and tonight is no exception.

It’s a Friday night in late September, and it’s just Rey and Finn hanging out alone in his rec room. Rose is back at the home with a stomach bug, and Rey loves her best friend dearly but...

“You’re welcome to stay here if you don’t want to risk contamination,” Finn jokes, bowl of ice cream balanced in his lap as he lazily surfs through the channels. Rey mindlessly pats her too full stomach and flips through some of Finn’s *Bleach* volumes that he’s insisting on her borrowing. She’s not quite sure how to break it to him that, aside from appreciating the art, anime and manga just aren’t her thing. Although she does have a soft spot for *Inuyasha*, but that’s only because Rose is so obsessed with it.

“Thanks,” she says, closing the manga and setting it aside. “I think it’ll be alright to sleep in my own room, though.”

“Suit yourself,” Finn mumbles around a mouthful of ice cream. “I’m glad you got to come hang out tonight! You usually miss Fridays now.”

Rey nods and gives him a small smile, trying not to let on to how disappointed she actually is to be here. Fridays are *always* for Ben, but he’s out of town meeting up with a potential client, and she can’t begrudge him that.

Hopefully a new project will improve Ben’s mood.

She pulls a blanket across the back of the couch and drapes it over herself, and an hour later she and Finn are deep into a discussion of what their Hogwarts House would be. Finn is a Gryffindor, and he asserts Rey is as well. They both agree that Rose is a Ravenclaw, and Nana would be a Hufflepuff.

(Rey frets in the back of her head over which House Ben would be in, Gryffindor or Slytherin, and is agonized when she realizes he won’t perfectly fit into one or the other.)

Finn lets out an exceptionally loud burp, and moments later Rey braces herself and then belches in his direction. A race ensues and, just like in sixth grade, Rey is faster at burping the alphabet than Finn. They're both laughing hysterically by the time said race ends, and Finn smacks her with a couch pillow, other hand wiping tears of mirth from his eyes.

Then Finn sighs, and the atmosphere in the room changes.

"Rey," he says, staring down at his long empty ice cream bowl. "Can I...can I talk to you about something?"

Rey pauses, having been in the process of taking off her socks. "Of course." She sits up, eyebrows furrowing in concern.

Finn still can't look at her. "You know how you and Rose have been asking me all summer what's wrong?"

Rey's heart starts to hammer. She and Rose have been worrying over Finn for months now, over whatever it is he's clearly been hiding from them. They'd stopped asking when he'd gotten genuinely angry with them a week before school started, figuring he'd tell them when he's ready.

Apparently he's ready. Rey tucks her hair behind her ears and nods, reaching over and giving Finn's shoulder a quick squeeze of reassurance. "Yeah?"

Finn glances up at her finally, eyes a little wide with apprehension. He swallows nervously. "Well, okay. It's just, I was kind of having a crisis."

"About?"

Finn groans and covers his face with his hands. His next words are muffled. "Well, you remember in June when my Nana made me volunteer at her church's Vacation Bible School—don't you dare laugh Rey, I had no choice! Anyway, there was a guy there, and his name was, um, actually it doesn't matter. But there was a guy there on the same volunteer team as me, and he was really nice and liked manga and stuff and I thought he was he was kind of—I mean, he wasn't ugly—"

Something clicks in Rey's head. She smiles, but says nothing, knowing these are Finn's words to get out. She simply squeezes his shoulder again.

"—*definitely* not ugly actually, um. But anyway, at the end of camp he, uh, he kissed me in the supply room when we were supposed to be getting more beads for craft time. And I...I liked it. Yeah. So, I guess what I'm trying to say is... I'm a little gay. Maybe? I haven't kissed a girl yet but that I feel like I'll like that too."

Finn is biting his lip now as he looks at Rey for her reaction, cheeks blushing.

Rey can feel immense delight bubbling up from her chest, and it comes out of her in the form of a giant grin. "Finn, are you currently telling me that your first gay experience was at *church camp*?"

He cringes and nods.

Rey laughs and then throws her arms around him, hugging him close. “I thought you were going to tell me something horrible, like you thought about murdering kittens or something.” She pulls back and flicks his nose. “Rose is going to be so relieved that you’re just bi.”

Finn’s face falls a little. “Rey, please don’t tell Rose.”

The smile disappears from her face. “What? Why?”

He squirms, obviously uncomfortable. “It’s just that...it’s different with Rose then it is with you.”

“Rose won’t care that you’re—”

Finn shakes his head firmly. “That’s not why I don’t want her to know. Rey, please, promise you won’t tell Rose.” He holds out his pinky, and Rey bites at her lip as she regards it. Finn knows how seriously she takes pinky swears. She sighs and hooks her pinky with his.

\*\*

“You’re speeding.”

“Am not! We’ve only just left the apartment complex!” But Rey applies a little pressure to the brakes anyway. She can’t look at Ben in order to see his expression, but she can hear him flipping through the sleeves of his CD case.

Rey hasn’t seen him in nearly two weeks and has been looking forward to today since Ben left to meet his new client. Something inside of her had ached wonderfully when she’d first seen him today, and she’d found herself only managing to give him a one-armed hug. He’d smelled so good, so like *Ben*, and she’d been able to feel herself turning bright red. If Ben noticed anything amiss, he made no comment on it.

“Old music or new music?” Ben asks. His hand is already poised over a CD, but he’s still ultimately letting Rey pick.

“Old.” She smiles when he immediately pulls out the CD his hand had been hovering over and pops it into the CD player. Rey finds herself humming along when the music begins. It’s good driving music, she thinks.

“What’s your new client like?” she asks, trying not to keep glancing away from the road in order to look at Ben. It’s easily the hardest part of driving.

“Interesting,” he says, and she can hear the curiosity in his voice. “He definitely has some fresh ideas for the type of stuff he wants me to paint.”

There’s a pause.

“He also pays *super* well.”

They pull up to a red light and Rey drums her fingers against the steering wheel. “Oh, good! You can buy me food.” She grins at him and waggles her eyebrows.

Ben sighs.

A half hour passes, and Rey peppers him with questions about his new project, growing increasingly frustrated when he consistently dodges answering her.

“Well, it’s not like I can watch you work on it at the studio anymore!” she snaps, stopping at a red light and shooting over a heated glare. She regrets mentioning Luke’s studio though, when she sees the look on his face.

He stares straight ahead, eyes dark, body language moody.

Rey slumps a little in the driver’s seat, wishing she hadn’t said anything. Ben found out about Vader not quite a month ago and has not been back to the studio since. Not even to collect his things. Rey had assumed he just needed some time away, and then things would be fine.

But she can see, now, that things are still decidedly *not* fine.

The light turns green. Frustrated, she slams her palm against the center of the steering wheel, honking her horn at the car in front of her when it doesn’t move.

“Careful, Rey,” Ben begins, sounding serious. “It’s not good to be an emotional dri—”

But when the driver in the other car gives Rey the finger, Ben starts shouting too.

\*\*

They pull off to the side of a back road about an hour away from Ben’s apartment. The trees part here, and the skyline is already beginning to turn from blue to the lightest orange. It’s a good place to draw the sunset, Ben says.

Rey sits on the hood of Ben’s car, armed with a sketch pad and colored pencils, giddy. Her hand seems to float across the paper on its own accord, her eyes moving back and forth between the sky and her work seamlessly.

She almost forgets Ben is even there, but when he clears his throat she jerks, coming out of her trance.

He’s a few feet from her, leaning up against the car and sipping a can of soda. “I’ve been meaning to ask...” He sounds hesitant, like he’s approaching a scared animal. “Are you still dating that guy?”

The beginnings of a smile start to form on Rey’s face.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” Ben adds quickly, glancing over at her. “I was just curious.”

Rey presses her lips together so that he won't see how amused she is by his awkwardness. "No, it's alright! I...I think he dumped me."

"You *think* he dumped you?"

"Yeah. He blocked me on AIM and Myspace, and the few times I tried to call his house his mom said he couldn't come to the phone." Rey shrugs.

Ben nods slowly. He tilts his head back and finishes the last of the soda. "Well, you don't seem too broken up about it. That's good. I might have had to kill him."

Rey isn't entirely sure if he's joking or not. "Yeah, well..." She can't quite bring herself to tell him that Jake probably dumped her because she accidentally ditched him to, well... To be with Ben. Frankly, telling Ben that would be mortifying. "Honestly, he was boring anyway." She sighs. "But cute."

Her eyes immediately flick over to Ben's. She grips the pencil in her right hand a little tighter, swallowing.

She's not sure exactly what reaction she had been expecting (or wanting), but Ben Solo chuckling was not it. "What's so funny?" she grumbles.

He shakes his head, still laughing a little, and Rey feels like it's been forever since she's seen him like this. "It's just so *high school*."

"Oh, hush up," Rey snaps. "My one relationship has already outlasted all of yours."

He scowls out at her, but after a beat rolls his eyes. "Fair enough," he relents.

Rey feels a burning desire to press further with this subject, but doesn't. Instead she shifts a little in order to get comfortable again, and bends back over her sketch pad.

Fifteen or so minutes go by in companionable silence, and Rey finds herself quickening her pace, trying to outdraw the setting sun.

"You know," Ben says, finally breaking their quiet, "it's been a long time since I've seen you draw like this." His voice is soft.

"That's because you're never at the studio anymore. You should come back." It pops out of her mouth too quickly, and Rey nearly winces. Even still, she means the words and doesn't flinch when Ben jerks his gaze away from her.

"I can't."

"Of *course* you can!"

"No, Rey. I can't."

She feels herself growing angry and is half tempted to leap off the car in order to stand in front of him to yell. "If you would just *talk* to Luke—"

Ben slams the empty soda can down on the hood, crushing it in one swift, violent motion. Rey jumps, the rest of her sentence dying in her mouth.

He squeezes his eyes shut. "Sorry," he says quietly.

"It's okay." Her voice is small. After a moment she slowly reaches out and holds out her hand, gesturing with her fingers. Ben sends her a look of confusion and hands her the crushed can wordlessly.

"I was thinking, we should get pizza on the way back." She turns the crushed can in her left hand, a little surprised by how utterly flat it is. She subtly tilts and takes aim. "You're buying."

Then with her right thumb and finger she flicks the can at Ben's face. It hits him on the chin.

## Chapter End Notes

Thought I'd leave everyone with a little fluff before we head into 2006...

Once again, thank you to everyone who shows love for this fic. It's so encouraging to hear what you guys have to say! I send you all hugs and cookies.

If you liked let me know?

# 2006, part one

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The coast disappeared when the sea drowned the sun  
I knew no words to share it with anyone  
The boundaries of language I quietly cursed  
And all the different names for the same thing

“Different Names For the Same Thing” by Death Cab For Cutie

\*\*

It’s a Friday in January and very, very cold. Rey pulls her jacket tighter around herself in order to keep out the chill, despite the fact that she’s in class, Finn and Rose sitting on either side of her.

Rey had no idea going into this semester that Health class would be her favorite by far. But she hadn’t shared a class with both of her best friends since high school started, and the guarantee of being able to hang out with them both at the same time every day was enormously uplifting.

Today all three of them are quiet and drowsy as a documentary on drug addiction plays at the front of the classroom. Rose is taking notes every once in awhile, eyes sleepy, and Finn quietly copies everything that she writes down. Rey has been doodling turtles on the corner of her own notes, but places her pencil down as she’s roped more and more into the documentary.

A reporter is following around heroin addicts, interviewing them, watching them as they get high. There’s track marks on their skin, their cheeks are sunken in, and there’s a heaviness and sadness in their eyes that for all intents and purposes shouldn’t be there.

Minutes pass, the documentary continues to play, and something prickles at the back of Rey’s memory. There’s a flash of a woman’s bare arms in a short-sleeved shirt. Her mother’s arms. They had always, always been covered in what Rey had thought were bruises. Vague, blurry images of her parents start flitting through her head. Them passing out on the couch sitting up. How they’d scratch relentlessly at their skin. How thin, so thin they always were. How they’d leave for such long hours at a time. How eventually they left and never came back.

Rey tries not to think about her parents too much. On the surface she can continue living her life in ignorance, thinking in the back of her head that maybe one day they’ll materialize, healthy and loving and with an excuse that will explain away her abandonment. But beneath the surface lies ugly truths, nastiness that makes her eyes swim with tears.

That even before they physically left her, they’d long deserted her in order to chase after a high. She had never been important enough for them to stick around for. She had never been



important enough for them to love.

\*\*

Rey doesn't speak much on the bus ride home. Rose keeps glancing at her with worried eyes, but Rey wordlessly pulls out her iPod and selects a song that seems to fit her sullen mood and the dreary gray sky outside. She puts in the right earbud and hands the left to Rose, who slips it in without saying anything. Her mouth does, however, press into a worried line.

Finally, when they're half way home and Rey has repeated the same melancholy song three times, Rose gently places her hand over Rey's. "Are you okay?" she asks softly.

For a brief moment Rey considers lying and giving Rose a smile. It'd be easier to pretend that everything is fine. But this is Rose, and Rey can't quite bring herself to lie like that. So she shakes her head and takes a deep breath, trying to keep her chin from wobbling.

Rose doesn't press any further, only lays her head on Rey's shoulder and keeps her hand covering hers.

\*\*

Rey breathes out a sigh of relief when Ben's cellphone goes straight to voicemail. Canceling will be easier if she doesn't actually have to hear his voice. "Hey, Ben. It's Rey. Listen, I know we're supposed to...well, it's Friday. But I don't feel well so I think I'm going to stay home. Sorry. Yeah. Anyway, bye."

She hangs up and sets Maz's cordless phone down beside her on her bed. She's leaning against the wall, shoulders slumped. She feels like she could sit in this exact position for the rest of the evening.

"You sure you don't want to hang out with me and Finn?" Rose is sitting on her own bed, watching her like a hawk. "It might make you feel better."

The corner of Rey's mouth twitches a little. "Thanks. But honestly, I just want to be alone right now." Somehow, this excuse feels hollow. But the only people Rey wishes were here, who she wishes she could speak to are probably de—

No. No, she couldn't think about that. She gulps and shuts her eyes. "And I genuinely don't feel all that well." And this, blessedly, doesn't feel dishonest.

\*\*

It's nearly nine o'clock when the door to Rey's bedroom opens and Maz pokes her head in. Rey sits up, pausing the music on her iPod as she does. It's the same song she had been listening to on the bus earlier that day.

"What?" Rey had been half asleep. She's dressed in soft cotton shorts, an oversized sweatshirt, and warm, black knee-high socks. She'll be depressed in comfort, thank you.

“You have a visitor,” Maz says, pushing her oversized spectacles up the bridge of her nose. Rey’s caretaker looks both amused and severely irritated. Interestingly enough, Rey feels the same.

She stands and yanks out her earbuds, leaving them and the iPod behind on her bed. She marches out of her room, brimming with annoyance. She knows exactly who’s here. How many times has Ben Solo canceled on their Friday nights through the years? Rey grits her teeth as she trots down the stairs. And yet the *one time* she cancels on him he shows up at her home and really, who does he think he *is*?

She opens the front door and doesn’t even feel any self-satisfaction at knowing she’d been right. Ben stands in the doorway, shivering a little, and clutching—

“Isn’t it too cold for ice cream?” Rey says by way of greeting, eyes taking in the two milkshakes he’s holding.

He blinks at her. “Says the girl who’s in shorts.”

Rey rolls her eyes and opens up the door for him, beckoning him inside. “I told you I didn’t feel well.”

His eyes flick over her, scrutinizing. “You don’t seem sick to me. Besides, I could tell you were upset about something.” Still clutching the desserts, he looks into the main room where a few kids are arguing over Grand Theft Auto. Ben doesn’t move away from the front door, hovering awkwardly by Rey. Sighing, she jerks her head and heads through the entryway and into the large, spacious kitchen. She flicks on the light and sits down at the head of the long dining table.

She’s tired and grumpy and when Ben places her milkshake down in front of her she grabs the cherry and chews on it furiously.

Ben shrugs off his coat and lays it down on the table next to him. Despite her foul mood, Rey’s gaze sweeps over the black sweater clinging to his broad shoulders. It looks nice on him. It looks expensive.

Rey drums her fingers against the tabletop and says nothing. There’s a weird underlying charge to the energy in the air, and when Ben finally breaks the silence Rey nearly jolts. “Alright, kid. There’s something wrong.”

“I just had a bad day at school.” She tucks some of her long brown hair behind her ear and scowls.

The corners of Ben’s mouth lowers into a concerned frown. “Hmm.”

There’s another full minute of silence, and the heaviness of the day pulls on Rey. She’s drained. She’s irritated. And she’s sad over things she cannot change. She swallows, and tears prick at her eyes. Ben shifts so that his body is fully angled toward her, and this simple gesture makes her suddenly feel safe.

“We watched a documentary on drugs in health class today,” she begins, picking up the milkshake and taking a tiny sip. It’s cookies and cream, what she always gets, and him knowing this easy fact comforts her even more. “It was about heroin, mostly.”

“Your parents.” Ben’s voice is low, and Rey jerks her head up in surprise. “How’d you know?”

He tilts his head a little. “Just pieced together what little you’ve told me about them.” After a pause he adds, “I’ve never been able to think of another reason as to why they’d leave you.”

The tears spill now, hotter than Rey had been expecting. “I had thought, maybe, that one day they’d turn up again. That they’d come back.” She glances up, expecting to find sympathy in Ben’s face, or even, god forbid, pity. Instead his eyes are flinty and a muscle jumps in his cheek.

“I don’t think you should waste anymore time thinking about them.”

She wonders if he hadn’t meant for it to sound so harsh, but she flinches all the same. Her mouth parts and she leans back into her chair, shocked. “How can you say that, Ben? They’re *my parents*. They were all I thought about for *years*—

“Rey.” His brown eyes are as intense as she’s ever seen them. “Your parents are dead. They were two nobodies who left behind their only kid and OD’d in the woods somewhere.”

The words *sting*. They sting and they burn and they make Rey ill with their ringing truth. “You—” She struggles to get her lips to form words. “*Get out.*”

“They were two nobodies,” he repeats calmly, as if Rey hadn’t said anything. “They were nothing.” His gaze is still resting on her. “But you’re not nothing.”

More tears spill down Rey’s cheeks and she presses her lips together forcefully.

“Not to me,” Ben continues. “And your parents leaving you was probably the best thing they could have ever done for you. I’m sorry you not having them brings you pain, kid. But you’ll always have me.”

Rey is breathless.

“And Luke,” he tacks on quickly. “And your caretaker, and your friends, and Poe and that fucking cat—”

“Thanks, Ben.” She leans forward and pushes against his shoulder playfully. He nods, dark hair falling into his eyes a little. There’s stubble on his cheek, and Rey’s heart begins to hammer. He relaxes in his chair and starts sipping at his own milkshake, mumbling over how much it’s melted.

And Rey realizes that it’s time to start owning up to other truths she’d rather not acknowledge.

Like how she probably is in love with Ben Solo, whatever the hell that means.

## Chapter End Notes

2006, man. Let's get this ball rollin'.

Two things: I am behind on answering comments from last chapter, and for that I thoroughly apologize. I don't like updating before responding to everyone, but it's been a long, crazy week. I will eventually get to everyone though, never fear!

I don't particularly agree with Ben's attitude toward Rey's parents here. Addiction is a disease and should never be taken lightly. I, and I'm sure many of you, have lost people I care about to addiction. That being said, I think Ben would despise Rey's parents no matter what, simply because they left her. Personally, I think that's why he comes across as so harsh when he's telling her about them in canon.

Anyway, thank you again to everyone who shows love for this fic. Y'all are the best, forreal. If you liked let me know?

## 2006, part two

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I had to write something down  
And I found myself alone  
And then I let go of everything  
Into another dimension

“Dimension” by Wolfmother

\*\*

Rey is cleaning paintbrushes for Luke in the studio supply room when she hears voices. Her ears prick and she turns off the running water, craning her head a little toward the open door.

She eyes the other dirty brushes, and she really should continue cleaning them instead of eavesdropping, but—

Rey is too curious for her own good. It’s a Monday in the middle of July; all the other students have gone home. But not Rey, because *she drove herself here*. Her sixteenth birthday was three months ago and yet the fact that she can drive herself around without another adult needing to be in the passenger’s seat still sends a little thrill up her spine. Sometimes, when no one is around to judge her, she takes her license out of her wallet and admires it. The picture isn’t even that bad!

And yet, when she pokes her head around the corner and into the hall, attempting stealth, Luke’s expectant face pointed right toward her makes her feel like a little kid. Standing right behind Luke is Han. Rey straightens as both men regard her, Luke with amusement and Han with curiosity.

“Wow!” Ben’s dad looks about the same as he did the last time she saw him, which was a few years ago. “Look who went and grew up on me. Guess I can’t call you ‘kid’ anymore, huh?”

Rey returns Han’s smile, pleased that *someone* in the Solo family has noticed that she *is* practically an adult now, thanks. “I drive now and everything,” she says cockily, wiping her wet hands on a paint stained apron.

“Did Luke teach you?” Han turns and regards Rey’s teacher with a raised eyebrow. “Terrible idea. He drives like a goddamn granny.”

Luke looks genuinely affronted, but Rey cuts him off before he can really get worked up. “Actually, Ben taught me. And, Maz, a little.”

Han stares at her in shock. “Ben? As in my *son*, Ben?”

Rey nods.

And Han laughs, but Rey catches something sad flicker in his gaze before he hides it away. “Well, remind me to never let your behind the wheel of any of my cars, especially the Falcon.”

\*\*

Half an hour later Rey finds herself sipping coffee with Han and Luke in the kitchen-office. Ben’s father regals her with tales of how he and Leia met (“She was protesting with some other college kids outside of the university and I was just trying to score some weed—*what?* Don’t be ridiculous Luke, I’m just telling the kid what happened.”) and how he and Luke had become friends (“You tend to bond with the people you’re arrested with—I’m *not* making light out of being arrested. Christ, Luke, you’re so stuffy.”)

Rey’s eyes have gone wide and she peers at Luke with newfound respect. “You’ve been arrested? How?!”

Han is grinning, clearly about to launch into the story, when Luke says loudly, “That’s a tale for another time. It’s nearly midnight, Rey. I’m shocked Maz hasn’t called and demanded to speak to you.”

Rey frowns. “If she does, tell her she would always be up to date with me if she’d let me have a cellphone.”

Han is nodding in support, but Luke shakes his head. “That’s not my place, Rey.” He yawns, and she gets the point.

Rey huffs and scoots her chair back, letting it screech across the floor. “Fine. You’re no fun.”

“Hasn’t been for over thirty years,” Han quips, and both men stand in order to walk her outside.

The night air is blessedly cool, the humidity having worn off for the day. It’ll be horrible again tomorrow, however, and Rey is already dreading how much she’s going to sweat.

As Rey pulls out the keys to Maz’s car Han places a hand on her shoulder. She turns, smiling and expecting for him to hug her, but is instead taken aback by his somber expression.

“You still see Ben all the time, don’t you.” He doesn’t ask, because he already knows the answer. Rey nods, suddenly feeling a little wary. She adores Han; some part of her has always envied Ben having a father like him. But if he says anything disparaging about his son in front of her she might just deck him. Or, at the very least, she’ll get into Maz’s car and rudely slam the door in his face.

Han squeezes her shoulder once and then lets his hand fall away. “When you see him next, tell him to give his old man a call, will ya? I haven’t spoken to my son in nearly a year and would like to tell him that I...” He trails off, and Rey sees Ben so potently in the way his father runs a hand through his gray hair, in the way he can’t seem to get his words out.

“Anyway,” Han continues, “just tell him that I miss him and that he really should call. Preferably before I’m dead.”

“Yeah,” Rey agrees, suddenly feeling quite small and not so grown up. “Will do.”

\*\*

A few days later Rey is perched on the countertop of the bathroom she shares with Rose and two other girls, face alarmingly close to the mirror, black eyeliner in hand. She hadn’t really bothered much with makeup until a few months ago. But then Rose had convinced her to wear some eyeliner for the last day of school, and Rey had liked the adult, edgy look it gave her.

And since she’s about to spend the entire day with Ben...well...

Rose opens the door and pokes her head in, face lighting up when she sees Rey. “Oh, I love that!”

Rey twists a little to face her. “You don’t think it’s too thick?”

Rose shakes her head. “Not at all! Besides, that’s the look now anyway. And you straightened your hair!”

Rey smiles, shifting a little with pride. This kind of femininity is new and quite fun. Her hair falls nearly to her mid-back, and a few weeks ago she’d let Rose take some scissors to it. She’d added layers and side swept bangs that helped frame Rey’s face.

She hops off the counter and waltzes back into their bedroom, changing out of her lounge clothes and pulling on the shortest pair of denim shorts she owns. She would like to wear one of her band t-shirts, but it’s too damn hot to really wear anything that’s not a tank top. She holds up a few differently styled ones for Rose to approve or deny. They both settle on one that’s black and covered with little stars. It just barely hints at cleavage, but nothing too risqué. Rey would rather not risk Maz skinning her alive.

“Did you shave your legs?” Rose asks, and Rey nods. Her best friend tosses her a bottle of body spray and Rey gives herself a generous spritz.

“You look nice,” Rose compliments, smiling at Rey knowingly.

Somehow, her best friend had *figured it out*. And really, Rey isn’t entirely sure she would’ve been able to keep it from Rose for long regardless. One day in February Rose had looked her square in the eye and asked, “You have a crush on Ben, don’t you?”

And Rey had only turned bright red, which had been answer enough. She got the feeling that Rose didn’t necessarily approve of Ben, but she didn’t go out of her way to make Rey feel bad about it either. And she didn’t give voice to Rey’s intensely growing fear that *Ben could never see you that way*.

“Well, have fun,” Rose says, nose disappearing behind Dracula, their summer reading book. And honestly, Rey has never been more grateful to have her as a best friend.

\*\*

Ben looks entirely too pleased when he picks her up from the home. And it's not because Rey has worn her shortest pair of shorts, as she immediately and begrudgingly discovers.

Instead of the shitty car he's had since the late 90's, a brand new 2007 silver BMW convertible awaits them.

"You...you got a new car," Rey points out stupidly.

Ben nods eagerly, looking like a little boy on Christmas morning. "I did. Come on, let's go. We can ride with the top down!"

Rey opens the car door, already missing those absurd automatic seat belts. She gets in and shuts the door behind her, buckling herself in and taking in the new car smell. The seats are real leather, the wheel sleek, and if she stares at the stereo long enough she might start drooling.

But a sense of foreboding starts swirling in her belly. "Did your new client buy you this?" She accidentally interrupts Ben with this question; he'd been enthusiastically pointing out the satellite radio the car had come with.

Ben pauses mid-sentence, some of the joy leaving his face. He clears his throat. "So?"

Rey is already pouting, but Ben plunges ahead before she can open her mouth.

"I know you don't like him even though you literally know *nothing* about him—"

"That's exactly *why* I don't like him!"

"—but things have been going really well lately, okay?"

Rey crosses her arms over her chest, refusing to be impressed when Ben puts the key into the ignition and turns. The car comes to life underneath her feet with a purr. "You won't even let me see your art anymore!"

Ben sighs in frustration as they pull out of the home's long driveway. "Rey." His voice is strained, but soft. "Come on, not today, okay? I've been looking forward to today."

Rey's lips part, pout leaving her face. For a second she's almost wistful, but then she quickly forces herself to get a grip. "Where are you taking me anyway?"

Ben grins, an it's shit-eating, and one Rey hasn't seen in quite some time. He presses a button and the top starts to lower. He turns up the volume on the stereo and Rey doesn't recognize this band, but the music is blaring and awesome and fun. The wind thoroughly ruins the meticulously straight hairstyle she'd been going for, but Rey finds she doesn't really care. People in other cars watch them as they careen by, and Rey finds herself winking at them and occasionally waving.



There's something that screams home about riding around with Ben Solo in a car. And who cares if this car is brand new and not familiar. It *does* have satellite radio and working A/C. Who cares if Ben's shady new client bought it for him? No big deal.

But that foreboding doesn't completely leave her belly.

\*\*

Rey nearly screams in delight when Ben parks outside of a parlor called Psycho Tattoo. "We're getting tattoos?!"

Ben levels her with look, and Rey quickly corrects herself. "You're getting a tattoo?!"

He grins again, and oh does that make her chest feel both light and heavy at the same time. She scrambles out of the car and hurriedly follows him inside, brimming with excitement. She first thing she notices is that the whole place smells like a doctor's office. Everything is meticulously clean, and as Ben speaks to the artist at the counter Rey starts flipping through portfolios. She's always thought she'd look pretty cool with a tattoo, but has no idea what she'd get. In fact...she glances at Ben over her shoulder. She didn't really know tattoos were Ben's thing either.

But frankly, it's not surprising.

She wanders over to stand next to him, noticing that his excitement has melted into nerves. He glances down at her briefly as he speaks to the artist, and she notices the piece of paper that the artist is studying. She recognizes Ben's work. She'd recognize it anywhere. He's drawn out a massive tree, leaves blowing away in invisible wind. The leaves turn into birds.

\*\*

Ben sits for nearly four hours. The tree spans across his right upper arm and onto his upper chest and collar bone, and Rey eats up this opportunity to stare and take note of every single muscle that curves and flexes under Ben's skin. For artistic purposes, of course. (Yeah, right.)

The tattoo gun continues to buzz as the artist adds on finishing details. Ben winces every once in awhile, but otherwise has given no sign of being in pain. Rey can tell it must hurt, though, because the skin all around the tattoo is an angry red, and the artist pauses every so often to gently wipe off blood.

Once it's finished, the artist rubs the fresh tattoo down with a thick, clear ointment. The two men chat a little as Ben stands in front of a mirror in order to survey the work.

"And what about you, sweetheart?"

It takes Rey a moment to realize that the artist is speaking to her. She blinks at him, slightly confused.

The artist, young but still probably in his thirties, sweeps his eyes over her. "Belly button piercings are popular with chicks your age. You'd look cute, having one to show off when

you're in a bikini. Normally I charge forty bucks, but for you I'd do it for thirty." His gaze lingers on her narrow waist.

Rey understands, logically, that he's mostly trying to upsell and make a little extra money. But the way he looks at her makes her skin crawl. She places both hands on her hips and *glares*, throwing all her irritation and disgust toward this man into a matching scowl.

The artist visibly shrinks back and Rey feels a wave of pride sweep over her. She *can* be scary, thank you. She turns to Ben, already smirking, but stills when she realizes he's moved away from the mirror and is standing right behind her. He's drawn himself up to his full height and has crossed his thick arms over his chest. The expression in his eyes is freezing, and he looks down his nose at the tattoo artist, corner of his mouth just barely curved into a snarl.

"Just a suggestion." The artist holds his hands up placatingly.

"Yeah, well." Ben's pulls out a wad of cash out of his pocket and—*holy shit are those hundred dollar bills?*—tosses a few at the tattoo artist. "You can take your suggestion and shove it up your fucking ass. Come on, Rey."

She quickly follows him out of the parlor and into Ben's new car.

Ben is a black cloud of annoyance for the next ten minutes, lips only quirking into an almost smile when Rey starts desperately making silly faces at him.

"Sorry," he finally sighs. "I didn't know that dude was going to be a creep."

Rey shrugs. "It's not big deal. It's not like that's the first time something like that has happened."

Mentioning this proves to be a mistake, as Ben's mood manages to darken even further. And even though Rey would normally get upset over Ben being like this, this time she feels a little bit of thrill.

Ben is still sulky when he pulls up to the BBQ joint they're supposed to be meeting Poe at for dinner. "Sorry," he apologizes again. "That kind of shit just really pisses me off."

"Don't worry about it. When I do get my belly button pierced I'll make sure to go to another parlor."

Ben gives her a look that can only be described as odd. He stares at her for a long moment. "Rey, can I be honest with you about something?"

Her heartbeat spikes. "S-Sure."

He's quiet for a moment, as if weighing his words in his mind. "You're wearing way too much fucking eyeliner." He laughs and laughs at the indignant expression on her face and, really, Rey would rub her whole body in stupid eyeliner if it'd get him to laugh like that again.

It isn't until much later, after she's already gone home for the night, that she realizes she forgot to tell Ben about seeing Han.

## Chapter End Notes

Ben's tattoo is actually a variation of a tattoo my brother has.

Heavy, heavy stuff coming up my dudes. But at least Ben is moving in the direction of being the hot, tattooed guy he was always meant to become in this story. So there's that?

If you liked, let me know? Also, I have [tumblr](#)! Come shout at me if you'd like.

## 2006, part three

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

If I turn into another  
Dig me up from under what is covering  
The better part of me  
Sing this song  
Remind me that we'll always have each other  
When everything else is gone

“Dig” by Incubus

\*\*

Rey smiles at Finn and Rose’s squeals of laughter. It’s a Tuesday and their Thanksgiving break has finally started, and she and her friends are at the studio despite it technically being closed for the holiday. Rey stares at an easel with a half done painting she’s working on for her advanced art class in school.

Finn and Rose are flinging perfectly good gummy worms at each other, but Finn pauses in the middle of their candy battle to look over Rey’s shoulder. “Hey!” He ducks a worm that would’ve hit him right in the forehead. “That looks awesome! But like, what is it?”

Rey laughs a little, smiling at him. “Is it bad that I’m actually not sure yet?” She turns and surveys the painting again. What little she has so far resembles half a face, although she isn’t sure who it is yet. Usually Rey goes into her work with an idea fully formed in her mind of what she wants to create. But her high school art teacher had challenged her class to just paint with no real destination in mind.

Rey is finding she’s not particularly fond of lacking control in this way.

Finn shrugs, still staring over her shoulder. Rose is standing next to him, head tilted to the side and brows furrowed. The longer they stare the more fidgety Rey grows.

She hears Luke shout from the front of the studio that their pizza is here, and Rey quickly darts out of the room before her friends can see how red her cheeks are getting. She pulls some cash out of her back pocket and hands it to the delivery guy, telling him to keep the change. The phone starts to ring as she closes the front door and locks it behind her.

She hears Luke groan as he gets up from his spot on the entryway couch, tossing the book he’d been reading to the side.

“I can answer it!” Rey says, already making her way to the phone, when Luke shakes his head. “Go back to your friends, Rey.” He smiles at her, and she’s not sure, but she thinks she

spots more wrinkles around his eyes and mouth than had been there six months ago. But there is still a youthful spark to his gaze that puts Rey at ease.

She beams at him and walks quickly out of the entryway and down the hallway to the painting room, where she hears Rose shriek in indignation. “Finn, gummy worms are fair game but *not* sour gummy worms, you heathen!”

Rey walks into the room and places the pizza box down on an empty table, opening it and inhaling the mouthwatering scent. Finn and Rose crowd around her, each of them grabbing a slice.

Rey can hear Luke’s hushed voice as he speaks to whoever it is on the phone.

She’s chewing her third bite when Luke slowly walks into the room. In a span of three minutes he’s aged ten years, and whatever spark Rey had seen in his gaze moments ago has vanished. She stills, lowering her slice from her mouth and swallowing thickly. Finn and Rose also sense the change in atmosphere, as they immediately stop speaking.

“Finn,” Luke says, avoiding Rey’s eye. “Please, call your Nana and tell her to come pick you and Rose up. The both of you need to go home.”

Finn gapes for a moment at Rey’s art teacher, briefly at a loss for words. Then he snaps to attention and nods quickly, face suddenly serious. He pulls a flip phone out of his back pocket and steps out of the room, half eaten pizza slice in hand. Rose makes to follow him but pauses long enough to wrap her arms around Rey in a quick hug. Rey can’t quite return it, eyes pinned on Luke’s grave face.

When Rose has left the room as well, Rey lets out a shuddering breath and braces herself. “Is it Ben?”

Luke shakes his head once, and Rey’s shoulders visibly droop with relief.

“It’s Han.”

The relief is immediately replaced by a blank, white noise that fills and buzzes about Rey’s head. It’s as if someone has thrown a bucket of cold ice water on her. “Is...is he okay?” Her voice is small.

Luke opens his mouth and closes it once, twice. Tears fill his eyes and just the sight of it causes Rey to let out a dry sob. “No, Rey. He’s gone.”

Something about seeing such visceral pain on an adult that Rey has known since childhood makes her tremble in terror. A heavy, awful weight settles over her shoulders because this is *life* isn’t it? These things happen. But not to Rey, not to Luke, not to—

“Ben!” Her breathing turns to shuddering gasps and she whirls toward the doorway, feet already ready to break out into a sprint. Panic wells up in her throat and her vision briefly blurs because she needs to be wherever Ben is *right now*—

Luke places his hands on her shoulders and stops her with surprising strength. “No, Rey! We need to stay here for the time being—”

“Of course we can’t!” she screams, trying to step out of his grasp. “Ben needs us, he needs *me* and I can’t just stay here!”

“Rey.” Luke’s voice is gentle. “I don’t want you around Ben right now—”

She wrenches herself out of his grip violently. “I can’t believe you’d say that,” she snarls, already marching toward the door. “He shouldn’t be alone right now. He can’t be, he’ll—”

The phone rings and Rey’s breath catches. She runs out of the painting room and back into the entryway but pauses as her hand hovers over the ringing phone. Luke is right behind her, and she sets her jaw as she allows him to answer it up before she can.

Finn and Rose are sitting on the couch, watching them with tense, sad expressions.

Her head jerks back toward Luke when she hears him say, “Poe.”

She steps right up to him, desperately watching his face as he listens to whatever it is Poe is saying.

Her mentor squeezes his blue eyes shut and sighs deeply. “He’s at Grady’s, then?” That’s the hospital. Rey’s heart flips, already knowing intrinsically who ‘he’ is.

“Is he alright?” A pause. “We’ll be there soon. Yes, she’s with me.” He opens his eyes and lifts them to Rey, face grim. “She’ll come.” He hands up the phone. Rey waits with bated breath and a hammering heart.

“Ben totaled his car,” Luke says, and Rey feels her eyes go wide. “Poe says he took off from their apartment as soon as he found out. He walked away from the accident, but he’ll need stitches—”

Rey is out the front door before Luke can finish his sentence, mind spitting a thousand different thoughts at her. She’s left her coat inside and the November air bites through her thin sweater and ripped jeans. She stands by the passenger door to Luke’s car and waits impatiently for him to follow her, trembling with sheer emotion.

She sucks in shuddering breaths as Nana pulls into the parking lot, pushes a shaking fist against her mouth as Rose and Finn walk out of the studio with Luke behind them, holds back sobs as Luke locks the front door. Rey forces herself to focus on not completely falling apart.

She can’t fall apart. She can’t. Not yet.

\*\*

As soon as the nurse at the help desk tells them where Ben is, Rey breaks out into a run, just barely dodging doctors and patients alike as she barrels down hallway after hallway. She follows signs for EMERGENCY UNIT, nearly tripping over mop buckets and nurses in her haste.

She hears Ben before she sees him.

*“Don’t fucking touch me!”* There’s a shattering noise and a doctor forcefully stumbles back, pulling open one of the many curtained off sections on this large floor. She sees Ben then, finally, face twisted with rage and covered in blood. Rey knows, with deep horror, that the blood is his. Poe is with him, and Rey watches as Ben viciously shrugs off the hand that Poe had been trying to place on his shoulder.

She slows to a walk as she approaches, as if moving toward a wounded animal. And maybe that’s precisely what Ben is right now.

“Calm down—” Poe begins, reaching out toward Ben again, only to be shoved away. He falls hard into a chair, dark curls bouncing against his forehead with the force of it.

“Sir,” the doctor says, sounding exasperated. “Sir, you need stitches in your face—”

*“Get the fuck away from me!”* Ben snarls, and the movement causes more blood to leak from the long gash that slices across his cheek and into his neck. Red soaks through his grey sweater. Rey’s hand covers her mouth and she bites back a shout. She’s shaking all over, chest moving up and down in erratic breaths.

Ben moves like a raging storm. He flips over the chair that Poe isn’t sitting in and then rips the IV out of his hand like a savage, causing blood to arch and spray against the cot. The doctor is shouting, calling for assistance as Ben sweeps medical supplies off a countertop. And then Ben *screams*. The agony in it breaks Rey’s heart.

“Ben?” She barely whispers his name, but he snaps his head up in her direction, doctor and Poe instantly forgotten. The rage melts away from his face when he sees her and his chin wobbles. Tears fill his eyes and he leans back against the cot, defeated. “Rey.” He says her name like it’s his last remaining lifeline.

A nurse ushers past Rey and starts applying pressure to where Ben had yanked out his IV. Poe is arguing with the doctor, insisting that there’s no need for sedation, that there’s been a death in the family—

Rey and Ben hold each other’s gaze and she moves slowly to stand in front of him. Rey is sobbing now, so incredibly overwhelmed with everything that is happening around her. But she’s here with Ben now, and that’s what’s important. Tears begin to fall from his eyes and his shoulders begin to shake.

She reaches up, stands on the tips of her toes and gently brushes his tears away from his cheeks. How can she fix this? How?

“It’s going to be okay, Ben.” Her words come out shaky and there’s an underlining hint of hysteria that she quickly reins in. “It’s going to be okay.” Then she wraps her arms fiercely around his middle, turning her head and pressing her cheek flush against his chest. She ignores the dampness of his bloody sweater against her skin. “It’s going to be okay, Ben.” She utters it like a mantra against him, thinking that if she says it enough then maybe by

some miracle it'll be true. He encircles his arms around her shoulders, pulling her against him with matching ferocity. She feels his chin against the top of her head.

They hold each other and weep together.

\*\*

Rey holds Ben's hand as he gets nearly forty stitches in his face, neck, and chest. The gash slices into his collarbone as well, distorting the tattoo he'd only just gotten back in the summer. The pulling of the thread against his skin makes Ben jerk sometimes, so Rey hums an Incubus song that she'd heard earlier on the radio, attempting to put him at ease. She hums and hum and hums, squeezing his hand a little whenever he looks like he wants to snap.

The doctor works on him warily, continually eyeing his hulking patient with distrust. Poe stands with Luke, and the two talk in low voices with their heads together. Rey hears the name "Leia" pass between the two of them several times, and she wonders if Ben's mother is planning on showing up here as well. She does not, however. And Rey thinks that maybe for the time being that's for the best. Ben will probably be seeing a lot of her in the coming days ahead.

Because Han is dead. Hit by a drunk driver head on. Killed instantly.

Ben stares listlessly at the tiled floor, silent.

It's the middle of the night before he's finally discharged, and Rey finds herself wishing for her coat as they walk back into the night air. She shivers as they cross the parking garage toward Luke's car. Ben doesn't look at her, just let's go of her hand and shrugs off his coat. He places it around her shoulders and she melts into its instant warmth.

Then Ben takes her hand again, lacing her fingers through his own.

## Chapter End Notes

I'M SORRY. I've been planning for Han to die since the very beginning, but that still didn't make this any easier to write. I hope you guys aren't too mad at me :(

Shout out to audreyii-fic for suggesting the Incubus song. I was struggling with finding the best song to use for this installment and frankly your suggestion turned out to be perfect.

Once again I am a GARBAGE HUMAN and am behind on replying to comments from last chapter. But please know that you guys are fucking incredible and I am entirely too underserving. Feel free to come shout your feelings and throw proverbial tomatoes at me over on [tumblr](#).

If you liked let me know? (This seems ironic to say, but...)





## 2006, part four

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

My ex says I'm lacking in depth  
I will do my best  
You say you want to stand by my side  
Darling your heads not right

“Someday” by The Strokes

\*\*

Rey’s mouth falls open in awe when Luke pulls into the long driveway leading to Senator Organa’s house. Although “house” is a loose term. It looks more like a manor from a Jane Austin novel.

She peers at Luke, whose face looks pensive. “Ben used to live here?” she asks as they park on the manicured lawn with a plethora of other cars. Han was a well-known man indeed.

Luke nods. “Before he came to live with me, yes.”

They get out of the car and Rey pulls her black coat tighter around her body. Thanksgiving was yesterday, and it had been a somber affair. She and Rose had gone over to Finn’s house and it had truly pained Rey’s heart that she hadn’t had much of an appetite. Nana’s cooking is one of her favorite things in the whole world.

But she hasn’t been able to stop thinking about the way Luke had looked with tears of grief in his eyes, of the way Ben had screamed.

Rey shakes her head a little to clear it, because the next few hours are going to be difficult enough without dwelling on horrible thoughts. She pulls her shoulders back and follows Luke onto the gravel walkway and up to the sprawling front doors. Rey shades her eyes from the bright November sun and takes in the brick, the columns...

Ben’s childhood home is a place with *columns*.

It’s surprisingly loud inside. People mull about everywhere, and Rey finds herself pressed against Luke because of the sheer volume of people. Usually this type of thing would annoy her, but knowing that so many have come to pay their respects makes her heart happy. Leia had opted to hold only a wake for Han instead of a full-blown funeral. Han would have wanted his life to be celebrated with food and—Rey spies most of the adults holding large glasses of wine—alcohol.

Luke pats her shoulder. “I’m going to find my sister.” He strides off, leaving Rey lingering by the front doors. She scoots away when another patron walks inside, eager to get away from

the brisk, chilly air.

She walks out of the entryway and into a parlor. Or is it a normal living room? There are multiple rooms for people to gather, and they're all filled with unrecognizable faces. Rey makes her way toward the back of the house, glancing around every corner and hoping to find Ben.

She hasn't seen him since Tuesday night, and she grows more and more anxious with every day she doesn't hear from him.

She wanders down a hallway, pauses at a door and, after brief hesitation, opens it. She'd been expecting to find a bathroom or a coat closet but is instead met with an office. The oldest dog she's ever seen is stretched out on a rug. The shaggy mutt lifts his head and surveys her before placing it back down on his paws with a sigh. His tail thumps gently against the floor when Rey walks into the office and closes the door behind her.

It takes her a second to notice the cockatoo in the corner of the room. He watches her from inside his large cage. The blinds to the window are open, and the bird ruffles his feathers a little as he basks in the sun. "We're doomed!" it suddenly squawks, causing Rey to snort.

"That's cryptic. Who taught you that?" Rey stands in front of the bird and regards it curiously. It shuffles back and forth and bobs its head, clearly pleased that she's giving it her attention.

"Glob of grease! Glob of grease! R2 where are you?" he says, and the old dog groans and gets up off the floor. It moves and sits right under the cage, head tilted to the side and watching the bird. The dog's tongue lolls lazily out of his mouth and he bumps the bottom of the cage with his nose.

"R2! There you are! R2!" The bird spreads out its feathers happily and squawks again, and the dog lets out a happy bark. Rey laughs in delight.

The door opens behind her. "Rey?"

She turns around quickly and there Ben is, looking sharp in a black suit. His face, however, has seen better days. The black stitches in his cheek and neck look ugly and painful, and there's a nasty bruise on his temple that Rey hadn't noticed the other night. He walks inside the office and shuts the door behind him. He looks exhausted, and Rey wonders when he last slept.

"You found 3PO and R2," he says, coming to stand beside her. He hasn't shaven, she notices. He pats the old dog on the head, ruffles his fur.

"It's quiet in here," Rey says, watching Ben closely.

Ben nods in understanding. "I used to hide in here too."

His brown eyes cast about quickly, as if he sees ghosts in every corner. Something inside of Rey's chest breaks a little for him.

\*\*

They wander to the kitchen, where Rey decides that Han would be absolutely furious with her if she didn't take advantage of all the free, delicious looking food spread over the marble countertops. She fills up an entire plate and ends up going back for seconds, patting her belly with contentment once she's full.

Ben eats nothing, just stares at his hands. They mostly sit in silence, with Ben awkwardly and tersely accepting the condolences and sympathies of strangers. He hunches in on himself after awhile and Rey stands.

"I want to walk around. You coming?"

Ben nods once and stands. This time Rey lingers in every room, taking in the multitude of framed photographs that feature Ben and his broken family. If the situation had been any different she would have *loved* to tease Ben over his baby photos, or the ones of him sobbing in Santa's lap as a toddler.

She jumps a little when she sees a picture of herself resting on a long table. She strides over to it and picks it up, inspecting it. It's a picture of her and Ben at his high school graduation. She must've been eight or nine at the time, and they both make silly faces at the camera. Rey smiles at the memory, and when she turns to look at Ben she's pleased to see he's smiling too. Only a quirk of his lips, really. But it still counts.

"I forgot she framed this one," he breathes, taking the photo from her and peering down at it. Rey glances over her shoulder, where Leia is speaking to a small group of people in front of a fireplace. She'd given Rey a tight hug when she'd seen her earlier, and Rey wonders how on earth the woman looks so put together.

She has not seen mother and son interact at all. It makes Rey ache, makes her want to say something to Ben about it. Especially since she had forgotten to tell him about Han. Nasty guilt makes her bite her bottom lip, but she wills it away. She'll talk to Ben about Leia. And she'll tell him about Han. But not today.

Rey runs a finger along the frame, which is covered, of all things, with ducklings. "Odd frame choice."

"Not really." At Rey's raised eyebrow Ben continues. "I used to call you duckling to my parents. Because you imprinted on me like one." He looks at her out of the corner of his eye, expression sly. But she thinks she might spy a bit of tenderness there as well.

Then he sighs, sets the frame down, and the moment passes. He steps away, but Rey stares at the picture for a little bit longer. Ben looks so incredibly young and carefree and Rey feels her chin start to tremble.

There is too much heartbreak here. Rey cannot wait to leave.

\*\*

The next day she all but invites herself over to Ben and Poe's apartment. Ben lets her in without complaint, wearing only a battered Soundgarden t-shirt and lounge pants. His hair is messy and unkempt, and Rey suspects he hasn't showered. There's a cold atmosphere to the apartment, despite the heat being on. Rey rubs her arms as she steps past the threshold.

"Hey, kid," he greets her quietly. BB-8 winds himself around her legs happily as she enters the apartment. "Poe isn't back from work yet," Ben calls to her before slumping down on the couch. He stares at the TV which, Rey quickly comes to discover, isn't even turned on.

"Have you eaten today?" she asks, concerned.

Ben shrugs.

"Your face looks a lot better," she lies, and he nods. He acts like he's barely heard her.

His sadness makes helplessness swell up inside of her like a balloon that's about to burst. She hates seeing him like this, hates that she can't wave a wand and make everything better, hates that she's so completely useless when he obviously needs her. She casts her eyes about, desperate for anything that will—

She realizes then, why the apartment feels so off. It's silent.

She peers back at Ben, who's face is devoid of any emotion except listlessness. Resolve hardening, Rey marches over to the record player and starts ruffling through Poe's collection.

"Don't bother," Ben says softly, and Rey can feel his eyes settle on her back. This spurns her further, and she searches and searches until she spies the record she wants. The pretty, swirly covers on the front give it away. She puts it on, and whirls back toward Ben as the upbeat music fills the air.

She walks with purpose over to him, grabbing his hands and attempting to yank him onto his feet. His eyebrows furrow and he resists. "Rey, what—"

"Dance with me," she commands, ignoring the flipping and fluttering going on in her belly.

Ben frowns. "No."

Rey pulls with more insistence this time. "Come on, Ben Solo. Get up or I will make you."

He doesn't smile, but she knows an amused gleam when she sees one. Her plan is working. "No," he says again, but she gets the distinct impression he's mostly trying to annoy her.

She widens her feet and leans all her body weight into her pull. "It'll make me—" she grunts at how irritatingly large and solid he is—"*happy*."

At this he gives in, just like she knew he would. He stands, grumbling, and allows himself to be pulled toward her.

There's a pause, and he watches her as she just stands there. Rey realizes, with a horrible, queasy pang, that dancing in front of Ben is a lot different than dancing around with Finn and

Rose. This might be one of the scariest things she's ever done.

But she'll swallow her pride and fear for him. She bangs her head flips her hair around a little bit. She shakes her hips, feeling completely and utterly ridiculous and why oh why had she thought—

But then there it is, a smile. Then an amused chuckle. Ben doesn't even wince when Rey accidentally treads on his big toe. She takes his hand and lifts it over her head, indicating for him to twirl her. So he does. Perhaps, if Rey had been feeling more brazen, she might've placed her hands on his shoulders, or gotten him to touch her waist. But instead she flails her limbs about in the silliest ways she can think of, suddenly not caring if she looks stupid. Ben Solo is smiling for her. *Because* of her.

He lets out a full laugh, smile turning into a near grin when Rey breaks into the robot.

"Um, you're supposed to be dancing too!" She shouts to be heard over the music. "Come on."

Ben shakes his head. "I don't dance."

But after some persistence and encouragement she gets him to shuffle back and forth as she swirls around him in a consistent blur of motion. He watches, brown eyes bright. There's a look on his face that Rey doesn't recognize. Gratitude? Fondness? Or something else, maybe.

She decides not to dwell on it. Soon the song ends and Rey stills, panting a little as she regards Ben. Before she can feel too pleased with herself, she watches as the brief joy melts off of him and is replaced once again by sorrow. He sits back down on the couch and buries his face in his hands, as if he can't believe he's allowed himself to experience a moment of happiness in a world where his father is dead.

When his shoulders begin to shake Rey moves slowly to stand in front of him. She's thankful, then, that the music blocks out the sounds of his sobs, because she doesn't think she can handle her heart breaking any further.

Hesitantly, she reaches out and places her fingertips against the top of his head. When he doesn't pull away she threads her fingers through his hair. He leans into her touch and she massages and gently scratches his scalp. He relaxes, and after awhile his hands fall away from his face. His eyes are red when he looks up at her. Then they flutter shut. Rey considers stepping forward and gathering him close, but refrains. He looks like he might pass out any second.

And he does. He mutters something under his breath that she doesn't catch before suddenly laying down, half his legs and feet dangling off the far edge couch. He's fast asleep in moments, and Rey briefly weighs the pros and cons of stretching out beside him. He's left enough room for her, and really, she could use a nap.

Hormones win out over reason.

\*\*

Rey awakens later with a jerk, moaning and wondering what century she's in. She's sweaty; there's a wall of softly snoring heat next to her. Rey stills, realizing where she is and who is fast asleep beside her. She smiles to herself then shudders when Ben shifts, fingertips brushing against her spine. Then he groans and changes positions, rolling onto his back and effectively knocking her clean off the couch. She lands on the floor with a squeak. Ben doesn't wake up.

Rey stands and brushes nonexistent dust off her clothes. There's a deep sigh that comes from neither her nor Ben. She jerks her head up and spots Poe standing in the kitchen. He methodically dips a tea bag into a mug, eyes drifting back and forth between her and Ben.

Poe sighs again before giving her a small smile. "Hey, Rey."

She gives him an incredibly uncomfortable wave, feeling blood rush to her cheeks. He'd seen them both on the couch, of course. "Ben fell asleep," she hastens to explain. "I was tired too so I just thought—"

Poe sets his mug down and crosses his arms over his chest. "Ben hasn't slept since...well, since."

Rey nods. "I figured as much." She rubs the back of her head, not sure why she's uncomfortable. She and Poe usually have easy, great conversations. "Well, I'll go ahead and get out of your hair."

"Rey." The way Poe says her name is unwaveringly gentle, and it makes Rey's heartbeat speed up. She feels a surge of unbidden dread. Whatever he's about to say, she has the feeling she won't like it.

"Rey, you know Ben adores you right? You know he'd do anything for you?"

She swallows, nods.

Poe picks up his mug again, then puts it down. He bites his bottom lip as he looks at her, and Rey can tell that's debating what to say. "Look, Ben is a, I mean he's a good looking guy. It's only natural, really, for you to feel...for you to feel the way you feel. Especially considering the history the two of you share."

Rey gapes at him, horrified.

Poe continues. "But Rey, I think it's important for you to know that, that it's not going to happen." He says it as softly as possible.

Rey takes in a shaky breath, not daring to say anything. Not daring to move.

"Even if ten years go by—you have to understand Rey because I don't want you to get hurt—even if ten years go by... Ben will never touch you. You're the best thing he has and he would never do anything to mess that up."

Her hands have turned into fists by her sides, and Rey is torn between feeling furious and deeply humiliated. "Y-You're wrong."

Poe looks genuinely sad for her. “Rey, he’s twenty-five. You’re sixteen. Even if he wanted—”

“So?” Rey snaps, cutting him off. “We’re both Millennials!”

Poe openly grimaces. “Actually, Ben and I are technically Gen X.”

Rey whirls and all but runs to the door, suddenly unable to be in that space. Her breaths are quick and harsh, and she feels the fear, feels the *rejection* sink into her mind and body and bones. Because of course Poe is right, she’s ridiculous for ever thinking that maybe, just maybe, that someday...

She goes to slam the door behind her but quickly stops it in mid-swing. If it slams it could wake Ben. That’s when the tears start. They don’t stop until she gets back to the home.

## Chapter End Notes

WHAT DO DUCKLINGS TURN INTO, BEN? HMM? Ugh, our babies are in so much pain. At least next chapter is Christmas? Also, the conversation between Ben and Poe after Ben wakes up wondering where they hell Rey went is really interesting. This is one of those moments where I curse the fact that this fic is from Rey’s POV. I’ll probably post it after the main story is finished.

Shout out to my bestie kikisothercat for texting me a month ago saying "Can 3PO please be a bird," to which I responded, "Of fucking course."

I was not expecting the response I got last chapter. You guys continue to completely blow me away with all your lovely comments and feedback. Thank you so much for continuing to be so wonderful!

If you liked let me know?



## 2006, part five

### Chapter Notes

Before we dive into this chapter, please [check out this awesome fanart](#) the lovely OliviaCordray did for the hospital scene in chapter 30. She also is delightful and created a playlist for this fic that has all the songs featured in every chapter. You can listen [here](#). I'll post my own when this fic is done. It's 90 songs deep and has songs for future chapters, but I'll share on the final update!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

I'm just a stupid fuck with brilliant luck  
And sometimes a bright idea  
So shower me in a chorus of compliments  
And verse I don't deserve  
I might run but I'll never hide

“Hangman” by Motion City Soundtrack

\*\*

Rey cannot remember the last time she's been so *angry* with Ben Solo.

The mall is packed; it's barely a week until Christmas, and Rey has finally convinced Ben to leave his apartment and come out shopping with her. They've been having a relatively good time. Ben is still much quieter than usual, and he follows Rey around with a sluggishness to his steps. But he'd eaten pizza with her at the food court and laughed over her excitement at spotting Santa. Plus, he isn't acting any different around her, despite the conversation she and Poe had had after Han's wake. She had thought, all in all, that this day is going as well as to be expected.

Until ten minutes ago.

Rey is seething as they stand in a Spencer's, eyes staring at the wall of t-shirts but unable to comprehend anything.

“Rey—”

“Shut up,” she snaps, hands clenching into fists.

Ben sighs, clearly growing exasperated. “Rey, can we please just talk—”

“What's there to talk about, Ben? What's it matter? Hmm? You're leaving *again*.” Her voice is louder than it should be, and Rey has never really been one to cause a scene, however—

Ben glares down at her, hands buried in the pockets of his jacket. “I told you, it’s for work—”

“So?!” Rey sees the cashier turn her head subtly in their direction. “I don’t even know what you do for work, or who your stupid client is, because you won’t *fucking* tell me.”

Ben briefly squeezes his eyes shut, as if summoning all his patience. “We’ve had this discussion before—”

Rey walks briskly around him, refusing to listen to any thing else he has to say. And to think that’d she’d been looking forward to this day all week! Only to find out that Ben is going out of the country for what could be three months—

She’s so furious she can’t think straight. She’s not sure what has her more upset, that he’s leaving or that he won’t even give her a proper explanation as to *why*. She exits the store and moves merges with the throng of shoppers, not even paying attention to where she’s headed. A large hand places itself on her shoulder and without bothering to check if it’s Ben’s, she viciously shoves it off.

“Rey.” Ben voice is low and right behind her. Rey turns sharply and slouches down onto a bench, refusing to look at Ben when he sits down next to her.

He tugs on her sleeve and she jerks her arm away. “*Don’t.*”

“Please understand,” he pleads. “I’m not going away to hurt you. But my boss let me have this whole month off for bereavement, and this trip is purely business. And the money is... It’s *good* money, Rey.”

“So?” she snarls, petulant and unwilling to bend. She firmly keeps her head turned away from him. But she knows he’s watching her closely. She can feel his eyes burning into her.

“Please, Rey.” Ben gently nudges her foot with his own. She immediately kicks at it. “Please don’t be angry with me right now. I can’t...” He lets out a noise of frustration before saying in a much softer voice, “You’re my best friend.”

If Rey had heard this twenty minutes ago all of her insides would’ve melted. She would’ve smiled over nothing for the rest of the day. Now, however, instead of melting, her insides twist and burn and suddenly she can’t deal with this situation anymore. It’s too much. Too much hurt, too much frustration, too much holding on to things she doesn’t understand.

Rey finally turns and looks at him, not allowing the softness in his gaze to deter her next words. “Really? Your ‘best friend’? Do you even know what that phrase means?”

She can tell that she’s hurt him. He swallows and immediately looks away from her, but she knows him too well. She continues before she can change her mind. “Because best friends are open and honest with each other, Ben. They tell each other things. Like, gee, where they work and who they work for! And they don’t spring the fact that they’re *leaving the country for a couple of months less than two weeks before they’re supposed to leave!*”

Her yelling has roped in a small but very invested audience. A few shoppers are lingering by their bench, pretending to be checking their bags.

Ben is staring at her, eyes a little wide. She takes in his face. And it hits her then that he's finally shaved. And his hair and clothes are clean. And he'd eaten earlier. A vast improvement over the last few times she's seen him since Han's death. And she realizes it's probably because of her. He'd made the effort to leave his apartment and shower all because of—

Her consuming affection for him wars with her genuine fury over him leaving. But, is she really angry? Or is she just deeply sad that she'll have to go through another period of time where she's separated from him because of him? Her heart pangs, and it *hurts*.

Rey feels the tears prick at her eyes and she takes a deep breath, trying to calm herself. Ben instantly picks up on her changing mood and his head tilts in concern. He opens his mouth to speak.

"Will you just take me home?" Rey whispers, swallowing. "I don't want to be here anymore."

Ben nods, closes his mouth. They drive the whole way back in silence.

\*\*

"Are you still mad at Ben?"

Rey looks up from her bed before quickly turning down the volume to the music she's listening to. It sounds upbeat but features incredibly depressing lyrics. It suits Rey's mood. "Huh?"

Rose is standing in their doorway, gaze mischievous. "I said, are you still mad at Ben?"

Rey shrugs and glances down at the assortment of items scattered across her bed. It's Christmas Day and the sun has set. She'd spent the night before staying at Finn's, and then Rose and Paige had come over to Nana's that morning for a massive homemade brunch. Then they'd all exchanged gifts and really, it had been quite lovely. She'd sketched and colored portraits of her friends in a cool superhero style for their gifts. Finn had already hung his up before she'd left.

And now Rey is sated and sleepy, but ultimately ready for this holiday to be over. For this year to be over.

"Well," Rose continues. "You might want to decide, and fast."

Rey looks up sharply. "Why?"

Rose smiles. "Because he's downstairs."

Rey practically leaps out of her bed, heart suddenly hammering. She's not sure why she's surprised. She knew he'd eventually show up to speak to her, especially since she's been

dodging his calls for the past week. He had even dragged himself to the studio, where she'd steadfastly ignored him, pretending to need to speak to Luke whenever Ben had moved hopefully in her direction. She was being childish, but Rey had found that she didn't care. Some tiny, ridiculous part of her hoped that maybe her ignoring him would somehow convince him not to leave.

She groans, glancing down at what she's wearing. A pair of sweatpants with holes in questionable areas, and a Nightmare Before Christmas sweatshirt that Rose had given her that morning. No time to change, however. She's practically out of her room before she doubles back and flings open the door to her closet.

She grabs Ben's Christmas present from where it had been buried under sweaters and coats and mismatched socks. She hadn't bothered to properly wrap it but... Ben probably wouldn't care.

She forces herself to move slowly down the stairs. Too fast and he might think she's happy to see him. Which she's *not*, thank you. She's still very, very upset—

Ben looks handsome. He's sitting in the kitchen, clearly waiting for her, which a small wrapped package resting on the table in front of him. He stands when he sees her, mouth quirking in a smirk at her sweatpants.

Rey sniffs and puts the bag with his gift next to the wrapped package, then crosses her arms over her chest. "Merry Christmas," she grumbles.

Ben moves, and then she's being enveloped into a massive hug. She squeaks at the unexpected contact, but something icy finally melts in her chest and she finds herself leaning into his embrace. She smiles, and doesn't mask it in time when he pulls back. Ben catches her expression and promptly mirrors it, and really who is Rey kidding.

She can never stay angry at Ben Solo for too long.

"I'm sorry, kid." His old endearment makes her feel warm all over. Ben glances away, runs a hand through his hair as he continues to apologize. "You were right."

This makes her raise an eyebrow. "I'm sorry, come again?"

He's trying to look nonchalant, but Rey spies the way the tips of his ears are turning red.

"You were right, about best friends being open with each other. I've haven't been open with you about a lot of things because I don't want to drag you into my bullshit."

"I *want* to be a part of your bullshit, Ben." The words zoom right out of her mouth before she can stop them. She forces herself not to wince at how desperate she'd sounded. This is it, she thinks. This is where Ben parrots Poe's words back to her, tells her that it's not going to happen and that she shouldn't be so raw with him, so willing to put herself on the line.

"I know you do," he says gently. "I haven't told you certain things, mostly because I've wanted to protect you. But...you're not a kid anymore." This statement does funny things to

Rey. Her head suddenly feels fuzzy and her body too warm.

Ben picks up the wrapped package and hands it to her. “Don’t, uh, tell your caretaker about this. I asked if I could give it to you and she technically told me no.”

Rey’s eyes go wide and she glances up at Ben, delighted. “Contraband?”

“Just open it.”

She pauses, her fingers poised over the gift. “Tell Poe nice wrapping. I *know* you didn’t do this.” Ben scowls at her, and she giggles as she yanks off the bow stuck on top before ripping into the paper. When the box is revealed she stares down at it in astonishment.

“Holy shit, Ben.”

He’s anxious. “If you don’t like it—”

“Holy *shit*, Ben!”

“Voice down Rey, Maz is not supposed to—”

“HOLY SHIT, BEN!” She flings her arms around his neck and presses her whole body against him. Ben lets out a surprised ‘oof’ and Rey squeals directly into his ear.

“OhmyGODthisisthebestpresenteverIcanFINALLYtextFinnandRoseinclass—”

Ben sets her down and she flings open the lid of the box containing her brand-new cellphone. It’s a sleek, silver Motorola Razr. Rey stares down at it in awe, feeling as if she could burst into tears out of pure joy.

“The guy at the store said those were pretty popular. I put you on my plan—Christ, Rey, please don’t cry...”

Ben has greatly underestimated what it means to give a sixteen-year-old girl her very first cell phone.

Rey rubs at her eyes, too happy to be embarrassed. “Thank you, Ben.” She beams up at him.

He nods, pleased. “It’s so we can talk. While I’m gone.”

The weight of his words settle on her and she cradles her new phone to her chest. “You promise?”

“I’ll call you every single day if you want.”

It feels as if a million beams from the sun have filled Rey’s brain. She can’t bring herself to form words; she’s too emotional. Instead she jabs a finger at the bag with his gift in it. Ben looks a little startled as he regards it, as if he’d been so caught up in giving Rey her gift he’d forgotten that he’s been given one as well.

He pulls a small rectangle out of the bag and starts unraveling the newspaper Rey had wrapped it in.

She finally finds her words right before it's revealed. "I technically need it back. It was my art project in school and my teacher wants to put it in the end of the year art show." She shrugs as if it's no big deal.

Ben quirks an eyebrow at her before pulling away the last bit of newspaper.

He looks at the painting for a long time. So long, that Rey begins jabbering, hoping her words will help cover up how suddenly nervous she is about him seeing it. Her anger toward him the past week had made her forget about the seriousness of this gift.

"I saw Han a few months before...well, before. And I noticed things about him that reminded me of you. It made me happy. I just thought...I don't know. I totally understand if you don't like it. It's probably not my best—"

The look Ben sends her makes her stop talking. He puts the painting down, traces his fingertips over the canvas. On the night Han had died, Rey had only had an outline of half a face. She soon realized what to do with it. She'd used old pictures Luke had of Han and blended half of his face with Ben's, who she'd painted from memory. Father blended with son look up at her from the table and she shifts her weight with nerves. The coloring could be better, and she's still not completely satisfied with how Han's nose turned out—

Ben engulfs her in another hug, and she returns it, breathing in everything about him.

"I don't know what to say," he says, chin moving as it rests on top of her head. His voice breaks, just a little bit.

"That's okay." Rey's words are muffled, but neither of them care. She inhales the fresh, clean scent of his shirt and ponders happily over how this Christmas went from being totally normal to, perhaps, the best Christmas she's ever had.

A thought crosses her mind, that she's already mentioned Han and she should really tell him about what his dad said, and after all her talk about best friends being open—

No. It's Christmas.

She'll definitely tell him soon, though.

Besides, Ben *still* hasn't told her why he's leaving or who he's working for. Rey closes her eyes against the onslaught of guilt, clings to him a little tighter before he finally pulls away.

Ben is gazing at her with such tenderness that she blushes. Then he clears his throat, turns, grabs the bow that Rey had yanked off her gift and promptly sticks it to the top of her head.

\*\*

She calls him ten minutes after he leaves on the guise of testing out her new phone.

## Chapter End Notes

If this feels like a transition chapter...it's 'cause it is LOL. Next chapter we'll head into 2007. And before y'all yell at me over Ben leaving again, just know that the next chapter is debatably the most Reylo chapter yet. 2007 is going to be a fun year ;)

Once again, I cannot heap enough praise on you guys for being such dope readers. You guys genuinely make my days with your lovely comments and enthusiasm.

If you liked let me know?

# 2007, part one

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I'll think about you, I'll dream about you  
I will not doubt you with the passing of time  
Should they kill me your love will fill me as warm as the bullets  
I'll know my purpose this all was worth this I won't let you down

“Alive With the Glory of Love” by Say Anything

\*\*

## January

Saturday, the 6th

Rey answers on the second ring. “Ben!”

She can hear the smile in his voice when he greets her. She rearranges herself on top of her bed, the afternoon sun leaking in through the curtains. “How is jolly ol’ London?”

He sighs into his phone. “You do realize no one here talks like that?”

“Well, I might need some pointers because you, sir, are talking to the new Gwendolen in my high school’s very sophisticated upcoming production of *The Importance of Being Earnest*.”

There’s a long pause. “Wait, seriously?”

“Finn convinced me. He said it’d be a fun thing for me, him, and Rose to all do together.”

“Yeah, okay.” There’s a honking noise and shouting, and Rey wonders if he’s walking down a street. “You barely show off your artwork even though it’s incredible. How are you going to perform in front of an audience?”

“Thanks, Ben. Your confidence in me is *staggering*.”

“Well, when is it?”

“The play? Not until April. Why?”

“Because I’ll need to make sure I’m back in time to see it.”

The nice thing about talking to Ben on the phone is that Rey can let her face break out into goofy grins without fear of him noticing. She takes advantage of this now. “I’ll keep you up to date. Anyway, what are you up to?”



“I just walked into a—*excuse me*—a pub, actually. I’m supposed to meet a...a coworker.”

This piques Rey’s interest. “Nice. Shady business in a shady pub.”

“No.”

She waits a moment, listens to him order a pint. “You flew all the way out to England to do drug exchanges?” Rey is already grinning.

“For god sake Rey, I already told you. I’m not dealing drugs.”

“It is a heist?”

“No.”

“Are you carrying a big briefcase filled with money? Are you dressed like the guys from Men in Black? Are you a hitman?!”

“No, Rey, we’ve talked about this a hundred times—Wait. You’re laughing.”

She snorts into the phone. “I’ll have new theories next week.”

“Wonderful,” he deadpans, and Rey’s cheeks already hurt from smiling. “Wait, I think I see my coworker.”

“You don’t know what he looks like?”

“It’s a she, and no, not until right now...” He trails off. “Rey, I have to go. I’ll call you later, okay?”

“Yeah, sure,” Rey says, trying not to show how bummed she is at their conversation being cut off so soon.

She hears a crisp, feminine voice introduce herself as “Phasma”. Then *click*.

\*\*

Friday, the 26th

Despite the cold, Rey stands outside her school, too on edge to sit still anywhere. She bobs up and down on her feet as she waits for Ben to pick his phone.

“Hey, kid.”

Her bottom lip is already wobbling and she sucks in a quick breath, trying to calm herself before she says—

“What’s wrong?”

“Hey, Ben, it’s—I mean everything is fine I guess.” Her voice breaks and she squeezes her eyes shut. “I can’t do this.”

“Can’t do what?” he asks quickly. “Rey?”

“This fucking *play*. You were right. There’s no way I can stand in front of everyone and like, perform and say my lines and shit! Plus, despite what Finn says I am garbage at this—”

“Rey. You told me two days ago that things were going great and that you’d already had all your lines memorized.”

“Yeah, but we started working on our blocking and stuff today and I-I don’t think—”

“Deep breaths.”

She obeys, her breath forming clouds in the cold air as it whooshes out of her lungs. “Sorry. I’m just maybe panicking a little. Rose tried to talk me down and I...I was really rude to her.”

“What did you say?”

Rey chews on her bottom lip in guilt. “I was crying in the dressing room and she tried to talk to me and I snapped, Ben, I just told her to fuck off and that she wasn’t helping and...” She can feel the tears start up again. “I should never have auditioned for this play, you were right —”

“First off all.” Rey hears creaking over the phone, and suspects that Ben might be shifting in his hotel bed. “Don’t listen to me. I’m an idiot and I’m sure I’m wrong and that you’ll be great. Second, Rose isn’t going to stop being your friend because you were a bitch to her one time.”

Rey pauses in her pacing. “I was a bitch, wasn’t I?”

He makes a noncommittal noise and she smiles a little.

“I should go apologize. Finn invited me to join them for burgers. Guess I should go.”

“Enjoy your friends, Rey. Also...” Rey waits for a long moment before he says, “Never mind. Goodnight.” *Click*.

\*\*

## **February**

Wednesday the 14th

“Happy Valentine’s Day!”

Ben speaks around a mouthful of food. “Seriously?”

“Well, since you’re in the City of Love and it’s the day of love—”

“Since when are you so sentimental?”

Rey is laying in her pajamas, staring at the ceiling. “I’m in a good mood, okay? The guy who plays Algernon on the play asked me out on a date for Friday.”

“That so?”

This is Rey’s least favorite part of phone conversations with Ben. She can’t see his face.

“Yep. I had no idea he even liked me like that.”

There’s a scoffing noise and Ben grumbles something just beyond the reach of her hearing.

“How old is he? Where is he taking you?” A pause. “What’s his name?”

Rey’s cheeks feel pink. “Alright *dad*, don’t you think those are enough questions?”

“No. Now, answer them.”

“He’s my age and we’re going to the movies, you oaf.”

“The movies. How original.”

“Oh, hush up. At least I have a date.” She sits up, suddenly overwhelmingly alarmed. “I mean, unless, unless you’ve found a nice French girl or whatever.”

“No.” Back to chewing. “You didn’t tell me his name.”

Rey sags a little with relief. “It’s Kyle. You’re noisier than an old lady.”

“Just when it comes to you. Anyway, I have to go pick up a few things for my boss. I’ll talk to you later.”

Rey looks over at the clock on her bedside table. It’s already evening time here. “Isn’t it really late there?”

“Yep.” There’s a ruffling sound, as if he’s pulling on a jacket.

“Definitely drugs.”

There’s a massive sigh. *Click*.

\*\*

Saturday the 16th

Rey laughs sleepily to herself as the phone rings at 7am. She should’ve known he couldn’t wait until a reasonable hour to talk to her. She flips open her phone and brings it to her ear, thankful that Rose is such a heavy sleeper.

“Ben, do you know how fucking early it is?”

“How was your date?” He sounds nonplussed.

She nibbles at her thumbnail, pleased. “It was fine. He’s nice.”

“Hmm. Just ‘fine’ and ‘nice’, huh?”

“What’s wrong with those words? Better than being ‘bad’ or ‘scary’.”

She can almost see his expression darkening. “If you *ever* have a date that’s ‘scary’—”

“Calm down, Ben. Besides, he asked me out again and I declined.”

He actually sounds surprised. “Oh.”

“I don’t really see him in that way.” Rey nestles into her blankets, feeling warm and tired. “No point leading him on just so I can say I have a boyfriend.”

Ben still sounds surprised. “That’s...actually pretty mature of you, Rey.”

Rey doesn’t point out the fact that frankly, she mostly turned Kyle down for a second date because of *someone else*. Instead she says, “Thanks! So, what’s on your agenda today?”

They talk until Rose sits up and flings a pillow in Rey’s direction.

\*\*

Sunday the 28th

“*Ben*,” Rey hisses into her phone as she creeps out of her bedroom and into the hallway. The home is completely dark and she tiptoes down the stairs as quietly as she can. “It is the middle of the night!” she whisper shouts.

“I’m sorry.” He sounds breathless. “I know it’s incredibly late but I just had to talk to you while I... Rey, I’m looking at the Mona Lisa right now.”

Rey freezes on the fourth step. “Really? You’re at The Louvre?” Her voice has raised a little in excitement, and she cringes as she trots the rest of the way down the stairs.

“Yes. It’s beautiful. I don’t think I’m supposed to have my phone out but...I wish you were here, seeing this with me.”

Rey leans against the wall, hand pressed to her heart. “Me too.” And maybe it’s PMS or maybe it’s because it’s very late, but she finds herself saying, “I hate that you’re so far away. Off having adventures and seeing incredible art while I’m stuck here.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll come back for you, kid. I promise.” He sounds wistful, and Rey isn’t sure if it’s because of what he just said or if it’s because of Mona Lisa.

Rey flicks on the kitchen light, thinking she might as well have cookies while she’s up. She’s pouring a glass of milk, about to ask Ben if he’d be willing to give her an over-the-phone tour when—

“Shit. No, sir, I am not on my ph—” *Click*.

\*\*

## March

Monday the 5th

Rey moans into the phone by way of greeting. She's lying in a mountain of tissues and there's a half-eaten bowl of soup on her nightstand. Rose is staying at Finn's tonight in order to escape her toxic germs. Which is fair; Rey wouldn't want to be around a roommate as sick as she currently is.

"Uh. Are you okay?"

"I have the flu," she groans, rubbing a hand along her feverish face.

"Oh, Rey, I'm so sorry. Do you want me to go?"

"No. We didn't get to talk yesterday." Rey is debating whether getting up and pulling on another sweatshirt is worth the energy.

"But if you're sick—"

"Distract me," she commands, leaving no room for debate. "What are you doing?"

"I'm—*hey, watch it you fuck!*—just on a walk. The weather is nice."

"That sounds lovely." It comes out slurred.

"Rey, are you sure you don't want me to... You sound delirious."

Rey waves a dismissive hand to no one in particular. "It's just Nyquil. I had some."

"How much?"

"I don't know, a couple of little cups worth or whatever." Then she starts giggling.

"Wait, holy shit, Rey—"

"Oh! That reminds me, Luke asked about you on Friday."

There's a pause. "How did *that* remind you of Luke?"

"He wants to know if you're going to come for your tree painting. If not, he's gonna hang it in the entryway next to his 'Two Suns' piece."

There's a short silence that follows, as if Ben is gathering his words. "No. No, I guess he can hang it up."

Rey dabs at her nose with a tissue. "I think he misses you at the studio. I know I do."

"I can't, Rey. Not yet."

She nods, mind thinking over Luke and the studio and Ben's estranged relationship with his family. And she's not sure if it's the cold medicine or if it's because she doesn't think she can keep it in any longer. "I saw Han."

"What?" he snaps.

"A couple of months before. I saw Han. He came to the studio looking for you. And he, he asked me to tell you to call him. And I forgot. Ben, I forgot. And I'm so fucking sorry. I shouldn't have forgotten something so important. And then...and then he died Ben and I felt so guilty, have been feeling so guilty. And what if I hadn't been so horrible and had remembered?" She's crying. When did that start? "And it might have made all the difference and I'm so sorry, Ben."

*Click.*

She wails. He calls back two minutes later.

"I'm sorry for hanging up, Rey. I'm sorry. I just. Sometimes I feel too much."

"I know." Somehow, she manages to sound dignified. "It's okay."

"Don't...don't beat yourself up over that, kid. Frankly, it wouldn't have made a difference. I still wouldn't have reached out."

Rey curls up on her side, facing the wall. "I know."

Silence stretches between them for a minute or two.

"My dad—My dad was always the one I was angriest with." Ben's voice is so soft. Rey's heartbeat picks up, suddenly realizing they're entering uncharted territory. Ben *never* talks about his parents.

"Why?"

Ben lets out a long exhale. "When my mom insisted on sending me away, my dad argued with her. I could hear them screaming at each other each night while they thought I was sleeping. My dad thought it would be best to keep the family together, that I needed to stay. My mom thought differently. And Leia won." He's quiet for a long time. "She won because my dad stopped fighting for me."

"Ben," Rey breathes. "I'm sure she thought she was doing what was best."

"Right." Ben scoffs into the phone. "Before the incident in eighth grade, I got depressed. I felt alone, like no one understood me. And I was angry all the time. Destructive. I thought about asking Leia if I could see someone because I knew back then that there was something wrong with me. But I couldn't. She acted like there wasn't an issue, and I didn't want to disappoint her. Then, one day I got a migraine. Went to grab some Advil from the kitchen. But all the medications in the cupboard were gone. She *hid* them. Because she was afraid I would do something to myself. OD on fucking Tylenol or whatever. She *knew* there was

something wrong me and never even asked. She's great at attacking other people's problems and ignoring her own." There's a pause. "So, that's why I don't call my mom."

Rey has never heard Ben sound so bitter. She swallows back the excess of snot and tears threatening to come pouring from her face. "I'm glad you told me." Then, because she can blame it on the cold medicine later, she says, "There's nothing wrong with you, Ben. Not to me."

She desperately wishes she can see him. "Thank you," he finally says. And she can't tell what he's thinking.

But she can sense his churning emotions. She opts to distract him. "Tell me about the last thing you ate. I want full descriptions."

"Really?"

"Look, I haven't had solids in two days. Tell me. About. The food."

\*\*

Saturday the 24th

He calls right after she gets out of the shower. She answers despite not having on a speck of clothes. Ben doesn't need to know that, of course.

"You're alive!" She exclaims into the phone. "It's been four days and you weren't answering my calls."

Ben sounds vaguely embarrassed. "That's, ah, because I was in jail."

Rey freezes, towel in one hand. "What?"

"I got into a bar fight. Honestly, it's not a big deal. German police are actually very nice. Most of the issues stemmed from me being an American. Paperwork."

"You—Ben!"

He has the decency to sound a little ashamed. "Really, Rey, don't worry."

"Of course I'm going to worry!" She attempts to wring out her hair with one hand. "You can't just—Ben Solo! What am I going to do with you." She sighs. "Did you at least win the fight?"

"Naturally." She can hear his grin. Then he makes a hissing sound. "Fucked up my left hand a little, though."

Rey frowns at her reflection in the mirror. "See, Ben, this is why we don't punch random people in bars." She clucks her tongue.

"Sorry to disappoint you."

She rolls her eyes. “You could never disappoint me.”

His tone turns surprisingly somber. “I wish you wouldn’t say things like that.”

“Why?”

“Because one day I’m sure I *will* disappoint you.”

Rey glares down at her towel. “I’ve said it once and I’ll say it again. You’re the best person I know. So, like, get over yourself dude.” She throws all her attitude into the last sentence, and she thinks she might’ve heard Ben chuckle.

“What are you listening to?” he asks, abruptly changing the subject.

“Oh, you can hear that?” Rey looks over at Paige’s old, faithful speaker. It’s currently propped up next to the mirror, blasting music. “Here. Check it out.” She sits her phone next to the speaker and turns up the volume. She dances around the bathroom, drying herself off and slipping on clean clothes. Then she picks her phone back up and sings very loudly into it.

Yes, she can definitely hear Ben laughing now.

\*\*

Friday the 30th

“Ben!” Rey is trying in vein to hold the bust of her costume closed. She doesn’t quite fill it out, and the baggy gap is fucking embarrassing. Good thing final fittings haven’t happened yet. “I told you, I’m rehearsing.”

“I know.” He sounds chipper. “I was just wondering if you wanted to get milkshakes after it’s over.”

Rey rolls her eyes. “Ben, I already told you, I’m not getting a coffee milkshake and drinking it over the phone for you—”

“That won’t be necessary.”

She huffs. “Ben—”

“I’m home, Rey.”

## Chapter End Notes

Okay. This is my favorite chapter so far. Our babies are pathetic in the cutest way.

Dear readers, I am going out of town and won’t be back until Saturday. Hopefully I’ll be able to update before then, but if not definitely expect an update by Sunday at the latest.



Once again, thank y'all so much for all the wonderful comments and love you guys continuously sprinkle on this fic. Your comments mean the world to me, truly.

If you liked let me know?

## Friday, March 30th 2007

### Chapter Notes

Welp. Quite a few of y'all mentioned that you were excited to read their reunion. And, uh, I actually hadn't been planning on including it in the next chapter. Buuuuut because I love you guys... Also, TwiztedCookie13 said in the comments for chapter 32 that Rey would probably glomp Ben when she sees him. And I agree. So, yeah, here's their reunion. Hope this will sate you guys until Sunday! I'm off to pack.

Rey parks Maz's car at the local 24-hour diner that she and Ben always go to for their milkshakes. She hops out of the driver's seat and slams the door behind her, neck already craning for a glimpse of him through the windows.

He's standing at the front counter, his height and bulk a dead giveaway.

She all but sprints into the diner, happiness and excitement making her face crack into a grin. There's also a fluttering, happy kind of anxiety bubbling around in the pit of her stomach. All of it is too much at once, and when the front door chimes all her emotions surge her body into action.

Ben comes into full view, back facing her, and she rushes him.

In retrospect, maybe she shouldn't have thrown herself full force at him. Knowing that'd he'd catch her is not good enough reasoning to jump on him. But hindsight is always twenty-twenty. Rey throws her arms around his neck and crushes her body to his side. There's a crunching sound and icy cold liquid bursts and covers her chest, arms, and neck, soaking her sweatshirt.

Rey loosens her grip on Ben and winces, risking a glance up at him. He's staring down at her, wide eyed and alarmed.

"Uh." Rey gingerly let's go and steps back. Most of Ben's milkshake had gotten on her, which is good because she's pretty positive Ben's black leather jacket is authentic. She can't help but let out a bark of laughter. "Hey, Ben."

Ben stares at her for a long moment before the tips of his mouth curve in amusement. He glances down at the demolished styrofoam cup on the floor by his feet. There's some milkshake splattered on his shoes, but he seems unbothered.

He looks back up at her and shakes his head at the mess Rey has made. There's milkshake in her *hair*. "I was going to drink that."

Rey wipes ice cream off her neck with the back of her hand, shivering at the cold. “You’ll just have to lick it off of me then.”

She freezes, brain instantly replaying her words in big, bold letters. Alarm bells go off in her head. She looks up at Ben, slightly horrified because she didn’t mean it like that she *didn’t* but—It’s already out there.

So she props her hands onto her hips and waits for his response.

Ben is staring intently at her face. Then his gaze *flicks* down once, and Rey can’t tell if he’s simply taking in her messy state or if it’s something else. She simultaneously wants to say another thing that can be easily misconstrued *and* sink into the floor to die.

Ben mouth does that weird *thing* where he works his lips together. Then he exhales through his nose, almost as if he’s irritated, before turning around and pulling back out his wallet. He plops cash onto the countertop. “I need another one of whatever I just ordered.” Then he glances back at Rey over his shoulder. “An, uh, a lot of napkins.”

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They sit in the diner and talk for three hours.

## 2007, part two

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sweet Jesus I swear that I love you  
No matter what the chariot says  
I'm biased and by this I'll judge you  
On weakness wrapped up in my own innocence

“Now That You’re Home” by Manchester Orchestra

\*\*

Rey is very proud of herself. It’s Thursday, the opening night of her school play, and she has not thrown up. Despite the fact that her stomach feels as if it’s about to crawl its way up her esophagus and out of her mouth, she has *not* thrown up.

Rose, however, is not so lucky.

Rey rubs soothing circles into Rose’s back as she gags, hunched over a toilet in the girl’s bathroom. The play starts in fifteen minutes. “You’re going to be fine,” Rey reassures her, wincing as Rose spits into the water.

Rose groans, getting to her feet and dabbing her mouth with some toilet paper. She looks alarmingly pale. “Thanks, Rey. I think I’m going to be okay now.” She straightens out her voluminous skirt before reaching out and tucking a piece of Rey’s long, expertly curled hair back into place.

Rey keeps a close eye on her as Rose washes her hands and rinses out her mouth. The color is finally beginning to come back to Rose’s cheeks. “Are you sure? I can run and tell—”

Rose grabs her hand, and both girls exit the bathroom. “Nope. Finn will never let me live it down.”

Rey shakes her head a little, careful not to let Rose see her quirked eyebrow. Somethings never change.

\*\*

The play goes off without a hitch. Once, Rey does forget one of her lines in a brief pause that seems to last for a million years. She recovers quickly, stuttering over the words a little as they rush to get out of her mouth. It’s arguably one of the most terrifying moments of her entire life.

After, she and the rest of the cast head out into the main lobby, tired but excited. Rey has changed out of her costume but is still in full stage makeup. She can’t be bothered to take it off until she’s back home in her own bathroom.

Finn's Nana finds them first. She takes her time hugging all three of them, enveloping them in her arms and squeezing tightly. "You were all wonderful!" she exclaims before grabbing Finn and kissing him on both cheeks. He smiles a little, too content with the attention to be truly embarrassed. He waves goodbye to Rose and Rey, promising to see them on Sunday for Easter dinner.

When he and his Nana are out of earshot, Rey leans over and whispers in Rose's ear, "Is this like last year? Are we going to have to go to church with them again if we want the food?"

Rose nods, and Rey tries not to let her disappointment visibly show.

There's a squeeze on her shoulder and Rey turns, peering down into Maz's proud face. Her caretaker taps her chin lightly with a program. "Very good job, child."

Luke strolls up behind Maz, and Rey ducks her head a little, happy and embarrassed and pleased that the two adults she's known the longest have both shown up to support her. "Agreed," he says simply, blue eyes crinkling with a smile. "Looks like you have a potential future in multiple artistic pursuits, Rey."

Rey feels her chest swell a little. "Thanks! I did forget one of my lines once, though. I hope the pause wasn't for too long—"

She trails off at the sight of someone walking right up to her, bouquet of flowers hiding their face. Her stomach flips, because if it's Ben Solo behind all those beautiful flowers she might just—

It's only Poe.

He lowers the bouquet and then makes a show of handing them to her in a flourish. "For you, Rey. I had no idea I've been rubbing shoulders with such talent all these—"

"Thanks." Rey takes the flowers from him and presses her lips together in a thin line. She's seen Poe a handful of times since they had that horrible talk last November, and she's still not quite sure she's forgiven him for it yet. However, at the dejected look on his face she can't help but sigh. "They're really pretty." She gives him a genuine smile. "How's BB-8?"

Poe, sensing the change in her attitude, grins and hugs her quickly. "Misses you, of course." He pats her shoulder happily and then turns his attention to Rose. "I didn't know you were performing too! I would have brought you flowers as well—"

She spots *him*, toward the front of the lobby by the main doors. His eyes are flicked up toward the ceiling and his left hand is buried in his pocket. Rey shakes her head slightly as she observes Ben, who has never felt very comfortable in a crowd.

Rey excuses herself and makes her way over to him, waving dramatically until she finally catches his attention. His mouth quirks when he finally looks in her direction and she jogs the rest of the way until she's standing in front of him. "You came!"

He frowns. "Of course I did."

“Well, a high school play is hardly what Ben Solo does in his down time. Plus, I wasn’t sure if you’d be working.” She bites her bottom lip.

Ben looks slightly offended. “I told you when you first got the part that I would come. And, you know...” He reaches up and awkwardly runs a hand through his hair. “You were actually pretty good. Great, really. Your English accent was convincing.”

“Thanks!” she exclaims, beaming under his praise.

Ben tilts his head. “I didn’t realize how long your hair has gotten.”

“Oh?” Rey fingers the ends of her hair, shiny and stiff with hairspray. Rose had truly outdone herself in the dressing room, spending over an hour curling it to perfection and getting it to stay put. Rey has never felt more done up. “I was thinking of getting it cut. I don’t think I could survive another summer with hair this long.”

Ben shrugs. “Go for it. I’m sure it’ll look good no matter what.” He smiles down at her.

Rey’s heart flips in her chest. He probably doesn’t mean anything by that. He’s probably just being nice and she’s thinking way too much into this—

He holds up a single rose that he has clutched in his right hand, suddenly looking intensely uncomfortable. “Um. Poe says you’re supposed to give flowers after a performance. So, I grabbed this for you.” He does not make eye contact as he hands it over.

“Thanks,” Rey breathes, taking the flower and staring down at it. It’s just a basic rose, nothing truly special about it, but it seems more beautiful than the entire bouquet that Poe has given her. She tucks it into her hair, behind her ear.

Ben’s expression turns soft.

\*\*

“Do I look acceptable for church?” Rey asks, holding her arms out and showing her outfit off to Rose. She’s wearing a jean skirt with black leggings underneath, and a black shirt with mesh sleeves.

Rose blinks at her. She, in contrast, is in pastels. “That’s a lot of black for Easter. But, I’m an atheist so. I don’t particularly care.”

Rey laughs, tossing some of her hair over her shoulder. She really *does* need to get it cut.

Rey has never put a lot of thought into religion. Maz worships at the church of believing-in-whatever-the-hell-you-want, and Rey has no recollection of even knowing about religion before coming to the home. She does like the spirituality of nature, in the way drawing the sunset and the wind rustling her hair and clothes makes her feel, but otherwise doesn’t mull over that sort of thing like others do.

Finn’s Nana, however, has been going to church every Sunday since the day she was born, and if it means making the old woman happy and partaking in a celebratory meal with her,

then Rey can sit through an hour-long church service.

Finn holds in his laugh when he and Nana pick Rey and Rose. He turns in the front seat so that he can face them. “You look very *festive*, Rey.” Then he snorts. Rey’s cheeks haven’t even turned red before Nana is already clapping him on the back of the head.

An hour later Rey is sitting still, staring at the back of the head of the person sitting in the pew in front of her, blocking out pretty much everything that the pastor is saying. Finn had told her that it would be considered rude to doodle during the service, so her hands fiddle with the purposely distressed hem of her skirt. She runs over her lines from the play in her head; their final performance would be tomorrow night.

Rose sneezes next to her, making Rey jump and promptly bringing her back into the present. The young pastor is excited, obviously reaching a pinnacle point in his message, his voice loudly echoing around the sanctuary.

“Humans don’t look at the forests and mountains and oceans and think, oh, how beautiful, there must be a God. Forests and mountains and oceans look at the way humans can love each other and think, oh, how beautiful, there must be a God.”

The air is still, and Rey’s mind whirls over the words. She thinks, unbidden, of Ben.

Ben handing her a rose and being shy about it. Sitting on top of his old car on the side of the road, flicking a crushed soda can at his face. The way his laugh sounds over the phone when there is a sea separating them. The way he makes her feel safe.

Could loving Ben Solo be a spiritual experience? If so, she’ll worship at his altar forever.

\*\*

Nana drops off Rey and Rose at the home, both girls laden down with leftovers. Nana speaks directly to Rey before she can get out of the car. “Would you be a dear and run a plate over to Mr. Skywalker’s? That man needs a good home cooked meal.”

Rey contains her laughter, picturing how scandalized Luke would be knowing someone had referred to him as “Mr. Skywalker”. She nods, waving goodbye to Finn and Nana, she and Rose watching as they drive away.

Maz lets Rey borrow her car with no trouble, and in no time Rey is parking in the studio lot next to Luke’s car and...

Ben’s car is here too. After he’d totaled his BMW he’d replaced it with a Camaro. It suits Ben more anyway, in Rey’s opinion.

This must mean that Ben is *here*, and the realization causes Rey’s heart to soar. She’s out of the car and in the building quickly, quietly closing the unlocked front door behind her. She wonders if they’re sitting in the kitchen-office having coffee, if they’re finally putting things

---

There's shouting, and Rey's heart goes from soaring to plummeting in seconds. To her shock, the shouting is coming from *Luke*. Neither man must have heard her come inside.

"You will get *caught*, Ben! This will not last forever, what Snoke is having you do. This isn't a game that you will come out of unscathed! You're messing around with people's *money*, Ben—"

Rey gasps, right hand coming up to cover her mouth.

"Since when do you give a shit what I do?! You never have before!"

"That's not fair, Ben. You know that's not true."

There's the sound of a door slamming, and then marching footsteps. Rey freezes, eyes darting to the couch, wondering how lame it would be to try and hide behind it—

"Think of Rey," Luke pleads, causing both Rey and the footsteps to still. "If she finds out about this it'll break her heart."

"*Don't you dare bring her into this.*" Ben's voice sounds almost feral in his anger. The footsteps pick up again and then Ben is barreling into the entryway, clutching the painting that he'd given Luke permission to display. Luke is right behind him. Both men freeze when they see Rey, who is still standing by the front door, plate of Easter dinner clutched in her left hand.

She wants to die.

Shock flits across Ben's face, and Rey winces, not quite sure what to expect next. Frustration? Irritation? Maybe he'll scoff at her—

Instead it's much worse. Ben's shock is quickly replaced by hurt, then his eyes narrow at her. "How long have you been standing there?"

Rey's mouth opens and closes, completely at a loss on how to form words. "Um—"

"So instead of letting us know you were here, you just stood there and listened to a conversation that was none of your business?" Ben's hurt has melted into...betrayal. Before she can answer he moves swiftly past her, careful not to let his shoulder bump into hers.

"Ben, wait!" Rey calls, reaching out and letting her fingers curl around his bicep.

The look he shoots her is flinty, and he pulls his arm out of her grip before exiting the studio, letting the door slam shut behind him. Rey moves to the front window, staring out of it at Ben's retreating figure, panic unfurling inside her. She's fucked up she's fucked up she's fucked up—

Luke sighs from behind her. "Rey, you must know by now how rude eavesdropping is."

She nearly hurls the wrapped plate of food at him.



## Chapter End Notes

I hope everyone is having a lovely Easter! Or, if you don't celebrate, a lovely Sunday! Easter in 2007 was on April 8th, a week after Ben arrived home. Worked out pretty perfectly, huh? Also, today my mom gave me a Rey candy dispenser that talks if you press a button. It's "from the Easter bunny". I am in my late twenties.

And don't fret, the next chapter will be fun. There will be more of what we had in the drabble I posted a few days ago :D Also, thank you to everyone who wished me well on my trip! It was lovely. And so are you guys! <3

If you liked let me know?

## 2007, part three

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

You better understand  
That I won't hold your hand  
But if it helps you mend  
Then I won't stop it  
Go on and save yourself  
And take it out on me

“Cochise” by Audioslave

\*\*

Two days after Easter, on her seventeenth birthday, Ben calls. He doesn't apologize, exactly, more like grumbles that maybe, *perhaps* he had overreacted. Rey huffs and sets her phone down on her bedside table without hanging up the phone. Ten minutes later, when she realizes he's still on the line, she decides to forgive him.

\*\*

Rey is already regretting this.

It's 8am on a Saturday morning in mid-May, and instead of sleeping in, she's with Ben as he parks his Camaro in front of Fett's MMA Training and Kickboxing.

She gets out of the car slowly, eyeing the dark entrance leading in into the gym while Ben grabs his bag out of the backseat. He's wearing simple gym shorts and a black tank top, his muscular arms and broad shoulders on full display. Rey is wondering how she's going to manage the next hour or two being in close proximity to *that*.

She should never have complained about losing an arm wrestling match to Finn in front of him. It had landed her here.

“Are you coming?” Ben is standing several strides in front of her, one eyebrow raised expectantly.

Rey sighs and follows him, pulling her long hair into a messy bun on top of her head. She and Ben sort of match; she's also in simple gym shorts and an old black tank top with holes scattered in random places. She adjusts her sports bra a bit and tries not to dwell on the fact that she's actually about to work out. With Ben.

They walk into the front entrance, where Rey had been expecting a wall of cool air to hit her. Instead, the inside is not only as hot as outside, but it's stuffier.

“Is there no A/C?” she asks, standing next to Ben where he’s paused at the front counter. There are trophies and championship belts littered all over this front entryway, and is that a picture of who she presumes to be the owner with *Mike Tyson*?

Before Ben can answer, said owner walks into the front room from a back office. He grins at Ben and nods a greeting before settling his gaze on her. He blinks in surprise. “Solo, you brought me a guest! You never bring guests.”

Ben nods back, mouth lifting a little. “She complained about losing an arm wrestling match.”

The owner, a short, beefy dark-skinned man with very bright, white teeth, grins in anticipation. “We can fix that here.”

Rey nearly groans.

Her regret intensifies moments later when she’s handed a waiver. Her eyes skim over the form before she signs it and pushes it toward the owner. She’s then given a pair of hand wraps, which she has no idea what to do with, and a pair of battered blue boxing gloves. Rey stares down at them for a moment, then resigns herself to a miserable two hours.

She follows Ben, who is a walking ball of energy, through another set of doors into a massive warehouse that serves as the main room for the gym. There is no one else here aside from the two of them, probably because everyone with sense is still in bed. A section of floor holds rows of hanging punching bags, there are two fighting cages, a boxing ring, and a large section of floor covered in a spongy mat. “For the jiu-jitsu classes,” Ben explains, noticing her gaze.

“How long have you been coming here?” Rey asks, feeling very much out of her element.

“Uh, about six years or so? I find working out here can be, uh, helpful.” Ben shrugs, tossing his bag down by the punching bags. Rey assumes that this is where they put on their gloves and start, uh, boxing or whatever, but—

Ben moves towards a set of back doors that can only lead outside.

“What are you doing?” Rey asks, putting down her borrowed wraps and gloves in order to follow him.

“We need to warm up first.”

A swirl of unease curves in Rey’s stomach, and once again she is *kicking herself* for allowing this to happen. She could be blissfully asleep right now!

Outside there’s a back parking lot that’s littered with massive tires. Ben hops in place a few times to loosen his limbs. “So, today I was thinking we’ll jog around the building and then, after the first lap we’ll flip a tire once. Then we’ll jog another lap, then two tire flips. Work our way up to ten. Got it?”

“I hate you.”

His brown eyes twinkle at the sharpness of her tone, and he *smirks*. The bastard. “Try to keep up.” Then Ben is off, much faster than his bulk and height should allow.

The competitive side of Rey rears its hideous head, and with a grit of her teeth she takes off after him.

\*\*

Rey is going to die.

No, she *has* died. She’s pretty sure it happened after lap six, where she’d gone to flip a tire only to have it flop back down on her foot. She’d teared up at the pain and let out a very pathetic whimper. Thankfully, Ben had not witnessed it. He’d been jogging on the other side of the building, halfway through his ninth lap.

Rey has realized that’s she’s painfully out of shape. She might be naturally skinny and blessed with a high metabolism, but physically she’s useless. This realization makes her feel weak, and she doesn’t like it. She forces herself around the building for the tenth time, nearly falling down with relief when she turns the last corner and spies Ben sitting on top of a tire, waiting for her.

She forces herself through the last ten tire flips with surprisingly aplomb. Perhaps that’s because she can feel Ben’s eyes boring into her, watching as she tries not to struggle with the ninth flip. The last one is both the hardest and the easiest. She crouches down, careful to lift with her legs and not her back. She hauls the tire up, rubber grimy underneath her hands. It lands with a satisfying thud and she turns to face Ben, legs shaky.

Her ragged breathing is *embarrassing*, and wispy bits of her hair stick to her sweaty face. She is soaked in sweat, cotton clothes sticking to her skin.

Ben is standing and walking over to her. “Are you okay, kid?”

She gasps for breath, nodding. She bends down and places her hands on her knees. “Piece... of...cake.”

That smug look returns. “Good. Now we can finally get to the main workout. I thought you’d never finish.”

Rey scowls at his back as she trudges back inside, wondering how on earth he does this practically every day. Although...she supposes no one can look like Ben does without putting in the hard work.

The air in the gym is warm and stifling. “Is there seriously no A/C?” she whines, following Ben over to the hanging punching bags. He’s already rummaging around in his bag, yanking out his own gloves, wraps, and a bottle of water.

The guy from the office answers for Ben. He appears behind a bag, forehead slick from exertion. “Nope! We *want* you to sweat.”

Ben has taken her into hell.

She watches blearily as Ben puts on his hand wraps. He's trying to explain the process to her, but she's already so sweaty and tired, she can't focus. She holds up her own wraps, stares at them for a moment, and then looks over at Ben helplessly.

He laughs a little, stepping right up to her and taking her wraps from her. He takes her right hand, bare fingertips brushing over hers, before guiding her thumb into the hole and showing her how to properly wrap up her hands.

"Weave it through your fingers like—good, good. Make sure to focus on your knuckles, you'll want those protected."

Rey's mind can't quite concentrate on his words, however. She's too busy watching, entranced, as his hand guides the fabric around her knuckles and palm. She hadn't realized how much larger his hands are compared to hers. Ben has nice hands, actually, now that Rey is getting the opportunity to study them. They're steady, *strong*. But yet, he maneuvers his fingers around her hers with the utmost gentleness. He's caused a lot of violence with these hands, she muses. But never toward her. Never.

Something large and hot drops in the pit of her stomach. Rey swallows.

When her hands are fully wrapped, Rey slowly looks up at him, biting her bottom lip. Ben studies her hands for a moment, admiring his work, before his gaze flicks up to meet hers. The heat in her stomach drops further and suddenly she wants to reach out and *touch him*, see if his skin is as hot as hers. Ben certainly *looks* flushed—

"Hey, Ben, it's your turn to pick the music!" the owner calls out, and Rey feels disappointment wash over her.

The moment, if it can even be called that, breaks, and Ben moves away towards the corner of the room where Rey spots speakers. Seconds later pounding music fills the nearly empty gym, and Rey shoves her hands into her gloves, suddenly feeling restless.

Ben shows her how to punch, and even though there's feet of space between them, the energy is charged. Rey throws all her new frustration into her jabs, crosses, and hooks. Kicking is a little trickier. She watches as Ben demonstrates, executing his moves flawlessly and with practiced grace. She tries to copy his movements, and for a moment she's seven years old again, sitting on a stool and watching Ben paint with the utmost curiosity.

She twists her hip at the correct angle and lands a savage kick against the bag, making a pleasingly loud smacking noise.

Ben nods, a look of pride crossing his features, and Rey feels newfound adrenaline course through her. She's starting to understand why Ben has been coming to this place for years, despite all the sweat and ridiculous warm ups. *This* is fun. Feeling strong and unstoppable. Feeling powerful.

Rey allows herself to get lost in the aggressive music. She unleashes a flurry of punches and kicks, not bothering to make sure she's doing them correctly. With the final right hook she

lets out a furious cry, striking down her imaginary enemy. She steps back, panting, and glances over at Ben to find him watching her as if...as if...

As if she's something delectable.

More heat courses her body, but before she can move, before she can even *blink*, Ben is strutting away, calling out toward the owner before climbing into one of the fighting cages for a spar.

Rey frowns deeply before yanking at the Velcro holding her right glove in place with her teeth.

\*\*

She pulls off her shirt some twenty minutes later in a sweat infused fit. She dabs at her moisture slick face with her damp tank top, the bench under her hard and uncomfortable. She's been watching Ben spar with the gym owner, which is wonderful, but also *frustrating*. The way Ben moves when he's like this is primal, masculine, and it calls to her in a way that makes her squirm.

That hot weight is still sitting deep in the pit of her stomach, worsening every time she looks at Ben. Rey isn't stupid. She knows exactly what's going on with her body. Two years ago she'd read about masturbation in a copy of Teen People, and, curious, had done some exploring in the shower with *delightful* results.

But getting this flustered around Ben is inconvenient, because she can't *do anything about it*.

At least not yet.

Ben has stripped off his own tank top and Rey allows her gaze to greedily roam over his bare upper body. He is truly in incredible shape. He corners his sparring opponent against the metal ringed wall of the cage, landing blow after blow.

Rey's gaze, to her detriment, dips lower. Granted, it might be her hormone ravaged brain, but is that a bulge she spies?

*Calm down*, a part of her mind says logically, *you have no idea what to do with **that** anyway*. Then another part speaks up unhelpfully. *But you've always been a fast learner*.

Goddamnit.

Rey stands and walks off to find the restroom before she can spontaneously combust.

\*\*

When she wanders back into the main room, Ben is standing by his gym bag and swigging water. He turns, having heard her footsteps, and moves to toss her the bottle. He falters when he sees her, the bottle slipping through his fingers and landing with a plunk by his feet.

Rey has yet to put back on her shirt. In her defense, it is very hot in this gym.

It's too easy to tease. "What?" she asks innocently.

Ben doesn't say anything, ripping his gaze from her and snatching up his own discarded shirt. He puts it on methodically. "Did you have anywhere specific in mind for lunch?" His voice betrays nothing, and Rey can't help but feel an icy pang of disappointment.

She reaches for her own tank top, still sitting in a crumbled, sweaty heap on the bench. She turns her back to Ben and pulls it over her head, wincing at the musty way it smells. "Honestly, I'd kill for tacos."

Rey's back is still to him when she bends over to retie her sneakers, and therefore misses Ben peeking at her over his shoulder.

## Chapter End Notes

Here's my modern day take of Ben and Rey training together! I actually wanted to put this scene in when Rey was around thirteen, but I just couldn't find the right spot for it. I felt it worked here and is a lot more fun now that Rey is older anyway, ya feel me? (Also, that warmup is just as awful as it sounds, except my trainer made me do sprints instead of jogging. Kill me.)

I feel like we're sitting in a hot tub and I just turned up the heat a little. Also, I'm pouring all the mid-2000's emo culture on us next chapter. Finally, finally Rey gets to go to a "concert". Any guesses as to what is it?

Once again, thank you all for being so amazing with the kudos and comments and bookmarks that you give this fic. I love reading what you guys have to say! Y'all bring me joy <3

If you liked let me know?

## 2007, part four

### Chapter Notes

Is this a perfectly normal update, or is this my surreal trip down memory lane? Who knows?

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Here's to the fast times, the times we felt alive  
To all the nights that we forgot to get back home  
Stay seventeen  
The party scene has got the best of me and you

“The Party Scene” by All Time Low

\*\*

“Nope.”

Rey and Rose are standing in Maz’s office. Their caretaker is leaning back in an old, cushy office chair, her reading glasses low on her nose. “Three seventeen-year olds alone at a music festival? Absolutely not.”

Rey can tell by the way that Rose’s shoulders are starting to slump that she’s already accepting defeat. Rey, however, is determined. “Come on, Maz. We’ve never gotten to go to a concert, and a lot of bands we love will be on this tour—”

“You’re not going to convince me.” Maz’s face is set in stone, and Rey presses her lips together in sheer irritation. She is *not* going to let this opportunity slip through her fingers.

“What if we can convince someone to chaperone us?”

Rose takes a small step forward. “I bet Paige will take us! She’s been meaning to come down to visit for the summer anyway, and she’s not a huge fan of crowds but—”

Maz holds up her hand and Rose falls silent. But there’s a twinkle in her eye that makes Rey smile a little in triumph. “Alright, if you can find a chaperone that I approve of, then you can go—But you have to find a chaperone!”

Rey and Rose are already celebrating.

\*\*

Except Paige can’t take them.



“Sorry guys.” Paige’s voice sounds truly apologetic. Rey has put her phone on speaker, and she and Rose lean toward where it sits between them on Rose’s bed. “I’ve got to work that day. I have to know about this kind of stuff a month or so in advance so that I can ask off.”

“That’s okay.” Rose is quick to reassure her sister, but flashes Rey a look of disappointment all the same.

Rey doesn’t feel hopeless just yet, however. They have several back up options.

\*\*

Except Poe won’t take them either.

Rey is sitting in he and Ben’s apartment. She’d been sketching little cartoons of BB-8, trying to seem nonchalant before slipping the request into the conversation.

“Oh yeah, Warped Tour!” Poe claps Ben on the shoulder, who shoots him an annoyed look at the interruption of his personal space. “Remember when we went in 2000? Green Day and Weezer in the same day. That was a good time.” He looks off into space wistfully, reliving memories. Then he sighs and shakes his head. “I have a date that night, Rey. Sorry.” He shrugs apologetically at her.

Ben goes still before Rey can shift in her seat to face him. “No.”

“Oh, come on!” Rey is growing exasperated and desperate, her day of pop-punk-emo music slipping fading further and further away. She perches on the edge of her seat and cups her hands together. “You’ve been, so you get it! I’ve never even gone to a concert before, Ben.”

His face looks unchanged and she can tell she’s not getting anywhere.

Rey lets her hands fall to her lap, swallowing and giving Ben an entreating look. “It would mean a lot to me,” she says quietly.

Ben’s expression still doesn’t shift. But then he says, “Who’s playing?”

It is all Rey can do to keep her face from splitting into an immediate, victorious grin.

\*\*

Finn’s Nana drops him off at the home on a Wednesday in the middle of July and the three of them wait in the main room for Ben to pick them up.

“So, like, is Ben going to be spending the whole day with us?” Finn is sitting on a couch, making sure his ID, cash, and ticket are secure in his wallet for the umpteenth time. Rose’s eyes swivel to Rey, eyebrows raised in question.

Rey blinks at them, suddenly feeling a little defensive. “I mean, I guess?” She hadn’t really thought about it, how her friends would feel being around Ben all day at a music festival. Ben is apathetic toward them for the most part; she’s not sure what they’re worried about.

Finn nods slowly, and he and Rose exchange a loaded look that makes Rey scowl. She's about to ask them what their problem is when there's a knocking on the door.

Forty minutes later they're all piled in Ben's Camaro, barreling down the highway to the amphitheater that would serve as the venue. The gates open at 11am, and Rey keeps glancing at the clock on the car dashboard with growing excitement.

Her excitement almost drowns out the nearly suffocating awkwardness in the air.

Ben has barely spoken three sentences since he picked them up from the home. He keeps working his jaw, clearly tense, and Rey is getting the distinct impression that he's not quite sure what to say.

Thankfully Rose and Finn chat in the backseat, accepting Ben's silent company with growing, if still tense, ease. Rey keeps herself occupied by chattering away to Ben about all the different bands that are going to be there, enthusiasm increasing as she ticks them off on her fingers. "I'm curious about seeing Chiodos, and of course Bad Religion, and Paramore without a doubt. Rose will never forgive me if we miss All Time Low—"

"You're right!" Rose interrupts, leaning forward from the backseat. "Or The Starting Line."

"Underoath and Norma Jean, too," Rey continues, bouncing in her seat a little. She reaches up and runs her hand over her ponytail in nervous excitement. "Hopefully they won't play at the same time."

"Do you think any of them will do signings?" Rose asks, straitening her white To Write Love On Her Arms t-shirt.

Ben answers. "Most of the bands do," he says, matter of fact. "Or at least, they did back when I went."

Rose's eyes have gone wide with awed excitement, and Rey can't help but let out a giggle.

\*\*

Parking is not as nightmarish as it could have been, and soon they're standing in a massive line with a bunch of other teens and young adults, waiting for the gates to open.

Ben already looks grumpy, but as Rey glances around she feels laughter begin to bubble up in her chest. Eventually she's sniggering, trying to cover her mirth with her hand.

"Why are you laughing?" he asks, brown eyes narrowed. With a clean shave and a shorter haircut, he looks of average age with everyone else here. The pink scar that arcs across his face and neck before distorting his tattoo, however, automatically gives him a more aggressive look. He has his arms crossed over his chest, looking fairly intimidating. It makes what Rey is about to say all the more amusing.

"It's just, for once you're *by far* not the scariest looking guy around."

He stares down at her, eyebrows coming together. "You think I look scary?"

Rey snorts. “Of course *I* don’t.” She gives a pointed jerk of her head toward Finn and Rose, who are joking around together a couple of feet away.

But Ben doesn’t look over toward them. He keeps his eyes on Rey, whole body relaxing at her words.

A few minutes later, as their line slowly shifts forward, Rey observes a guy walking around and handing demo CDs out to random girls. He’s dressed in jean cut off shorts, an eye wateringly neon green v-neck t-shirt, and a sweatband around his forehead. He spies Rey and walks right up to her, smile bright. He introduces himself as someone from a band called Duct Tape Heroes.

“We play at noon on the Battle of the Bands stage! You gotta come check us out.” He pulls out a sharpie and grabs Rey’s forearm, and she watches in mild horror as he begins to write out his band’s name and set time into her skin.

His hand is smacked away instantly, sharpie flying.

“You don’t just fucking *touch* people without bothering to ask.” Ben is a solid presence beside her, glowering down at the band guy furiously. The other guy scampers off quickly, not bothering to grab his fallen marker from the ground.

“Thanks,” Rey says, smiling up at Ben and nudging him a little with her elbow.

He shakes his head, then tugs gently at her ponytail.

\*\*

People are drunk and the smell of weed is thick. Rey has seen multiple people throw up in the four hours they’ve been here. It’s five dollars for a bottle of water, and Rey has already made her way through three. They pass by tiny stages where no name bands play awful music. There are stickers and flyers and french fries littering the ground. And it’s mid-July, which means Rey has sweat through her black bra and white tank top ages ago.

But yet, this is magic for seventeen-year-old Rey. She takes in the live music with wide, appreciative eyes, grateful that after all this time she finally gets to go to a concert. And not just a normal concert, but one of the biggest annual touring music festivals in the United States, if not the biggest. Every once in awhile she’ll subtly pinch the top of her bare thigh, not believing her own luck.

And she’s here with her three favorite people to boot.

They make their way over to the Hurley stage so that Rose (and okay, Rey too) can see All Time Low. They have some down time to kill before the set begins, so they sit in a row of empty amphitheater seats. Rose plays with Rey’s hair as they wait, with Finn chowing down on a hot dog on one side of them and Ben brooding in silence on the other.

“How many buns are you giving me?” Rey asks, trying not to let out a hum of pleasure as Rose pauses to massage her scalp.

“Three.” Rose begins forming the first one at the top of her head. “I feel like it would look kind of punk.”

Rey laughs, eyes glancing over at Ben, who is watching the process curiously. “Go for it,” she encourages, pulling her knees up so that she can wrap her arms around her legs. She not so accidentally brushes her knee against Ben’s thigh in the process.

\*\*

An hour later Rose is in near tears. “I met Alex Gaskarth.” She is near delirious, one arm slung around Finn’s neck and the other around Rey’s. Ben walks in front of them, barking at the crowd to get the fuck out of the way as they move toward the first aid tent.

She, Rose, and Finn had gotten in the pit for All Time Low. The crowd had been thick, and the heat stifling, but watching Rose belt out every word to every song had been worth it.

Then they’d waited in the hot sun to meet the band and have them sign Rose’s poster. As Rey had stood underneath the summer heat, sweating so much she felt genuinely ill, she watched the way Rose kept lighting up at the idea of meeting her favorite band.

Things had been fine until after the last band member had autographed Rose’s poster for her. Then Rey watched as her best friend swayed on her feet, the excitement and heat catching up with her.

Now Rey is struggling a little under her best friend’s weight. Rose is petite and far from truly heavy, but when she passes out and falls forward, entirely dead weight, Rey and Finn nearly drop her.

“Ben!” Rey calls out, voice high pitched with panic. He’s in front of her in a second, softly gesturing for her to move out of the way. He bends down and hauls Rose off her feet with ease, hanging her over his broad shoulder.

“Move the fuck out of the way!” Ben shouts, barreling forward into the crowd, Rey and Finn having to nearly run behind him in order to keep up. They make it to the first aid tent shortly after, Ben gently depositing Rose onto a cot for a nurse to tut over. Finn kneels by Rose’s side, holding her hand tightly in his own.

“Thank you,” Rey mutters as Ben moves to stand next to her, her eyes fixed worriedly on Rose.

“Of course.” Rey doesn’t have to look at him in order to know that he is watching her. “She’s your friend.”

\*\*

Rose perks back up after she’s able to rest in the shade with some water for a little while. By the time she’s cleared to leave the tent the sun is starting to set. The air is slightly cooler, and the humidity isn’t nearly as stifling. Rey has downed another bottle of water while they were

waiting for Rose, and she leads the group forward toward one of the main stages, newfound energy coursing through her.

They don't get to stand close to the front for Paramore, but that doesn't bother Rey. She keeps her eyes fixed on the lead singer as the band bounds through their set, taking in Hayley Williams' haircut and outfit and filing it away for further research. She sings and bobs her head along to the songs, feeling like she could float away in happiness.

She loves music, and there's always something special about going to a concert for the first time. Rey glances over at Ben, wondering what his first concert was. He looks tired, hair sticking to his sweat dampened face. The tip of his nose and cheeks are red with sunburn, and the sight makes Rey smile affectionately.

He catches her smile and returns it. "Having fun?"

She nods, too content in this moment to bother forming words. But he understands.

Ben knows her well.

A drunk guy shoves past Rey, elbow popping her in the shoulder. She hisses in pain, watching with narrowed eyes as the guy stumbles past her, completely unaware of what he's just done.

She can feel Ben tense and step in the direction the guy has stumbled off to, like a big cat ready to spring toward its prey. Rey circles her fingers around his wrist, and he pauses, glancing down at her. Rey shakes her head a little, and a muscle jumps in Ben's jaw. But he doesn't move, letting Rey hold his wrist, choosing to glower at the spot where the guy has disappeared into the crowd instead. Rey smiles a little to herself.

She knows Ben well too.

\*\*

They're all exhausted and covered with sweat and dirt by the time they make it back to Ben's Camaro. Rey's feet burn happily when she finally sits down in the front passenger's seat, finally sitting down for the first time in hours.

The drive back is mostly silent, each person too lost in their own tired thoughts to discuss the day. There would be time for that later. At one point, Rey leans her head against the cool glass of the window and nods off.

She wakes up to Ben gently nudging her shoulder. "You're home, kid."

Rey is half asleep, and a part of her wants to laugh and say that she's been home all day because she's been with him. But that would be disgusting. Instead, she yawns and stretches her arms out in front of her. Rose and Finn clamor out of the backseat, slamming their doors shut behind them.

Rey looks over at Ben tiredly. "Thank you for taking us today." Her eyes are half lidded in exhaustion, so she smiles a little blearily when she says, "I know you only took us because

you love me.”

Ben rolls his eyes. But he’s smiling too. “Please get out of my car so that I can go home and take a shower.”

Rey smiles at that mental image, then opens the door and climbs out. She feels airy in a way she doesn’t quite understand, so content she might as well raise her arms and drift up to her bedroom window with the evening breeze.

She waves goodbye to Ben as he drives away, feeling as if she’s never been happier.

## Chapter End Notes

Warped was the pinnacle music experience for emo kids in the 2000’s. Poor Ben, he was miserable the whole time lmao. You really had to want to be there to enjoy it. Sadly, this year is actually the last year that Warped will run. It’s been going since ’95. I thought about going this summer for old times sake buuuuuut bought tickets to Childish Gambino instead.

I don’t know if it’s because my allergies have hit me like a freight train, but I really angsted over this chapter. I apologize if it’s garbage. I also apologize for being behind on answering comments, allergies are really keeping a girl down.

Still got a little bit more for 2007. It’ll be interesting. If you liked let me know?

## 2007, part five

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Oh no don't talk about it  
No please don't talk about it  
Oh no don't talk about it  
It goes away

“Erase/Replace” by Foo Fighters

\*\*

Rey walks into school her first day as a high school senior wearing her Warped Tour 2007 t-shirt.

\*\*

Her first quiz in Calculus is, thankfully for Finn, multiple choice. Rey is filling in the last bubble on her scantron sheet, when her eyes flick over to poor Finn, who’s sitting in the desk to her right. He’s panicking.

Finn has never been very good at math and struggled severely in the Geometry and Algebra 2 classes that Rey shared with him. So, because Rey is a natural at math and has no qualms breaking rules to help a friend, she and Finn have developed a system over the years.

He places a red pen on the left hand corner of his desk, and Rey shifts in her seat as soon as she notices his signal. She glances at him, bringing her hands underneath her desk so that Coach Johnson, their teacher, won’t see. She looks straight ahead at the white board and holds three fingers up for Finn to see. Three fingers for the answer ‘C’.

Rey spots Finn quickly shading in an answer bubble with his pencil. They proceed like this for all ten questions for the quiz, with Rey purposely feeding him two incorrect answers so as not to raise suspicion.

They hand in their scantrons when the quiz is up, and Finn slips Rey some bubble gum as thanks.

\*\*

Rey glances over at her phone every few minutes.

It’s a Friday, and she’s finishing up some work at Luke’s studio, waiting anxiously to see if Ben will call her or not. Their normal Friday night hang outs have been up in the air as of late, with Ben constantly “working late”. It makes Rey’s skin itch, and the two hours she sees him every Saturday at the gym only make things worse. She can only look, not touch, and

Ben has made it a habit to not linger too long after workouts, dropping her back off at the home almost immediately.

Rey is growing antsy. She misses Ben. Seeing him once, maybe twice a week doesn't feel like enough. In fact, she feels as if she could see him all day and every day and it would *never be enough*.

She's not sure how pathetic this makes her.

She's brewing a pot of coffee in the kitchen-office, homework spread out across the table. She smiles fondly, remembering how Ben used to sit in here with her and help out with her school work. And now Ben won't enter the studio if his life depends on it.

In fact, the only thing left of him in this whole room is his old, paint splattered stereo currently blaring Foo Fighters.

Rey leans against the countertop, watching the coffee maker gurgle out fresh coffee and glancing absentmindedly at the stack of disorganized papers that Luke has sitting by the sink. Aside from consistently walking in on conversations that she's not supposed to hear, Rey doesn't like to consider herself a nosy person. But when her eyes just happen to catch *Andy Snoke, dealer* scrawled in Luke's handwriting, followed by a downtown address... Well...

Rey slips the paper into her backpack not a moment too soon.

Luke enters the kitchen-office, looking weary but smiling at the sight of the fresh coffee. He immediately goes about pouring both Rey and himself cups, and Rey takes a seat in front of her homework.

There's a buzzing from her phone, and Rey practically leaps to flip it open. It's a text from Ben.

*Held up late, prob can't make it. Sry kid.*

She flips the phone shut quickly with a deep frown, not bothering to text him back.

"You brew a good mug of coffee, Rey," Luke compliments, inhaling steam from his cup before taking a tentative sip.

"Thanks." Her words come out surlier than she meant them too, and Luke raises an eyebrow at her. She flushes. "Sorry, just found out your nephew is ditching me *again*."

Luke sighs and takes another sip of his coffee, looking older than Rey has seen him in a long time. She waits a few moments for him to say something, and her anger mounts and mounts.

"It's because he's working late," she points out, eyes narrowing at the way Luke fidgets.

Her mentor continues to remain quiet.

The pencil Rey had been clutching snaps in her hand. "You know, I just don't get you Skywalker, Solo types! Do you just not *care* about each other at all?!"



Luke jumps slightly at her sudden outburst. “Rey! What are you—”

“Because—” Rey has to wheel in her emotions here; her eyes are threatening to tear, she’s so suddenly furious. And that won’t do. “Because Ben is obviously up to something illegal! *Illegal*, Luke! And you’re doing nothing! Does Leia know?”

Luke sets his coffee cup to the side and stands straight, looking tired and taken aback and... and defeated. “Rey, this isn’t any of your concern—”

“You know it is,” she growls, quickly getting to her feet. She takes in a shaky breath, centering herself. “Ben is, well, Ben is the most important person in my life, Luke. And he’s doing something—”

Her breath catches. Don’t cry, Rey. Don’t cry.

“He’s doing something that’s taking himself away from me and I don’t know what to do! I know that whatever it is, it’s bad. And he won’t tell me, which isn’t surprising, but... You know what it is, Luke. Don’t you.”

He won’t meet her stare. “I know what Ben is doing, yes. But—”

“And you’re doing nothing to help him.” Rey’s hands have become fists by her sides. “Have you forgotten that he’s your family?”

Luke jerks, as if she’s slapped him. “Rey, Ben is a grown man. He’s responsible for his own decisions and he must own up for the mistakes he’s made on his own. I... Ben is beyond my help. And Leia, I suspect she has her suspicions. But do you really think that her reaching out would help?”

Rey’s breath is sporadic, but she forces herself to mull over Luke’s words before answering. Finally, she exhales slowly and says calmly, “Then tell me what’s going on and let *me* help him.”

Luke is already shaking his head. “There’s nothing you can—”

Rey lets out a cry of sheer frustration. It reverberates around the room and Luke falls silent, watching her with both caution and curiosity.

“If anyone can help,” she says shakily, “it’s me. And I think we both know that.”

The air falls still and silent as Rey waits for Luke’s answer. Her heart is hammering and she watches him unwaveringly, hope slowly growing as another moment of contemplative silence passes between the two of them.

That hope is quickly dashed.

Finally, Luke picks his coffee mug back up and gives Rey a sad, sad look. “I’m sorry, Rey. But if I tell you, it could put you in danger. And, forgive me, but I couldn’t live with myself if any harm came to you because of information I divulged. And if something happened to you

because of me, well, Ben..." He says the next sentence with deep seriousness. "Ben would kill me."

Luke exits the kitchen-office quickly after that.

And, perhaps it's because she misses Ben so much she channels him, Rey grabs her own coffee mug and flings it into the kitchen sink with a shattering crash.

Then Ben's stereo dies. Nothing Rey does gets it to come back on.

\*\*

Rey gets home that night in a restless, reckless mood. She marches into her room and is thankful to see that Rose has gotten back early from her Friday hang outs with Finn.

Rey rummages through Rose's nightstand, her best friend watching with inquisitiveness, before finding the scissors and holding them out to her.

"Please. Cut off my hair."

Rose gasps in delight.

\*\*

Rey can barely pull her hair back into a ponytail. Her new sharp and jagged side bangs are too short to pull back, and they fall about her face as she runs through her warm up the next morning.

She ignores Ben as he instructs her through fifty burpees and one hundred pushups. She ignores him when she puts on her hand wraps by herself. She ignores him when she starts battering into the punching bag, anger hot and red and begging to be let out.

She ignores him as she marches to the bathroom to splash cold water onto her face.

An irritating voice that sounds alarmingly like Rose is speaking in the back of her head, telling her that *perhaps* she's being a tad immature, giving Ben such attitude.

But Rey isn't sure how to talk to someone she wants to kiss and punch at the same time.

She makes her way back into the main room from the bathroom, body already pleasantly tired. She goes for Ben's water bottle, managing a tiny swig before it's snatched out of her hand.

She splutters, water dribbling out of her mouth and down her chin.

Ben is glaring down at her, and this only makes her angrier. The *nerve*.

"What's your problem, kid? You've been giving me the silent treatment all morning."

Rey's mouth sets in a firm line and Ben stares at her for a moment before rolling his eyes. "Is this because of last night? Seriously? Are you thirteen again?"

That stings.

That stings *a lot*, actually.

She turns and walks swiftly away, lower lip wobbling a little bit as sits down on a bench beside Ben's gym bag. Out of the corner of her eye she sees him look up at the ceiling and run a hand through his sweaty hair. However, she stares pointedly ahead when he walks over to her and stands in front of her.

"I have a job, okay? Friday nights can be busy. I'm sorry. I don't really know what you expect me to do about that." His voice is still harder than she'd like, but she catches an undertone of pleading.

"I just want to spend more time with you," she says to Ben's knee with a dejected shrug of her shoulder. "I feel like lately I barely see you."

Ben is quiet for a long time.

Then he sits down on the bench next to her, and Rey realizes with a flush that he still hasn't put his shirt back on from when he'd taken it off to spar.

"It's just," he begins, and Rey can already hear his frustration. As if he's not sure how to talk about the words weighing in his head. "My job is very consuming, Rey. It demands more and more and more of me. And I... The time I get to spend with you is like a rare escape."

The heat coming off his bare skin makes Rey shiver, and she raises her head and looks at him, takes in his tattoo and sweat slick body. "Why don't you just tell me what you do? Maybe I can—"

"No," Ben cuts her off sharply. "Rey, I will never, ever involve you because I— Because I can't. I *won't*." His jaw sets and he looks more determined than Rey has seen him in quite some time. His brown eyes flick about her face, taking in every minute expression that she gives away, and she studies him with just as much intensity.

"Let me help you," she breathes, and his eyes squeeze shut.

When he opens them, Rey thinks that he's going to say something. Something important. Her heart lurches.

Instead he simply hands her his water bottle before standing up and walking away.

## Chapter End Notes

Small chapter is small but I'm quite fond of it??? I feel very confident that we're properly set up for what's coming up now. Two more parts left in 2007 and they are *doozies*. In a good way?

Thank you guys for continuing to douse this fic in love! You are all wonderful and delightful, and reading your comments makes me squee!

If you liked let me know?

## 2007, part six

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Credentials are boring  
I burnt them at the burial ground  
Don't order me about  
I'm an outlaw from the badland

“Bird Flu” by M.I.A.

\*\*

“Holy shit. So much for being able to park close by.”

Rey, Finn, and Rose all crane their necks, eyeing the street lined with cars. Finn’s hands flex against the steering wheel, and he turns in the driver’s seat to address Rey and Rose. “I’ll just drop you guys off at the front of the house.”

Rey and Rose nod, then eye each other with growing excitement. They’d all three gone to a house party during their junior year, but they all get the vibe that what they’re about to experience is on a whole new level.

Finding the actual house is easy; seniors, kids that Rey has known since middle school, pour into the house, all decked out in Halloween costumes. Rey spots a Jack Sparrow high five a clown before walking through the front door.

As Rey and Rose climb out of the used car that Finn had received over the summer, Rey wishes she’d put more effort into her Harry Potter costume then simply drawing a lightning scar on her forehead with eyeliner.

At least Rose makes a good Hermione. She’s curled and teased her hair to an impossible height. The two girls link hands as they walk across the front lawn, waving to other kids they know as they head inside.

\*\*

Rey, Finn, and Rose gaze into a massive bowl of green punch and pass inquisitive looks between the three of them. “What do you think is in it?” Finn asks, looking vaguely apprehensive and clutching a bottle as if it’s his last life line.

Kyle, who had played Algernon in the play last year, shimmies in between Rey and Rose. “It’s Hunch Punch!” he cries, voice much louder then necessary. “Have some!” He busies himself pouring punch into three red Solo cups, handing one to each of them cheerfully. Finn stares at his like it’s going to bite him.

“Be careful though!” Kyle says, slinging an arm around Rey’s shoulders. He’s about an inch shorter than her, she realizes in this moment. “There’s Everclear in that. But have fun! And make yourself at home.” He winks at Rey and then shuffles off to greet other guests, and Rey is distinctly glad she never went out on a second date with him.

She turns to Rose. “Is Everclear, like, a vodka or something?”

Rose shrugs. “I guess?” She takes a tentative sip of her punch and winces. “It’s not great, but —”

Rey sips hers too. It tastes like typical Hawaiian punch, but with an *edge* to it that burns a little as Rey swallows. It’s hardly great. But it’s not the worst thing she’s ever tasted.

She takes another sip.

And another.

Rey starts her second cup within the hour.

\*\*

Rey feels warm and floaty and *wonderful*. She and Rose are chatting with Kyle and another guy that Rey doesn’t know, and she finds herself much more touchy-feely than she would normally be. Her hand slides down Rose’s arm and Rey leans a little into her roommate, giggling at something painfully unfunny that Kyle has said.

She frowns down at her nearly empty cup, and notices that Rose’s cup is almost empty as well.

“Want me to get you more punch?” Rey shouts into Rose’s ear, determined to be heard over the pounding, bumping music that echoes all throughout the house. It makes Rey want to pull someone close and *move*.

Rose hums and nods, happily handing Rey her empty cup.

“I’ll be right back!” Rey moves away, stumbling slightly as she makes her way back to the kitchen. She tips and falls a little into the wall on her way there, which is *silly* because Rey’s feet feel lighter than they’ve ever felt. She pushes herself away from the wall with her palm and laughs.

She’s refilling her and Rose’s cups in the kitchen when another girl blunders into her, glassy eyed and dressed as Ariel. “Oh my *god*,” she slurs, leaning into Rey with a smile. “You’re Harry Potter,” she whispers into Rey’s ear. “God, that’s, like, my fave book *ever*. You look amazing,” she states, matter of fact.

“Really?” Rey asks in happy astonishment, because no one else has mentioned her “costume” yet. “Thanks!”

They become best friends by the punch bowl, each girl bouncing sincere compliments back and forth. Then they both realize they have to pee at the same time, so they link arms and

stumble out of the kitchen, Rey's punch held close to her chest.

There are people everywhere, and by the time Rey finds the hall bathroom her head is absolutely spinning.

She stares at her reflection in the mirror while she unzips her red skinny jeans, taking in her flushed cheeks and smeared scar. She's drunk, she realizes with a stark laugh.

It's the best peeing experience *ever*.

\*\*

Finn finds Rey talking with Ariel and Kyle about an hour later. Or has it only been fifteen minutes since she left Rose for more punch? She can't quite remember—

Finn is taking her cup away from her, and Rey feels a slight flare of anger at this.

"Rose is sick!" Finn shouts, leaning toward Rey so that she can hear him. He puts a hand on her shoulder in order to steady her. Rey hadn't even realized that she's swaying on her feet.

"Oh no!" Her right hand reaches out on its own accord to take back her drink. "Where is she?"

"Outside!" Finn looks highly distressed. "We should leave now!"

It takes slightly too long for Rey's fuzzy brain to understand his words. "Wait, now?!"

"Yes, Rey, now!" Finn takes her elbow and tries to gently tug her forward. "Come on, I don't want Rose to wait too much longer—"

"But—" Rey tugs her elbow out of Finn's grip. "But—"

"My boyfriend can give you a ride home!" Ariel pipes up, putting a hot hand on Rey's shoulder in order to steady herself. "He'll be here in like two hours!"

Rey feels her face split into a pleased grin. "Yeah, that'd be great!"

Finn is looking at Ariel distrustfully. "Sorry, but I'm not comfortable—"

"Oh my *god*." Ariel says the last word with a whine and a roll of her red-rimmed eyes. "it's not Harry's fault that your friend can't party!"

Some sluggish part of Rey's brain is slightly offended on Rose's behalf. It also suggests she follow Finn out of here.

But instead, Rey ignores that sluggish, sober voice of reason and smiles sheepishly at Finn. "I'll be fine!" she insists. "I've got a ride!"

Finn's eyes narrow. "I don't like this, Rey." He looks toward the front door over his shoulder. He's antsy. "I'll take Rose home and then come back and pick you up."

Rey sighs and shrugs, waving at Finn as he walks away. A few minutes later, she starts seeing double.

\*\*

She's standing outside with a circle of people. The crisp October air feels good on her heated skin. She feels sweat cooling on her temples.

Frankly, she's not sure how she even got outside. But Kyle is standing next to her, and she thinks she sees a flash of Ariel's red wig on the other side of the circle. When what she thinks is a cigarette is passed to her, she puts it to her lips and inhales, nearly coughing out a lung as smoke billows back out of her mouth. Kyle pats her back with a grin.

The cigarette is passed around the circle a couple more times. Weird. Why are they passing a cigarette around like a joint anyway?

And then it clicks, and Rey bursts into laughter.

Eventually the circle disperses, and Kyle attempts to kiss her. She shoves him away forcefully, and he falls to the ground with a hard thump.

\*\*

Rey is still outside. Her phone is pressed to her ear, and for a moment she's not even sure who she's calling. Just that she really needs to talk to someone about the stars.

"Everything okay, kid?" Just the sound of Ben's voice makes her insides squirm in delight. She grins and presses her hand to her mouth briefly.

"Everything is fine!" she reassures, head tilted up toward the sky. "I just really—" hiccup "—need to tell you that, um. I can see the Little Dipper!"

"You're drunk."

Rey pauses. "I had three cups of punch!"

There's a deep sigh over the phone. "What kind of punch?"

Rey taps her chin in thought. "Uh. It was green."

"Lovely. But what *was* it?"

Rey's rattled brain attempts to provide her with this information. It's sure taking its sweet time. "Vodka, I think. It was brand called Everclear."

Ben's reaction is immediate. "Jesus Christ, Rey! Why the fuck would you—Do you know how *strong* that stuff is? Tell me you're not driving, right?"

Rey shakes her head, not realizing that he can't see her. "Also, Ben. I think I smoked *pot*."



There's a long silence. Rey thinks she's probably about to get a lecture, but then Ben laughs. "Oh, Rey. You're going to have fun in the morning. Don't drink or smoke anything else, okay? Do you have a ride home?"

"Uh huh." Rey doesn't attempt to hide her annoyance at being asked the same question twice. She moves toward the back door that leads inside. Surely Ariel's boyfriend will be here by now, and didn't Finn say he would come back for her? She tugs on the door knob and realizes with horror that it's locked. She bangs on the door, ignoring Ben's questions and waving Kyle over when she spies him through the glass. She points at the doorknob and gestures for him to let her inside.

He shakes his head and gives her the finger.

"You *dick!*" she screams, her words coming out much less intimidating than she wants them to. "You piece of—"

"Rey!" Ben's voice sounds slightly panicked against her ear. "What's going on?"

"Kyle—" hiccup "—locked me out like the *fuckface* he is!"

And then she moans, leans forward and pukes all over her shoes.

\*\*

She vaguely remembers feeding Ben bits of info about her location. She told him that she's in the golf course neighborhood by the movie theater, and he'd hung up abruptly after that. Rey is currently sitting against an oak tree in Kyle's fenced in backyard, vision swirling and head pounding. She smells sour and gross; she's pretty sure she got puke on her jeans. She is also shoeless.

A bunch of loud swearing makes her open her eyes, which feel as if they're fused together. The back door swings open and hits the side of the house with such force that the glass shatters. The inside of the house is suddenly quiet.

"What the *fuck* man! You're going to have to pay—"

Ben shoves past Kyle, fists clenched and looking *murderous*. He doesn't bother saying anything, just strides quickly over to Rey as soon as he sees her.

She preps herself to be picked up and hauled over Ben's shoulder, similar to the way he'd carried Rose back at Warped Tour. She is not prepared for the way Ben crouches down and lifts her effortlessly into his arms, cradling her close to his body.

Rey's stomach flips, and not unpleasantly. She gives a surprised yelp and clutches at Ben's shirt. He shoulders past Kyle and marches through the house with purpose, ignoring the smattering of high school seniors watching him with wide eyes.

Ben parked his Camaro in the front lawn, and Rey knows he did it just to be an asshole. The tires have already left deep rivulets in the grass. He maneuvers her gently in his arms so that he can open the passenger door before placing her in the seat and buckling her in.

“Thanks,” she mumbles, blinking tiredly as Ben gets into the car next to her.

“Don’t take me home,” she says. It takes a lot of energy to move her head so that she’s looking at him.

Ben’s gaze narrows a little. “Are you sure that’s wise?”

Rey stifles a yawn. “Maz thinks I’m staying at Finn’s anyway. If you take me home...” She cringes, remembering a very drunk Paige coming home after a party when Rey and Rose had still been in middle school. That is not a scene she wishes to relive with her in the starring role.

Ben stares at her for a long moment before groaning and starting the car. “Fine.”

Rey lets out a hum of pleasure before settling herself into the seat.

\*\*

She manages to slowly walk up the apartment stairs, leaning into Ben the entire way for support. She shivers in the night air, causing Ben to rub his large hands up and down her arms in an attempt to warm her. It makes her smile.

Rey is too exhausted and fucked up to properly greet BB-8 once they’re inside Ben’s apartment. She stands in the middle of the living room and watches as Ben grabs a pillow and a blanket for her. He spreads it over the couch before busying himself by fixing her a glass of water. She lets herself sink into the couch cushion, and a moment later Ben sits next to her, refusing to leave her alone until all the water is gone.

When she’s finally swallowed it all, she sets the glass on the floor and then lies down, laying her head in Ben’s lap before he can move. Her brain reasons that his thigh is comfortable.

He goes still. Then he sighs. “Rey, I am not your pillow.”

She smiles. “Debatable.”

Ben shifts, attempting to move out from under her head, when Rey moans. Her head is pounding, and even though she doesn’t think she’ll be sick again, whenever she closes her eyes it’s like the earth is spinning.

“You okay, kid?” His hand comes to rest on top of her head, and Rey shudders at the warmth.

In response she nestles further into the cushy couch, hand coming up to grip his knee. Every part of him that she is touching is solid and sturdy, and it makes Rey feel safe and whole in a way that she can’t quite explain. “Stay here?”

His hand pushes hair away from her face. “Hmm?”

She frowns a little. “Will you stay here until I’m asleep?” Her words come out more slurred than she’d like.

Ben sighs again. “Rey—”

“Just be my pillow until I’m asleep.”

His hand is resting on her head again, and she could simply *melt* under the delicious heat of it. “Alright,” she hears him agree. She curls further into him and the couch, eyes fluttering shut. “Thanks,” she breathes, exhausted.

She stirs a little sometime later to someone running their fingers through her hair. The repetitive motion is gentle and soft and careful to avoid accidentally tugging her scalp. There’s low singing, and Rey isn’t sure if she’s dreaming or not.

*“Meet me in outer space.”*

Rey’s fingers curl tighter around Ben’s knee.

*“I will hold you close if you’re afraid of heights.”*

A wave of peaceful darkness rises to engulf her and for a moment she is boneless, so relaxed and content that she could let go of Ben’s knee and fall onto the ceiling.

*“Meet me in outer space...”*

She sleeps.

\*\*

Rey awakens to a sour mouth and a scrambled head. She sits up and grimaces at the sun coming in through the blinds, so sharp and painful it’s almost blinding.

She glances to her left and stills.

Ben is passed out asleep, mouth parted and arm slung over his face to block out the sunlight. He had stayed. He had stayed longer than she had asked. And he’d come to her rescue last night, carried her to his car. Sung to her and stroked her hair... This makes Rey’s heart swell in what can only be love, and she physically clutches at her chest because of it.

She’s beginning to wonder if maybe Ben Solo loves her too.

## Chapter End Notes

Ah yes, the stereotypical high school party chapter where our protagonist is rescued by the love interest. Such a trope. I REGRET NOTHING. The song Ben sings to Rey is “Stellar” by Incubus. One more chapter before 2008! I know a lot of y’all are chomping at the bit to get to that year...

Once again, thank you all so much for your wonderful comments and support for this fic! I'm behind on comments, and I've seen a few of the same things pop up:

"How long is this story going to be?" Right now, I'm tentatively thinking 55 chapters. That is subject to change, however. Also, I do know what year we're going to end with. No, I'm not telling! :P

"I can't wait for prom! Can Ben take Rey to prom! Holy shit prom!" I'm sorry friends but...no prom in this story. Mostly because we will not have time for it. 2008 is a big fucking year. And also because...I desperately don't want to write about prom :x

I have [tumblr](#)!

If you liked let me know?

## 2007, part seven

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

You were finished long before  
We had even seen the start  
Why don't you stand up, be a man about it?  
Fight with your bare hands about it now

“For A Pessimist I’m Pretty Optimistic” by Paramore

\*\*

It’s snowing.

Rey has only ever seen snow a handful of times, and she stands in the entryway of the studio on a Monday evening in December, watching the white flakes fall from the sky with genuine awe.

“Do you think it’ll stick?” She doesn’t have to turn around to know that Luke is lingering toward the back of the room, watching the snow fall as well.

“Doubtful.” Rey can hear the bemusement in her mentor’s voice as he strides to her side, hands behind his back. “But it certainly is in the holiday spirit.”

Rey turns, peeks at Luke. His blue eyes look almost youthful, far from the tired, exhausted older man she’s come to know over the past year. She can almost pretend that nothing is truly amiss; that Ben is in the back swearing over a project that isn’t turning out to his standards, or that Han is only a phone call away. That things in the Skywalker family aren’t so poisoned.

And Rey wonders when, exactly, she’s become so intertwined in this family’s dynamics that she is one of them in every way except for blood and name.

“You know, I actually hate snow.” Luke’s voice jolts Rey out of her reverie. “I miss summertime.” His voice is wistful, and Rey presses her lips together to keep from snorting.

“Do you want me to draw a sketch of you on the beach in a Hawaiian shirt for Christmas?”

Luke barks out a laugh, and when he turns to Rey his eyes are crinkled in mirth. “Frankly, I’d love that.” He points to a bare space on the wall next to his ‘Two Suns’ piece that had propelled him into fame decades ago. A space that hadn’t been bare back in the spring, when Ben’s tree painting had hung there instead. “I’d put it right there, in a place of honor.”

Rey grins, relieved and feeling warm despite the snow. She started the sketch weeks ago.

\*\*

The last Friday before Christmas, Rey skips out on the studio in order to finish her many gift sketches from the comfort of her bed. She's bent over Rose's sketch, absolutely agonizing over the way Rose's hair is turning out, when her phone buzzes with a text.

She flips it open and feels her heart drop into her stomach.

*Actually off early. Do our Friday thing? Cool if you're busy.*

Rey squeals and immediately calls Ben, hardly believing the way the tone of her evening is shifting.

He answers on the first ring. "I'm guessing that's a yes." She can hear the smug smile in his voice.

"I'm sorry, has Ben Solo actually deemed me cool enough to hang out with on a Friday?" But her own grin is plastered on her face, and she's hurrying around her room, hiding sketches and pulling out jeans and a fresh shirt to change into.

"Ha ha. My boss is actually allowing me to have some time off for the holidays." Rey can hear the rumbling of music in the background and surmises that he's in his car. She wonders if he called her as soon as he got off work.

That thought makes her body burn.

"Oh wow," she snips, not helping the sarcasm that leaks into her words. "How generous of him."

He sighs loudly into the phone, and she quickly continues so as not to ruin the happy mood. "Do you still have the blender that Poe bought last summer?"

"The one he got to make smoothies with but is still in the box? Yeah, I guess so." There's a pause. "Why?"

"I have an idea. I'll be there in a half hour."

\*\*

Poe and Ben watch her curiously as she spreads out vanilla ice cream, Oreos, chocolate syrup, strawberry syrup, and instant coffee on their kitchen countertop. Ben is eyeing the instant coffee with genuine offense.

"We're making milkshakes!" Rey cries, holding her hands up and twiddling her fingers in a 'ta-da' motion.

Poe looks instantly delighted; Ben's expression doesn't move.

"What a great idea, Rey!" Poe is already rummaging around in their kitchen for an ice cream scoop. "Beer steins are the tallest glasses we have, is it okay if we use those—"

“I could have just gone by the diner and picked some up.” Ben is holding the box instant coffee with growing distaste.

Rey yanks it out of his hand, undeterred. “Quit being a grump. What, do you think the diner uses fair trade Arabic dark roast in your milkshakes from them?”

He gives her a *look* before tilting his head to the side, acquiescing. “Fair enough.”

Poe finds the still boxed blender deep in the bowls of their tiny pantry, setting it on the countertop with some embarrassment. “Good to know this won’t be a waste of forty bucks.” He winces. “I should probably stop getting stoned and watching late night infomercials.”

Rey’s eyebrows shoot up. Ben’s eyes roll to the ceiling and he looks as if he’d like nothing more than to smack Poe behind the head. “Come on, man.”

Poe looks nonplussed. “What?” He grins at Rey. “I heard about your party experience a few months ago.”

Rey *glares* at Ben and he has the grace to look somewhat ashamed. “Do you tell him everything?”

Poe cuts off Ben before he can say anything. Smile still plastered on his face, he says, “Almost! Except I don’t know what Ben does, because he can’t be bothered to tell anyone.” Poe busies himself scooping ice cream into the blender, but his smile has warped into something bitter.

Despite the heat being on in the apartment, the air between the two men grows tense and chilly. Rey flicks her gaze back and forth between the two of them, realizing that Ben hasn’t told his roommate what he does either.

And really, why is she surprised by this? Ben’s job is a growing thundercloud over not just his life, but the lives of everyone he’s close to. Which, Rey understands with a pang of deep sadness, is basically just her and Poe.

The belly of this thundercloud is growing darker and darker, and Rey chews on her inner cheek as her eyes settle back on Ben. A storm is coming soon, and Rey is determined to weather it.

\*\*

Poe’s strawberry milkshake actually turns out pretty good. He’s slurped down half of it before Rey is done rinsing out the blender.

She laughs at his ridiculous expression when he gets a brain freeze. BB-8 winds through his owner’s legs, sensing his distress. She dumps vanilla ice cream and instant coffee into the blender, glancing toward Ben, who sits at the kitchen table looking over her gift sketches.

“Luke will love this,” he states, holding the half completed sketch up to the light for better visibility. He holds the paper gingerly, and Rey notices that the tips of his fingers are stained

black with what she presumes to be paint. Even though she sees no projects lying about, even though Ben basically came straight to his apartment from “work”.

Rey slams the top to the blender on with more force than necessary, jabbing the mix button with furrowed eyebrows. She thinks of the address to an *Andy Snoke* she has sitting in her backpack back home. Hmm.

Hmm.

BB-8 leaps on the kitchen table and Ben immediately starts shooing him away, shuffling Rey's sketches away from the cat's paws protectively. “Off, *off* the table, cat.”

BB-8 swats at Ben's hand and hisses, but Rey gets the sneaking suspicion that this is a habitual thing for the both of them.

Ben attempts to push the fluffy cat off the edge of the table, and BB-8 mewls loudly, darting out of reach before doubling back to smack at Ben's arm in outrage.

“Don't let them fool you.” Poe is leaning against the countertop, eyes alight with mischief. He leans down and says under his breath to Rey, “I've caught them snuggling on the couch together many times. I have pictures.” He winks at her, tilting his glass back and finishing his milkshake in two big gulps.

Then he winces again, and Rey pats his shoulder in amused sympathy.

\*\*

Ben helps Rey crush Oreos for her milkshake. In fact, he shows more enthusiasm for pummeling the cookies than perhaps he should, and when he finally dumps the crumbs into the blender Rey thinks it's a miracle he hasn't pulverized them into dust.

While her milkshake blends, he sniffs tentatively at the coffee milkshake she just made for him. He sips, looking like he's fully prepared to spit it back out. Rey watches with her hands propped on her hips. Honestly, he's such a drama queen.

She knows that the coffee milkshake she made is yummy by the way he refuses to meet her eyes.

“it's tasty, isn't it?” she asks smugly.

Ben swallows and instead of answering takes a second sip. He stares off to the side, working the ice cream around in his mouth.

Rey smiles and makes a “come on” motion with her hand, wordlessly demanding her compliment.

He sets the glass down on the counter forcefully. “It's delicious,” he grumbles.

Her smile stretches into something more triumphant and she throws a fist into the air in victory. Her fingers and hands are cold from making and handling the frozen treats, but the



way Ben's eyes finally flicker to her, the way they turn tender while taking in her beaming expression and joyfulness...

Rey's cheeks and chest suddenly feel hot with a flush, and her pleased expression falters into something sweeter, more wide-eyed.

Poe's horribly loud and obnoxious ringtone cuts through whatever moment she and Ben had been sharing, and Ben's roommate makes his excuses and disappears into his room to talk to his new boyfriend.

When Rey looks back at Ben he's gathering cleaning supplies from underneath the kitchen sink. He wipes down all the countertops, removing the sticky residue, syrup splatters, and cookie crumbs wordlessly.

The blender stops, and Rey busies herself pouring her own milkshake, concentrating on not making any more of a mess.

Frustration is welling up inside of her, causing her heart to beat faster, causing her palms to sweat. What is going on between her and Ben? Is it simply a friendship shifting into something more concrete and adult, occasionally awkward but ultimately platonic?

Or is it morphing into something *else*? Something with an undercurrent of deep intimacy and passion that goes eons beyond the simplicity of just friendship?

Oh, Rey hopes so much it's something *else*.

She's wished for few important things in her life. She wishes she could remember her parents' faces. She wishes she lived in a home she didn't have to share with a dozen other kids. She wishes she knew what her real last name was. She wishes she didn't know what actual trash out of a dumpster tasted like. Life has not deemed to give her those things, but Rey thinks that that might be okay. It might be wonderfully, perfectly, completely okay if it means she gets Ben Solo.

\*\*

She and Ben sit on the couch after her milkshake is done, the kitchen cleaned, and the blender back in its box.

"I have an early gift for you." Ben walks over to record player and puts on music.

Rey gasps in delight when she hears the opening song. "You got this just for me?" Ben is not big on this band, despite agreeing that they played a pretty good set back at Warped Tour.

"I did," he nods, settling himself down on the other end of the couch.

Rey lets the music fill the air for a moment before taking a deep breath and belting out every word to this opening song. Loudly. She even puts her milkshake down on the coffee table to that she can really use her hands for her performance.

Ben watches her, mouth quirked.

\*\*

They listen to the record and Rey talks about her upcoming semester, the last one she'll have as a high schooler. She talks about her college plans, about how she's not really sure what she wants to do career wise, although she thinks maybe she might want to open her own studio one day and teach kids, just like Luke—

She cuts herself off with a yawn, realizing with a glance at her phone that it's grown quite late. Her milkshake glass has been long empty, and with a mischievous smirk she stretches out her body on the couch, plopping her feet onto Ben's lap.

She's wearing fluffy socks with corgis on them, freshly laundered, thank you.

Ben, whose attention has been fixed solely to her ever since they sat down, works his mouth for a moment. It's such a *Ben* gesture, and she's still not quite sure what it means despite knowing him for more than half her life.

"Kid," he states, his tone low. There's a warning there, she realizes. He shoves her feet off his lap pointedly.

Their eyes meet.

Perhaps, if Rey had been older, she would know that this is one of those moments where one shouldn't push their luck. But Rey is not older, she's not-quite-eighteen, and it is so, so easy to tease.

She puts her feet back in his lap, biting her lower lip so that Ben won't see how badly she's trying not to grin.

He stares at her, eyes narrowing. "Don't, kid." He shoves them off again.

And now it's simply a challenge, and Rey loves beating Ben in challenges. She puts her feet back up, wiggling her toes and probing his thigh with her left heel—

He's pounces. He grabs both feet in one hand, grip so tight it nearly hurts. She thinks he looks furious, and her heart sinks because she's just trying to be playful, but maybe now that they're older—

But then Ben starts tickling the sensitive soles of her feet with his other hand, and even through her socks the sensation is obnoxious. Rey *squeals*, whole body convulsing with giggles as she tries unsuccessfully to jerk her feet out of his iron like grip. "No!" she shrieks. "No—oh my god, Ben, *stop*—"

The tickling only increases. Ben's grin is absolutely *feral*, and he shakes his head, still holding both of her feet hostage. "I warned you."

Tears are leaking out of her eyes as she gasps out laughter. Rey twists her body, trying so hard to pull her feet out of Ben's hand that she slips off the couch. She hits the carpet with a dull thud, still cackling, rolling her body away from Ben until finally, finally he lets go of her feet.

Her shirt has risen up, exposing almost all of her back as well as some of her bra to the open air. Rey chuckles into the carpet as the last of the tickling sensations die away and she's left with potent relief. Oh, she *hates* being tickled.

She scrambles to her feet, pulling down her shirt and realizing that her hair has fallen out of its half hazard bun. She's gasping for breath when she turns back to the couch to face Ben.

Except he's standing right behind her, so close that her shoulder brushes against his chest as she turns. Whatever words that had been on the tip of her tongue die as she looks up at him, lips suddenly parting.

Ben had probably stood up in order to help her off the floor. Probably. But now he's staring down at her in that inscrutable way of his, and Rey feels the energy of the room change. His chest is heaving, and without thinking Rey splays her right hand across it, as if to steady him. She can feel his heartbeat underneath her palm and *oh* it is hammering faster than her own.

His head leans down a little, brown eyes molten, and Rey's breath catches in her throat. This is it, she thinks, maybe the universe is going to let her have this, let her be happy, let *him* be happy—

She feels as if kissing Ben might solve every problem she's ever had, not by wiping them away and making them obsolete, but by filling her with such peace she'll forget she even has problems in the first place.

Rey tilts her head up, lips still parted and *yes*, his gaze has dropped to her mouth. She allows her eyes to flutter closed.

And then Ben's solid presence is gone, and she jumps at the slamming of his bedroom door.

She's in the now empty living room, in front of the empty couch, staring at the empty space in front of her where Ben had been standing only moments ago. The icy rot of *rejection* starts eating a little hole inside of her chest and she shuts her eyes quickly, steeling herself.

She marches into the hallway and knocks on Ben's door. "Ben?"

Rey is met with nothing but debilitating silence. It makes that icy rejection spread into hurt. And that hurt quickly twists into anger. She *pounds* on his door. "Open up the fucking door!"

More silence.

She kicks his door this time, not caring that it does nothing but smash her own toes. "You coward!" she shouts, all logical sense leaving her brain. "Why are you so afraid, Ben?! Of what—of whatever *this* is? I don't understand!"

She leans her forehead against the door, hand gripping at the locked doorknob. She knows, deep down, that this evening is over. That something had passed between them in that living room and that everything will be different from here on out. Her eyes swim with tears.

"Please, Ben. Please open the door and talk to me." Her voice goes quiet, pleading. "Please. I feel it too."

Silence.

“I think maybe you should go home, Rey.”

She whirls, and there’s Poe looking solemn and standing in his bedroom doorway. She opens her mouth to argue, but he shakes his head firmly.

Rey strides out of the hallway and into the kitchen, grabbing up her sketches and Maz’s car keys, angry tears trickling freely down her face. She can feel Poe’s eyes boring into her as she puts on her jacket and heads to the door, too humiliated to linger long enough to give BB-8 a goodbye pat.

She lets their apartment door slam shut behind her and all but flings herself down the stairs in her haste to escape.

\*\*

The only thing she receives from Ben on Christmas is a text.

## Chapter End Notes

Poor Ben. Pooooooooooooooooor Ben. This is the last of 2007. Next chapter we’ll move into 2008 and I think we’re finally due to find out what the hell Ben does, yes?

FRIENDS, I NEED YOUR HELP. I’ve had a really, really awful week. And I also realize that this story desperately needs more tags. So please comment with your tag suggestions! I’ll use the top three or four that are accurate and hilarious. I’m thinking “give Poe a medal” needs to be one because, really. Give Poe a medal. And of course, thank you to everyone who comments, leaves kudos, spreads love for this fic, etc. This has been a really trying time in my life and frankly getting to write this story and share it with you guys is often the highlight of my days.

I have [tumblr](#)!

If you liked let me know?

## 2008, part one

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

War is overdue  
The time has come for you  
To shoot your leaders down  
Join forces underground

“Assassin” by Muse

\*\*

“Look Rose, no one is disputing that it’s a great film. It is! The animation is beautiful, the characters are endearing, and you know how I feel about Christian Bale. He’s the Batman of our generation—”

Rose looks like she might punch Finn. They’re sitting at a red light, only a few minutes away from the local movie theater. It’s a Friday night in late January, and Rey sits in the backseat of Finn’s car. She watches her two closest friends argue with growing boredom.

“Finn,” Rose bites out with genuine venom, “the fact that you would even *suggest* that Princess Mononoke is the best Miyazaki movie over Howl’s Moving Castle is preposterous.”

Finn looks aghast, barely paying attention to his driving when the light turns green. “I’m not suggesting, I’m *stating*.”

“The main girl is bitchy to the point of being unrelatable *and* unlikable—”

“SHE RIDES. A GIANT WOLF.”

They continue to debate until Finn is pulling into a parking spot at the theater. They both turn at the same time to face Rey, nearly smacking heads in the process. Their identical expressions of expectation almost makes Rey laugh.

She settles the debate by simply saying, “Spirited Away.”

\*\*

Rose huddles close to Finn as they leave the movie. She hates horror and suspense.

Finn, however, is jubilant. “I wish they had shown more of the monster but at the same time their minimal use was *brilliant*. I wonder if they’ll make any more installments—”

Rey is only half listening to her friends as they discuss Cloverfield. She’d only half paid attention to the movie. In fact, she’s only been halfway paying attention to her *life* for the past month in a half.

She hasn't heard from Ben since the day she'd made milkshakes for him and Poe at their apartment. Ben's pathetic Merry Christmas text hardly counted as a conversation. He won't answer her calls and he won't answer her texts. She'd gone to his apartment once, fully determined to knock on his door and demand answers, but he hadn't been there, and she hadn't bothered to linger.

Rey is, naturally, miserable.

A lady bumps into Rey in the theater hallway, and Rey nods numbly at her apology, eyes staring straight ahead as they walk into the main lobby.

A guy who looks an awful lot like Poe is in line to get popcorn.

Rey pauses, tilts her head and squints, then gasps.

She's marching forward without a word of explanation to her friends, but they follow her regardless, both falling in line beside her.

"Dameron!" she shouts, and Poe twists his head at the sound of his name. His eyes widen when he recognizes her.

"Rey!" he says, all fake cheeriness and slight panic. "I didn't expect to see you here. Hello!" He waves to Rose and Finn, as if being nice and acknowledging her friends is going to lessen whatever it is she's about to say.

Finn opens his mouth to return Poe's greeting but snaps it shut at Rey's glare.

"What's going on with Ben? He's been ignoring me, and I *know* you know why." Rey's fists are clenching at her sides, and she has to remind herself to relax.

Poe looks around him, as if grasping for any excuse to escape, before turning back to Rey with a frown. "Do we have to do this here, Rey?" he pleads, looking truly uncomfortable. "I'm technically meeting my boyfriend."

"Yes."

"Alright *fine*. But let me get popcorn."

Rey nods, then turns and walks over to a nearby bench. She'll wait.

Poe takes his sweet time getting his concessions before wandering over to Rey. Finn and Rose stand a little ways off, giving the both of them some privacy.

Poe offers her popcorn and she shakes her head. He shrugs, puts a handful in his mouth and chews. After he swallows, he starts speaking.

"You two need space, Rey. Those are his words, not mine!" he says quickly, holding up one empty hand placatingly. "Your friendship is really important to Ben. And he'd rather have space from you for the time being, if it keeps things appropriate."

Rey swallows thickly, trying to keep a whine from escaping the back of her throat. “Appropriate,” she states, not really needing Poe to elaborate but desperately wanting him to all the same.

Poe looks like he would like nothing more than a clean, quick death. He eats another mouthful of popcorn in order to stall. Finally, he sighs and shakes his head. “Look, Rey, I know you really love Ben—”

Rey’s eyes go wide.

“—but you have to understand. You’re still a kid to us. A birthday providing legality doesn’t change that.” He gives her a genuinely sad smile and then walks away, seeming to understand intrinsically that continuing to speak will only make things worse.

Rey stares at the ground for a long time until Rose takes her hand and pulls her into a standing position. Rey allows herself to be lead back to Finn’s car, where she eats the pity cotton candy that Finn has purchased for her.

\*\*

“Maybe this is for the best,” Rose hesitantly says into the dark.

Rey had just turned out the light in their shared bedroom, and both girls lay curled underneath their comforters, the darkness providing a safe space for honesty.

“Yeah?” Rey breathes, moving her hand to rest underneath her head.

“You’re still Rey even without Ben.” Rose’s voice is so gentle. Tears spring to Rey’s eyes. “Sometimes I think you forget that.”

Rey doesn’t answer, and eventually Rose’s breaths even out into a deep sleep.

But what had Rey even been before Ben? An angry little girl with no friends or family. An artist who had no real knowledge of their own talent. Someone with no understanding of what it means to truly love another person.

Ben transformed her life, and Rey can’t forget that.

She rolls over, eyes still wide even in the dark of the room. She needs to talk to Ben, even if just for a few minutes, so that she can put this right. If Ben needed more time, if he needed to just remain friends for a while, then Rey would happily give him that. Rey would happily give Ben Solo anything.

She doesn’t sleep that night. She plans.

\*\*

Plugging the address into Maz’s TomTom and getting the GPS suction cup to adhere to the windshield is much more frustrating than it needs to be. Halfway through the drive it unsticks and nearly hits Rey in the face.

She's never been more furious with an inanimate object.

But eventually the damned thing leads her downtown, towards the Governor's Manor and the ritzy area that surrounds it. Rey drives slow, taking in the massive houses and immaculate front lawns of the rich before the neighborhoods fade into expensive shopping centers and high scale restaurants. That's where she sees it, secluded in a shady area in a space on its own

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### *First Order Art Gallery*

Rey yanks on the steering wheel and pulls into the parking lot, where she spies four cars, one of them being Ben's Camaro.

Rey has never sweated so much during winter. Ever.

She parks off to the side of the building, somehow understanding that parking directly out front might bring her unwanted attention. The front of the building is almost floor to ceiling windows, filling the massive warehouse of a front room with natural light. Rey walks up to the front door and pulls on the handle, disappointed but unsurprised when it's locked. She cups her hands and presses her face into the glass.

The front room is lined with paintings and sculptures and amidst the jumble of art, Rey instantly recognizes a certain piece.

Ben's tree painting, displayed off to the side between a picture of an ancient Roman street and a bust of someone that Rey can't distinguish from here. Frowning, she moves away from the front and shuffles off to the side of the building.

There's a side door all the way toward the back, and Rey sprints toward it, hand outreached and heart in her throat.

It's locked too.

She swears loudly and kicks at the asphalt, furious and unsure what to do next—

The side door swings open and Rey freezes. A tall, blonde woman props the door open with a large rock and pulls out a pack of cigarettes, not bothering to look in Rey's direction and therefore completely ignorant of her presence. Rey barely dares to breathe, instead holding stock still and watching the woman turn her back to her and bring a cellphone up to her ear.

She starts chattering to someone on the other line, strolling toward the woodsy area at the back of the gallery. "No, I don't give a shit how you do it." Her English accent is crisp and distinguished. "Just *do it*. Tell them Phasma sent you, if they ask—"

Rey silently darts through the open door, barely able to believe her luck.

She's in a cramped hallway that leads forward before slanting hard to the left. Rey moves along it quickly, half tempted to call out for Ben but knowing that that's a terrible idea. She's careful not to make a sound as she pokes her head around the corner, spying doors. Behind one comes the loud garble of massive machinery.



She moves, grateful that the machinery is covering the sounds of her squeaky sneakers—

“Who are you?”

Rey pauses, and turns her head, taking in the tall, pale redheaded man before her. Something jars in her head, a memory.

She’s seen this man before. She’d looked at a drawing of him everyday for years before she had finally forced herself to take down all the pictures Ben had drawn her while he’d been in jail.

Some rational part of Rey’s brain, the part that is panicking, tells her that if she leaves now then things might still be okay.

But Rey is so close to seeing Ben she can taste it.

“Hux,” she says, forcing herself not to say it like it’s a question.

The man straightens and steps back, eyes sweeping over her in confusion. “Do I *know* you?” He regards her like she’s a fly that’s fallen in his soup.

“Um. I’m Ben’s cousin.”

As soon as she says it, Rey knows she’s already made a grave error. Hux’s eyes narrow and his upper lip curls. “Solo doesn’t *have* cousins.” He steps closer. “You have ten seconds to get the hell out of here or I’ll—”

The noise of the machinery stops and is instantly replaced by loud, aggressive music. Rey knows it instantly, because she and Ben have listened to this band together for years.

She turns her back on Hux and makes a dash for this last closed door, the thrill of being in a deeply questionable situation making her grin like a madwoman. The door opens as she turns the knob and she all but falls in, not sure what to expect.

It’s a massive work room with large machines that Rey doesn’t know the purpose of. And there’s paint, paint and easels and paintbrushes *everywhere*. There’s also a long worktable covered with random useful items: scissors, a half empty tool box, a sledgehammer, random blocks of wood—

And there he is, sweaty and with work goggles on. His shirt is sleeveless, and with a jolt Rey realizes he’s gotten a new tattoo on his left arm.

“Ben!” she shouts, and he jumps at the sound of his name.

He whirls. “Rey?!” His brown eyes widen in panic when Hux appears right behind her. “How \_\_\_”

“Your cousin, she says. I’ll get Snoke.”

“No need.” Ben has already removed his googles and is walking quickly toward her. “I’ll escort her out.” His hand falls on her elbow and *grips*, and Rey nearly twists away from him in anger. She opens her mouth to say something before her words die away.

She’s never seen Ben look so frightened.

She allows herself to be propelled back into the hallway, Hux watching with thinly veiled amusement.

“Ben, where are you heading with our guest?”

The voice comes from behind them, and Ben pauses, letting out a groan so low that only Rey hears it. “Sir, I apologize. I was just taking her out of the—”

“Why? I would love to speak with her.”

Ben releases her elbow and steps away, throat bobbing nervously as he swallows.

Rey turns to face the new voice, now on high alert. And finally, after years of speculating, Rey gets an eyeful of Ben’s mysterious boss.

Her first thought is that he doesn’t look too impressive. He’s old, probably mid-seventies, with a completely bald head. There’s an ugly burn scar on the left side of the face that has left the skin puckered and pink. But he’s dressed smartly in a designer suit and sleek shoes. Something smarmy *oozes* from the pores of this man, and Rey knows immediately that she’s put herself in a very, very bad situation.

“Since your friend seems so intent to barge into our facilities, I think she deserves a grand tour, don’t you agree, Ben?” Snoke puts a hand to Rey’s shoulder and she flinches, glaring at him. He’s no taller than she is, she bets she could take him in a fight if need be.

Ben doesn’t answer, his whole body rolling with tension as he watches Snoke pull Rey back into his workroom, following close behind.

“I’m sure you’ve been wondering what your friend has been up to. He’s been assisting me. He’s been assisting me very well, actually.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Rey says, letting her voice remain flat and unimpressed.

Snoke smiles, although there’s nothing friendly about the expression. He walks to Ben’s worktable and picks up a small jar of paint. He hands one to her. “AcroViolet. Manufactured in 1980, and only obtained in a small art shop in South London. That pot of paint is what Warhol used to color Jackie Kennedy’s face in his picture of her. It’s likely the last in the world.”

Rey stares down at the antique pot of paint, something awful settling heavily in her stomach. “Why do you have this?” she asks, but in her heart she already knows the answer.

Snoke laughs. “To use and to sell, of course.” He gestures to the machinery. “This printing lab is one of three left in the world. We can print off any Warhol design and replicate it, down to it’s original paint.” He takes the pot from her and places it back on the table. Then he laughs again, although Rey is failing to see what’s so funny about the situation. “And when you have friends on the Warhol Board of Authentication, well.” Snoke raises one shoulder in a half shrug. The diamonds in his wristwatch catch the glaring light from overhead.

Something inside Rey snaps a little. She is not afraid of this man, this criminal. She shifts her focus to Ben and raises an eyebrow. “This is what you’ve been doing? Remaking Warhols and selling them to people who don’t know any better?”

Snoke grabs her chin and forces her to look back at him. “Of course not, silly girl. My loyal apprentice will recreate any painting that I deem noteworthy and sellable.”

Rey swats his hand away and turns back to Ben again. “Why?” she snarls. “You’re talented, Ben, you could do *anything*. Why this? It’s-it’s wrong not to mention *illegal*!”

He won’t quite meet her stare, body still unbelievably tense.

Snoke steps in front of her line of sight. “Criminality runs in Ben’s blood, does it not? And oh, I’m sure Skywalker has filled your head with things such as artistic integrity—”

Rey quirks a disbelieving eyebrow.

“—but tell me, girl, who is the real artist? Warhol didn’t even produce most of his own work. Did you know that on many occasions he’d come up with an idea and then have someone create it for him? Is he, the one with the idea, the true artist?” Snoke gestures to Ben. “Or is the real artist the one talented enough in technique and skill to recreate a piece down to the last brushstroke?”

Rey doesn’t want to hear anymore of this. “Ben—”

“My apprentice,” Snoke continues, cutting Rey off and beginning to circle around her like a hungry predator. “Has a painting hanging in the Metropolitan.”

Rey’s mouth falls open. This reaction seems to please Snoke.

“Yes. Thousands of people see his work every day. That’s more than most artists can ever say.”

“But they don’t know it’s *his* work!” Rey bites out, turning in place in order to follow Snoke’s movements. “They think it’s someone else’s, another artist who put time and effort into their—”

“My apprentice did put time and effort into his work.”

“But they don’t *know* it’s him.” Rey fixes her gaze on Ben. “It can’t possibly be worth it.” She is trying to be beseeching with her eyes, but Ben still won’t meet them with his own.

Snoke lets out a low chuckle, hands behind his back. “I’m sure the money he’s paid per piece cushions the blow.” He stops directly in front of Rey. “Now, I should call the police and have you escorted off my property for trespassing. But I won’t, Rey Kanata.”

And just like that, the entire situation has once again changed. Out of the corner of her eye she notices Ben begin shuffling slowly and silently to his work table.

“Don’t look so shocked, child, of course I know who you are. I was wondering why my apprentice kept leaving his work on Friday evenings, why he refused to go on certain trips. ‘I have other obligations’ he’d say. But from my knowledge he is estranged from his mother and uncle, and his roommate is hardly noteworthy. I figured it was a girl, although I’ll admit I was surprised to find you when I taped into his phone records.”

Rey’s isn’t sure if her heart has ever beat faster. She’s nervous, of course, but what could this man do to her, really—

Snoke pushes back the jacket of his suit, exposing a blood red pistol tucked into the waist band of his pants.

There’s a sudden roaring of terror in Rey’s ears and she stiffens.

Snoke’s lips pull back, revealing crooked yellow teeth. “An orphan brat so unwanted they didn’t even know your last name. And yet, you seem to be the main person my apprentice talks to, abandons his work for. I dug around, Rey, and you know what I discovered?”

She’s too petrified to answer.

“You’re quite talented yourself. Did you not take the top spot at your high school’s measly little art show last year? I saw the article written about it in the city newspaper. Your art teacher wanted you to enter it in a state competition, did she not?”

*How does he know all this?*

“And yet you didn’t. Why is that?” He reaches out and runs a finger along her chin. A wave of sheer nausea washes over Rey. Her head is spinning. Snoke doesn’t wait for her to answer before continuing.

“So much potential. So much *untapped* potential. You graduate in a few months, if I’m not mistaken. Perhaps you would like to work here over the summer? See what you can do? You could be an apprentice to Ben, if you wished it. There are many things he could teach you.” He makes a disgusted noise. “Although, I’m sure he’s already taught you *certain* things—”

The judgement and revulsion and the way he leers at Rey cause her to lose all sense of self preservation and rationality.

“The reason why I didn’t enter the painting of Ben and his *dead father* into the to state competition is because it was a gift, not a *show piece*. I would never come here and-and do what you do. What *Ben* does. It’s wrong and immoral, you filthy overgrown fucking *worm* —”

Snoke backhands her. The taste of blood in her mouth is instant. There's a shout and a hurrying of footsteps.

Rey immediately goes into defense mode. She has a distinct memory at the front of her mind, of Ben demonstrating against the punching bag last fall. *"Go for the jaw, behind the ear."*

She turns with her hips and throws everything she has into her punch, walloping Snoke right in the sweet spot that Ben had shown her months ago.

The old man drops like a heavy sack of flour, out cold. It's over so quickly she almost feels bad.

Standing behind Snoke with the sledgehammer from his work table half poised over his head and looking just as shocked as she feels, is Ben. He gapes at her, and Rey's chest starts heaving in sheer anxiety.

"You okay, kid?"

All she can do is nod.

He lowers his arms a little, shocked expression morphing into something rotten and nasty. He toes at Snoke's unconscious form with a hatred Rey didn't know someone could possess.

"What were you going to do with that hammer, Ben?" she asks softly, sliding a step backward.

Ben continues to stare down at Snoke. He does not answer, just spits on his boss.

\*\*

Ben tries to touch her face. She swats his hand away.

He's saying something as he walks behind her out of the building. But Rey can't register it.

He moves to stand in front of her, eyes wide and wild, but Rey merrily dodges around him.

She can barely breathe, much less process anything that Ben is trying to tell her. She gets in the car despite his protests, wanting nothing more than to be far, far away. From everything.

"—shouldn't drive!" he is screaming, but Rey starts the ignition regardless, refusing to heed his warning.

She should have. Twenty minutes later she runs a red light and T-bones someone in the middle of a busy intersection.

So many of you guessed it. Ben does art forgery, ta da! Pretty much all the Andy Warhol stuff is true. There are a couple of printing labs that can completely recreate his paintings down to the original paint that was used. Warhols are actually shockingly easy to reproduce and sell as the real deal. Anyway, I pulled all this info from the “Women Behind Bars/The Business of Making Art” episode of HBO’s VICE. Art forgery is fascinating in general. People get their hands on ancient materials like old coins, melt it down, then create sculptures they can turn around and sell as ancient busts of Caesar to museums and shit. Crazy.

Thank you all so much for your tag suggestions! I will add my faves and give credit next chapter, my brain is fucking mush right now to be honest. Also, Rey is okay. Obviously we’ll dive more into the repercussions of this chapter next time, but long chapter is long.

I have [tumblr](#)!

If you liked let me know?

## 2008, part two

### Chapter Notes

The lovely [charmer-of-the-shadows](#) on tumblr drew [this awesome drawing](#) of last chapter's confrontation with Snoke! Check it out and send her some love! ^.^

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

We promise we'll be leaving soon  
We share apocalyptic views  
How comforting that we see them  
Who are we to promise we'll be leaving shortly

“Well Thought Out Twinkles” by Silversun Pickups

\*\*

Rey has been in Maz's office a handful of times in order to receive punishment. But she's not sure she's ever seen her caretaker *quite* this angry with her.

Rey sits in a chair on the opposite side of Maz's desk, feeling sick, neck hot. Her head throbs where she'd smacked it against the steering wheel. There are little cuts all over her face and neck from glass, and her shoulders are stiff, but otherwise she's okay. She'd hit an SUV and the older couple from the other car had been much better off than her, more concerned with calling an ambulance for Rey than for their own car. Really, Rey had been very lucky.

Right now however, with Maz's potent glare boring into her, she doesn't feel lucky.

“You totaled my car,” the old woman says stiffly, hands clasped on top of her desk. “You totaled my car, broke my TomTom, and I spent over an hour at the hospital talking to cops and a very nice lady from the government.”

Rey winces.

“You might have a concussion,” Maz continues, “and you won't even tell me *where you were*.”

“I was at an art gallery,” Rey offers up for the umpteenth time. It isn't a lie, although Maz can take one look at her and know that there's more to the story.

Maz's eyes, size overexaggerated by the 80's coke bottle glasses she's refused to give up after all these years, narrow in sheer irritation. Then they settle on the angry bruise at the corner of Rey's mouth. Maz had stared at it a lot yesterday as well, and Rey has a sinking suspicion that her caretaker knows that *that* particular injury hadn't occurred in the crash.

“It’s odd, Rey. We were at the hospital for hours yesterday, and both Rose and Finn came to see you and make sure that you were all right.” She leans forward, her eyes narrow even further; they’re nearly slits. “But not a sign of Ben Solo.”

Rey stiffens, mind immediately going to her cell phone buried in her backpack upstairs. She’d turned it off last night after noticing that she had fourteen missed calls and over twenty text messages.

All from the same person.

Rey suddenly can’t look in Maz’s direction anymore, instead letting her gaze settle on the tank of fish that Maz keeps against the wall. She pretends to be enraptured with the angelfish, hoping that Maz will drop this specific subject, *anything* to not have to talk about—

“Ben Solo didn’t give you that smack on your mouth, did he?”

Rey whips her head up, lips parting in horror at Maz’s fierce and livid expression.

And despite everything that’s happened in the last day, the instinctive need to defend Ben no matter what rises to the surface. “No, no no no, he would *never*.” Rey narrows her own eyes. “You know that.”

Maz continues to watch her for a long moment, before nodding once.

“But,” Rey continues, working at her bottom lip with her teeth. “If he swings by… If he swings by I don’t want to see him.”

Her skin nearly boils at the unspoken questions that start hovering in the space between Rey and Maz, her caretaker and the realest thing to a mother she’s ever had. Maz has always respected her and her headstrong independence, but she wonders if perhaps the old woman’s patience has finally reached the end of its tether.

Maz lets out a long, deep sigh. “I won’t ask today, but you will tell when you’re ready, do you understand?”

Rey swallows, squeezes her eyes shut and nods slowly.

Another sigh, this one softer and more settled. “Alright, girl. Let’s discuss the terms of your punishment.”

\*\*

Ben does swing by the next day, a Monday, just like Rey suspected he would.

She lies in her bed, which she hasn’t really left since the night before, skipping school in order to get some rest. It’s early evening, and Rose dutifully rushes to the window when the doorbell starts to ring obnoxiously over and over again.

Then the pounding starts, until it’s abruptly cut off, likely because Maz has finally answered the door.



“It’s Ben,” Rose confirms. “I see his Camaro.” She turns and looks at Rey over her shoulder, eyebrow raised in curiosity.

But Rey stays curled on top of her bed, head still hurting and a bottle of Advil clutched to her chest. She trembles a little, despite the blankets she has wrapped around her body. She knows Ben will leave after knowing that she’s at least safe inside. But this won’t last forever. She’ll have to speak to him, and soon.

But the thought makes her heart race in apprehension. She’s still trying to process everything that went down on Saturday, but whenever she thinks about it the memories come to her all jumbled, as if her brain isn’t sure where the hell to even start with everything it discovered.

She *needs* to talk about it with Ben, and at the same time is terrified to. It’s so much. It’s *too much*.

“He’s leaving.” Rose is back to looking out the window. The she gasps and ducks a little, before groaning and raising her hand to give the most awkward, half-hearted wave that Rey has ever seen.

“He saw me,” Rose grumbles, lowering her arm and then pulling the curtains across their bedroom window. She sits down at the corner of her bed and looks at Rey for a long moment. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Rey shakes her head slowly, wincing slightly at the movement.

Rose nods, giving her a small smile. She stands, walks over to their tiny shared TV and DVD player, puts in *Superbad* even though only Rey (and Finn) find it funny. Rose doesn’t even turn it off when Rey falls asleep half an hour in.

\*\*

Next Saturday Rey is feeling exponentially better.

Maz, feeling nice, drops her off at the studio at noon, telling her she’ll be by to pick her up in a few hours. She’ll call when she’s on her way.

Rey nods, already knowing she’ll miss said call. She still hasn’t turned her cell phone back on. The panic that goes along with that rises against the back of her throat, but Rey swallows and pushes it down. She’ll deal with Ben. She will. Tomorrow, maybe.

Rey had no idea you could ache for someone so powerfully and yet be too chicken to talk to them.

She trudges into the studio, accepting a gentle half hug and hot cup of coffee from Luke with gratitude. He follows her into the painting room and watches wordlessly as she chooses an easel for herself and begins spreading out all her paintbrushes and pigments.

“I’m thinking of hosting an art show here.”

Rey pauses in mixing colors, looking up in sheer incredulity. “You? Host an art show *here*?”

Luke smiles fondly at her disbelief. "I am not a total hermit."

Rey laughs. "Could have fooled me."

Luke nods, accepting her light hearted jab. "I feel it's high time I show case the work of my students here, in my own turf." His blue eyes twinkle as they settle on Rey and her messy assortment of supplies. "You deserve it."

Rey stills, the implication dawning on her. She feels a grin slowly spread her lips apart. "You would feature *my* work?"

Luke smiles, opening his mouth to continue when he's cut off by Rey flinging her arms around him in excitement. "This is so *cool!*" she exclaims, squeezing her mentor close before letting go and stepping back. She twirls in a circle, doing a happy jig, excitement bubbling out of her body. "Are you going to let us pick what—"

Luke is already nodding, looking incredibly pleased.

Rey gasps happily. "Oh, I need to talk to Ben about the lightning painting I gave him forever ago, see if he'll let me borrow it long enough to display—"

She pauses, trailing off at the mention of Ben. There's a sharp pang in her chest and thoughts tumble over each other. She misses him, despite everything, and it's becoming harder to ignore. Maybe she can convince Maz to swing by his apartment tonight, just for fifteen minutes—

"Luke!" There's a bang from the entryway as the front door slams shut. "Luke! Are you here? I was hoping to speak with you."

Speak of the devil.

Luke turns toward the hallway. He hesitates only briefly. "In here," he calls out, voice calm. He doesn't glance at Rey, instead looking curious and resigned. As if he'd expected his nephew to eventually show up at his studio unannounced.

Rey hasn't told Luke about not speaking to Ben since the accident, but then...

Luke is the realest thing to a father that she has.

Ben walks turns into the room from the hallway, footsteps heavy. His face his lowered toward the ground. He doesn't notice Rey immediately, giving her long enough to notice the horrible dark circles underneath his eyes. He looks dog-tired, and when he finally does look up his eyes a rimmed red.

They look past Luke and instantly settle on Rey.

His skin, already exceptionally pale, pales further at the sight of her face. Most of the cuts have started to heal nicely, but they're scattered obviously across her cheeks and forehead and jaw. And the massive, ugly black and blue bruise on her forehead from her concussion is a dead giveaway that something has happened to her outside of Snoke's art gallery.

Ben makes a strangled noise and freezes misstep. “*What happened?*” His tone, though low, brooks no room for argument.

This is perhaps the *worst* way for Ben to find out. His hands curl into fists and he takes a sharp step in her direction before stopping. His breathing has already quickened and the energy around his body seems coiled, as if he’s ready to spring into action. Rey watches as Ben’s eyes flick over her body, and it hits her like a ton of bricks that the energy around him is *restraint*. He is restraining himself from closing the space between them.

Sudden warmth floods her chest and stomach and her hand raises from the table a little, as if to reach out to him on its own accord. Rey, mind scrambling to supply words for an explanation, is quiet for a beat too long.

Ben’s mouth twists. “*Rey—*”

“I got in a car accident,” she says quickly, blurting it out before Ben’s panic can deepen. “Last Saturday,” she tacks on, allowing herself a brief cringe.

Ben is silent for a long, agonizing moment. Rey watches with growing guilt as the realization and implications of her words come to him. He turns on his heel and strides for the hallway.

“Luke,” he calls out, voice echoing loudly about the studio as he moves out of the room. “I’m going for your plates. I’ll pay you back.”

Rey gapes, then looks at her mentor. Luke looks entirely put out over the situation, and he shakes his head, mouth pressing into a tight line, before following his nephew out of the room.

Before he leaves he looks back at Rey with a raised an eyebrow. “Keeping that from him was perhaps not your best idea.”

Rey nods as Luke retreats and then slumps down in her chair, running her hands over her face and groaning.

\*\*

She and Luke watch Ben shatter plates and bellow out his fury in the courtyard of Luke’s back garden. Ben meticulously goes plate by plate, bringing it over his head and slamming it into the ground with an astonishing amount of force, and Rey is distinctly reminded of an angry teenage boy flinging paint at a bedsheet.

She smiles at the memory.

“Aren’t you a little upset that’s he’s shattering your dining set?” She brings her mug to her lips and sips, blanching at the now lukewarm coffee.

Luke doesn’t look upset, but Rey sees a hint of disappointment in the tilt of his mouth. “He’ll replace it with a nicer set. He always does.” Then her mentor turns and wanders away from the backdoor, telling Rey he’ll be upstairs in his apartment if she needs him.

She sucks in a deep breath, anxiety spiking at the conversation she knows is coming.

Luke is giving them time to be alone, and she should be grateful.

She is. But she also wants to hide.

\*\*

Ben says nothing to her as Rey walks around the small radius of space that's covered it shattered ceramic. He's sweeping up the broken pieces efficiently, work gloves on and a trash bag at the ready. He looks up at her, takes in her sketchpad and iPod and the way she's wrapped her coat and an extra blanket around her shoulders.

She moves deeper into Luke's garden, although most of the plants are dry and brittle in the winter weather. But there's an old tree toward the back that faces out into a woodsy area. Rey sits beneath it, taking a second to get comfortable and letting the brittle air scrape against her lungs.

The cold clears her head and keeps her alert. She puts in one earbud and turns on music, purposely keeping the other one out as she begins to sketch out the sky and tree line, hoping to hear footsteps when Ben—

Ben walks up to her, crunching leaves to announce himself. She pauses the music and yanks out the lone earbud, looking up at him. He seems significantly calmer, having popped off and gotten a tantrum under his breath.

"We need to talk, kid." His eyes weigh her down, and she doesn't think she could stand and slip away even if she wanted to.

She pats a spot on the ground next to her beneath the tree. Ben cocks an eyebrow, and for a moment Rey thinks he's going to insist that they go inside. Instead, he drops down beside her, shifting his long legs so that they're spread out onto the ground in front of him. He turns his upper body so that he's facing her as much as is comfortable.

Ben holds up a large hand and reaches out, as if to touch her face, before stopping himself and bringing his hand to settle in his lap.

He looks at her for so long, and with such penetrating emotion, that Rey thinks she might catch fire.

"Are you okay?" he finally asks, words heavy.

Rey shrugs one shoulder, taping her pencil against her sketchpad. "Just some cuts and probably a minor concussion. I, uh, t-boned someone on the way back from...from your work."

Ben's chest rises and falls once, sharply.

"The people I hit are fine—"

Ben is shaking his head. “I’m just glad you’re alright. I—I apologize for earlier. I didn’t expect to see you here, much less looking like that. It... It just scared me, that’s all.”

Rey nods, pushing her choppy bangs out her face as the wind whips up. They stare at each other and Rey chews nervously at the inside of her cheek, unsure what to do with the hurricane of emotions thundering around inside of her chest.

She’s scared for Ben. She’s *furious* at Ben for what he’s doing. She’s confused at how to broach the subject of his work *and* what’s going on between them. She’s guilty for shutting him out for a week. She’s *relieved* she shut him out for a week. She’s irritated he always lets his anger get the best of him. She wants to comfort him. She’s glad to see him.

Finally, she sets her sketchpad down onto the dry ground beside her and shifts her body closer to Ben’s, settling herself physically and mentally preparing herself at the same time.

“Do you still work for that man?” She forces herself to sound stronger and fiercer than she feels.

“No,” Ben answers quickly. “Well, no. I’m...currently extracting myself. It’s a process.” He tilts his head, looking a little embarrassed but no less truthful.

Rey’s eyes narrow regardless.

He frowns. “If you think I would stay there after what he did—”

Rey feels her shoulders ease, as if a slight weight, a worry she hadn’t realized she’d been carrying, is eased from her. “I believe you. But I swear to god, Ben Solo, if you get yourself arrested, if you—”

“Don’t worry about it,” Ben says quickly. Too quickly, which means that Rey probably *should* worry about it. She takes a moment to look over his body, how there’s still an energy of restraint around him. But not just restraint, but restlessness too. She suddenly wonders why he had shown up to talk to Luke. She suspects it wasn’t just about her.

Perhaps Ben is floundering for something. As if everything has been unexpectedly upheaved and he’s trying to find the best way to land on his feet. But that’s a conversation for another day. And despite everything Poe said at the movie theater last weekend, Rey suspects that, once again, everything is different between them now.

Rey nods, deciding to concentrate on what needs to be discussed *right now*.

“I have a question. Well, more than one, really. But this one is the most pressing.” She keeps her tone low, serious.

Ben, whose eyes haven’t left hers since he sat down, nods and just barely inches closer to her.

“Something Snoke said really bothered me—”

“I didn’t know he knew those things about you, Rey.” Ben spits it out so quickly the words nearly jumble together, as if he’s been sitting on them for days at a time. “I would never, ever

jeopardize you for anyone, least of all him. Do you understand? I would never—”

“I know you wouldn’t,” Rey snaps with a roll her eyes. “That’s not what I’m talking about.”

Ben’s eyes widen a little and he nods, and Rey wonders if he’s ever seen him hang on to what she’s saying quite like this.

She takes another deep breath, steadying herself again. Ben being like this is *distracting*. “Snoko said that ‘criminality runs in your blood’.” She glowers at Ben. “And I want to know what the hell he means by that.”

Ben shrinks away from her, face softening in a brief flash of vulnerability. His mouth works, and finally he lets out a shuddered breath. “He said that because it’s true. Criminality runs in my blood.”

A wave of righteous fury washes over Rey, so potent and heady that for a flash she sees *red*.

“Because of *Vader*? Because of your grandfather and what he did?” Ben flinches at the harshness of her tone. Rey scrambles to her feet, somewhat surprised when Ben doesn’t stand with her but instead peers up, brown eyes wide and placating.

“You know what Ben, I graduate in a few months. I’m applying to colleges! I got in a car accident a week ago and my head is fucking *splitting*, thanks. And I just don’t have the patience to listen to the *best* and *stupidest* person I know talk about how he should be a criminal because his grandfather was some creepy serial killer. My parents were drug addicts, does that mean that’s all I can ever be as well?”

Ben’s eyes have gone impossibly wider, and she’s not sure if she can decipher the way he’s gazing up at her right now. It’s like he’s half astonished and half worshipful.

And then the look is gone, replaced by something hardened and spiteful. “Of course not, Rey. But I would have done it. Killed him. I wanted to, after he hit you.” His voice is so low, Rey thinks she might not have heard him if the wind had picked up his words and carried them to her.

Once again, it’s too much. Too many strong emotions battling at the forefront of her head and heart, and finally Rey just slumps back down on the ground beside him, her knee brushing against his. She’s exhausted, suddenly, and without thinking about the meaning or the consequences, she reaches out and takes Ben’s large left hand between her two smaller ones. She clutches it, presses her fingers into his calloused skin and brushing her right thumb over his knuckles.

What does one say to that?

On one hand, she suspects maybe she should be afraid that Ben’s rage can turn deadly. But it turned deadly for *her*, and unbidden possessiveness prickles throughout her. Rey’s grip on his hand tightens and Ben inhales sharply.

“I know,” is all she says. She brings his hand up to her mouth but doesn’t kiss it like she wants to. She tucks it underneath her chin instead, lets the side of his palm brush against the soft, mostly uncut skin of her neck. Ben’s gaze leaves her own, settling heatedly on her jaw. As if he can’t bear to continue looking her in the eye but can’t stand to look away from her either.

“Please, Ben. Don’t go back to that place anymore. Please.” She hesitates, then adds, “For me.”

And he nods, acquiescing. Because Ben Solo would do absolutely anything for her. And maybe that’s something Rey has always known, deep inside of herself. But sitting here with him, it seems cemented somehow.

He gently pulls his hand out of her grip, and Rey lets him go regretfully, thinking he’ll put his hand back in his lap. Instead he reaches out for her face, whole body shifting until every part of him seems to slant over her smaller form. The tips of his fingers hover over the yellowing bruise over her jaw. “Can I?”

Rey nods, breath hitching in her throat as Ben frowns in concentration, cupping her face with a gentleness Rey didn’t know he possessed. Her swipes his thumb over the mark Snoke gave her, corners of his own mouth curling down into a scowl. He tilts her face slightly as he examines it, warmth from his skin seeping and spreading deliciously into her.

She thinks he’ll pull back after he’s done looking at her mouth, but instead he starts tracing his fingertips over every cut covering her cheeks and forehead, tender touch lingering on the bruised bump from her concussion. Rey’s eyes flutter shut as he does this, as he reassures himself that all her injuries are superficial, as he reassures himself that she’s *okay*.

She’s never felt so cherished in her whole life.

When he finally pulls away the sheer loss she feels is instantaneous. As if his skin is meant to be brushing hers, always.

“I have more questions,” she breathes out, opening her eyes and trying not to be embarrassed by how high and breathy her voice is. “But...can we save the rest of that conversation for later?”

Ben blinks down at her. “I don’t know, are you actually going to turn your phone back on again?”

Rey has the decency to flash him a guilty cringe. “I’m sorry—”

He sighs, cutting her off with a shake of his head. “No, Rey. *I’m* sorry. Sorry for allowing that situation to occur in the first place. I slipped up somehow, must’ve had the address sitting around in my apartment. I was careless about what I was doing, and it put you in danger and I—I can’t—”

Rey doesn’t let herself think about what might happen if Ben knew it was Luke who’d carelessly left out the address, instead giving Ben such a severe look that he visibly swallows.

She picks her sketchpad and earbuds back up, determined to put a pause on this conversation and enjoy the hour or so that she unexpectedly has with Ben.

He's quiet for a beat. "Wow, please let me buy you a new iPod."

Rey clutches the old gadget to her chest, offended. "No way! This one works just fine." She puts one bud in her ear and sniffs, eyeing the old iPod that Ben gave her nearly four birthdays ago with fondness. It has been a loyal companion, only breaking down twice in the years she's had it. She and Rose had managed to tinker around and fix it with the help of Google. It still serves its purpose just fine.

"It pains me to see it. Please let me get you a new one."

Rey leans forward, shaking her head at Ben, taking in the way his eyes fall on her with such intensity. She suspects this probably goes way beyond the iPod.

"You're unemployed," she points out. "Save your money."

Ben scoffs. "I have plenty of that. I saved most of what I earned with Snoke."

Rey is surprised by this, although she's not sure why. Ben has hardly been extravagant; only blowing cash on a nice car and tattoos. And, on more than one occasion, her. "Oh."

Ben stares at her, and she can almost see the way he's deciding, as if he knows he's about to reveal something important. "I wanted to be able to take care of the people I care about."

"But that's basically just me," Rey blurts out.

There's a flash of a smile. "Exactly." He looks up at the tree, steeling himself. He doesn't touch her, doesn't reach back out to her. When his gaze falls back on her they're liquid heat, and Rey's heart is beating so fast, so fast. "I wanted to make sure you had money for college, for a future. I just wanted you to know that I was always going to look out for you."

Rey almost tells him she loves him.

But some part of common sense hisses *not yet*, wait just a little longer.

She gives him the softest smile she can manage, and a tear slips and trails uninvited down her cheek. She wipes it away with the sleeve of her coat hurriedly. Ben shifts, mumbles something, presses his knee up against her own.

Rey swallows, selects a song on her trusty old iPod and hands Ben the other earbud. He slips it in, watching her still, but relaxed and peaceful. She wonders if this is the first time he's been this calm since before the last time he saw her. They listen to the music together, Rey tracing out an outline of a sketch with fingers that can't stop shaking. Ben's hand has moved to rest against his leg, knuckles almost brushing Rey's outer thigh. Eventually he leans his head against the solid trunk of the tree, eyes closing as he drifts into a catnap.

Which means he doesn't stir when Rey leans forward and presses a peck of a kiss on his shoulder.



## Chapter End Notes

So much shippiness, I shame myself. But I thought we deserved some Reylo after the last couple of chapters, haha. Don't get comfortable. Thanks everyone for waiting an extra day for this update! Frankly, I needed the bonus time to brainstorm. Next five of so chapters are tricky and set up the final arc for this story, so I want to make sure they're right.

Thanks to everyone who suggested tags two chapters ago! The ones I went with were "its not cradle robbing when you're a huge baby too", curtesy of AugustinaKazuyo. That one made me tear with laughter. "Rey's milkshake brings all the Bens to the yard" curtesy of plainjayn (actually a variation of this one was mentioned by many, and honestly, I'm not sure what I expected I did that to myself lmao). And "alternative alternative universe" curtesy of Ktrain3189. That one made me smile and fits the fic!

I know I haven't had time to respond to everyone's WONDERFUL and incredibly insightful comments and I apologize. But I see y'all debating and speculating and it makes me love writing this story even more. Without spoiling anything, uh, so many of you are picking up what I'm trying to lay down ;)

I have [tumblr](#)!

If you liked let me know?

## 2008, part three

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

This is for you (this is for you)  
You're the one worth waiting for  
You're all I ever needed in this life

“A 2nd Glance” by A Day to Remember

\*\*

Rey watches, slack jawed, as Ben pummels into the punching bag. Sweat drips from his hair onto his bare shoulders and then the floor, face screwed up in rage. The smacking noises from his boxing gloves nearly overtake the booming of the music, and Rey just can't help but *stare*.

Ben has been like this for the past month—all intense, restless energy and sour mood. But at least today it comes with a nice view.

He finishes, puffing, and glances over at her, where she jumps and pretends to be focused on taking off her hand wraps.

“Feeling better?” she calls out, not looking up. She hears him grunt in response.

The door leading to the front of the gym slams shut and the owner (Bobba? Bubba? Rey can't remember his name and is now too embarrassed to ask) walks out from the office area. Rey feels her eyes widen at the sight of left his ear. It's swollen to three times its usual size.

Ben notices him and starts rolling his shoulders in preparation. “Interested in another spar?” he calls out to the owner.

The other man is in his own workout gear, but slouches down onto a bench instead of putting on his gloves. He gives Ben a pointed look and jerks a thumb at his ear. “No thanks. Not after yesterday. It's going to cost me sixty bucks for Urgent Care to drain this, you know.”

Rey, simultaneously curious and grossed out, tosses her gloves and hand wraps into her gym bag and walks over to the bench. “What's wrong with—”

“It's just cauliflower ear, and he's being a baby about it.” Ben sounds beyond annoyed, marching over to the music player and fiddling with the iPod Touch, until more fast pasted, aggressive music fills the open space of the chilly warehouse. No A/C in the summer means no heat in the winter, and Rey pulls her sweat dampened sweatshirt closer to her body. It's still only late February.

The owner makes an irritated noise from the back of his throat but doesn't respond.

Another hour of Ben letting out all his aggression against the punching bag passes, and Rey feels a twinge of worry.

She has a bad feeling about all of this.

\*\*

Ben usually drops her off at the home after the gym most Saturdays. This has been especially enforced these past few weeks that Rey has been 'grounded', although she'd all but begged Maz on her hands and knees to have a little extra time out this Saturday.

Maz had stared at her haughtily for a long moment but had relented. "I'm still waiting for you to tell me the circumstances around the accident last month. I haven't forgotten."

Rey had added that to the seemingly never-ending list of conversations she needs to have with people.

She and Ben leave the gym and Rey sighs a little at the sight of him climbing into the driver's seat.

He still hasn't put a shirt back on.

\*\*

It's much less difficult for Rey to convince Ben to take her to brunch than she'd thought it'd be. Perhaps all the energy he's exerted in the past couple of hours has drained his argumentative skills as well, because all she does is mention that she wants pancakes before he's pulling into the nearest sit-down breakfast place.

It's been so long since she's really gotten to go out and eat with Ben that Rey can't help but puff her chest out a little when he holds up two fingers for the hostess, jerking his head at Rey and saying, "Just us."

God, she's pathetic.

They both order coffee and Rey watches with growing dismay as Ben shifts around in his seat, as if he can't get comfortable. He flips through the pages of the menu, scowling and grumbling things under his breath.

The waitress sets down their coffees and takes their order. Rey orders pancakes and eggs and watches Ben order an omelet in perhaps the most hostile tone possible. The waitress jots down their orders nervously and scurries away from their booth, glancing back over her shoulder at Ben fearfully.

Rey sets her jaw. "Ben, what's your problem?"

He sips from his mug before setting it down so forcefully that coffee sloshes over the sides and onto the tabletop. "I don't have a problem."

Rey eyes the spilled coffee pointedly. "Are you sure?"

“Yes,” he hisses.

They have a stare down across the booth.

And Rey wins, of course. She’s been dealing with a petulant Ben Solo nearly her whole life.

Ben pushes his lips together, gaze finally flicking away from her before he lets out a long exhale through his nose. “Do you remember... Do you remember last year when I talked to you over the phone about how sometimes I feel too much? Well, I...” He hesitates, brown eyes settling on her face and hand clutching at his coffee mug. He looks vulnerable, nervous, like he’s about to reveal something he’d like to keep closely guarded.

Rey leans forward, biting her bottom lip and nodding in encouragement.

Ben focuses on her mouth. “I feel too much, now.” He leaves it at that.

“Is it because of that man?” Rey asks softly. She still can’t quite bring herself to say the name ‘Snokie’ or that Ben’s last job title was ‘art forger’. Not saying it makes it less real, somehow. Easier to ignore, easier to pretend it never happened.

Perhaps that is childish of her.

He gives one small shake of his head. “I haven’t been back there since you so gracefully showed up—”

She cringes.

“—but I don’t know, Rey.”

He sighs, looking as if all the weight of the world is resting on his shoulders.

“Don’t know what?”

“It’ll sound stupid,” he says lowly. His lips part and his fingers clench and unclench nervously around his coffee mug.

“Not to me,” Rey challenges, tilting her chin up.

Ben is quiet for a few minutes, long enough for the tension of unspoken words to skyrocket between them. He runs a hand through his still sweaty hair, pulls at the neck of his hoodie, as if he doesn’t know what to do with all the energy churning around in his own body.

Finally, he says, “I felt like I had purpose there. I knew it was wrong, Rey, I knew that. But I was doing something with my life. Laying out a future for myself...” He trails off briefly, letting his unspoken meaning settle over her.

*Laying out a future for myself and for you.*

“And now that’s gone,” he continues. “And I don’t know what to do about it. Myself. About anything. Or anyone,” he tacks on as an afterthought. “I just—”

The poor waitress appears with their food, and Ben snaps his mouth shut. He glowers at the tabletop when she places his omelet and Rey's pancakes in front of them. Rey utters a quick 'thank you' before the waitress can bother to ask if they want extra syrup. She looks relieved to be dismissed.

Ben waits until she's well out of earshot before continuing. "I feel like I might explode out into a million pieces at the drop of a hat. I don't really think anyone understands. It's lonely," he admits, swallowing heavily, as if the words are sticking to his insides.

"Oh *Ben*." Rey slumps down a little in her seat, feeling tears prick the back of her eyes and devastation prick the back of her heart. "You're not alone. Never. You're stuck with me."

She can't help it. She reaches across the table and takes his hand in her own, praying to whomever might be listening that he won't let go.

He doesn't. And it feels right, his skin against hers.

Rey can see them like this, decades from now, where the only years between them that will matter are the ones they've spent together.

She runs a thumb over his knuckles and stares at their joined hands. Ben lets out a great sigh, breath whooshing warmly over Rey's fingers and making her shiver.

He squeezes her hand, suddenly, and she thinks he's going to let go. Instead he holds it throughout their entire brunch together, despite how difficult it makes eating.

When they stand to leave Ben drops a wad of cash on the table, paying for their meal and tipping the waitress thirty percent in the process. They nearly run into her on their way out the door, hands depressingly separate now.

The waitress smiles at Rey. "Thanks for coming! I hope you and your boyfriend have a great day!"

"Thanks," Rey can barely get the word out, her face is turning so hot. She opens her mouth to correct the waitress, to tell her that, sadly, Ben is not her boyfriend—

But she doesn't, instead watching the waitress retreat before turning back to Ben. He's giving her a sharp look.

Rey walks from the restaurant to Ben's Camaro with an extra pep in her step. Ben hadn't corrected the waitress either.

\*\*

"Rey."

Color all wrong *ugh*—

"Rey."

Why isn't this purple turning out the *precise* shade it had been in her brain—

“*Rey*.”

She jumps, managing not to drag her paintbrush down the easel in the process. “What?” she snaps, flustered. Her hair is falling out of its bun.

Luke is standing in the doorway to the painting room, looking highly amused. “I’m making grilled cheese. Would you like some?”

“Oh.” Rey turns back to her work. It looks like garbage to her, colors and shapes and lines all wrong. “Sure.” She stands, thinking a break for dinner might be the reprieve her mind needs on this Sunday evening. She follows Luke into the kitchen-office, fingers working at the frayed hem of her long sleeve shirt.

Luke is pulling cheese and butter from the fridge. “Rey, the show isn’t until May.”

“I know that,” she grouches, slouching down into a chair and groaning. “I just want it to be *perfect*. A lot of people are going to be at this show.” She pouts at how high and nervous her voice sounds.

Luke is putting a skillet over the stove. Usually he’d cook upstairs in his proper kitchen. Tonight seems to be an exception. “You’ll do fine, Rey. You’re my best student.” Rey smiles and presses her hand briefly to her mouth, pleased.

But wait, that isn’t true.

“Ben is your best student.”

Luke’s body stiffens. “Except Ben is no longer my student.”

Those words cause a pang of pain to reverberate throughout her chest. Pain for Ben and what he’d told her yesterday at brunch.

She contemplates, taps a finger to her chin.

“I think you should let him showcase his work in your art show.”

Luke still hasn’t turned around to look at her. “No.”

Rey’s fingers curl angrily around the edge of her seat. “Look, I know that you and Ben have a strained relationship—”

Luke snorts humorlessly at this.

“—but he’s still your nephew. And he still loves you.” The moment she says it Rey knows its true. “And you still love him too.”

Luke turns away from the stovetop and faces her, arms crossed over his chest and looking pensive. He’s quiet for a while.

He's frowning at Rey when he starts speaking. "I visited my father once in prison. Before they executed him."

Rey's mouth falls open and she quickly snaps it shut. Where is *this* coming from?

"Mine and Leia's mother died in childbirth and we were raised separately before finding each other at eighteen." He smiles briefly at the recollection. "But when we discovered who our real father was, Leia wanted nothing to do with him or the terror attached to his name. But it was different for me. Leia was adopted but I spent years in foster care before finding her. She didn't want to know Vader, but I... I guess us orphans are always seeking, when it comes to our parents. Always wondering why."

He looks at Rey for a long moment and eventually she nods in understanding.

"He was mad by the time I met him. Insisted on being called 'Lord Vader'. He couldn't really hold a conversation. In fact, looking back I suspect he never truly understood that his son had come to visit him. I was a stranger to him, as much as he was to me."

Luke's blue eyes are far away, buried in a memory that Rey does not envy.

"Most of what he spoke of was nonsense. I don't remember much of it. But I do remember the look he'd get sometimes. This awful look, Rey. Like a deep hatred lived in him. Like he could turn on a dime and commit unspeakable acts, which he did, of course, but... I'll never forget that." Luke pauses briefly. "And sometimes I swear I see that look on Ben. It scares me, Rey."

Rey's heart stutters for a moment in sheer horror.

She knows exactly what look Luke is talking about.

But still.

"Luke—"

"I don't trust my nephew. Less now than ever. He is unstable." Luke's voice and tone leave no room for argument. But Rey doesn't care.

"Ben is *nothing* like his grandfather," Rey growls, feeling feral and furious. "He's nothing like him and for you to stand there and compare them is disgusting."

Luke opens his mouth, taken aback, but Rey cuts him off before he can say anything.

"You think Ben has already decided to make horrible choices for the rest of his life but he hasn't. And maybe if he got some support from you, maybe if he knew that you were on his side, he'd surprise you, Luke. He would. I know he would. Let him showcase his work in your art show."

Luke begins to shake his head.

"Do it for me."

It takes a lot to irritate Luke. The man is famously passive. So when he turns back around and finishes making their grilled cheeses, Rey isn't surprised in the least.

Silence continues to stretch between until, finally, Luke sits down across from her at the table and places her food in front of her.

She's already taken a massive, wonderfully gooey bite when her mentor says, "Alright. I'll let him participate."

\*\*

Rey calls Ben as soon as Maz picks her up, unable to contain her excitement.

"What?" he answer on the third ring, sounding bored. But Rey can hear the hesitant smile in his voice.

"I have some good news for you."

## Chapter End Notes

As you all can see, I'm garbage and love twisting canon moments to my whimsy. Also, in this fic as well as in canon, Snoke is a red herring villain. Hmm, what could that mean?

Someone turns eighteen next chapter, I believe.

Once again thank you for everyone who supports this fic! All the love I received got me to update on a fucking Monday. *I never update on Mondays.*

I have [tumblr](#)!

If you liked let me know?



## 2008, part four

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

You know, oh it's a funny thing you know  
We'll tell 'em if you like  
We'll tell 'em all tonight  
They'll never listen

“A Certain Romance” by The Arctic Monkeys

\*\*

Rey's eighteenth birthday falls on a Thursday.

She doesn't feel any different, physically. But she had woken up that morning filled with restless energy. All she can think about is the fact that she's guaranteed to see Ben at the studio tonight.

Not that anything is going to happen, she reminds herself. Just because she's—

“Are you okay?”

She and Rose are sitting in their AP Psychology class. They're supposed to be peer reading each other's essays but Rey can barely concentrate on the fact that she's still sitting in school, much less Rose's well crafted words swimming on the paper in front of her.

“Yeah,” Rey says quickly, hurriedly sitting up straighter in her seat and clearing her throat. “I'm fine.” She flashes Rose a quick smile that she hopes is reassuring.

Apparently it isn't, because Rose merely narrows her eyes and frowns. “You've been acting odd all day.”

Rey shrugs one shoulder. “It *is* my birthday,” she says nonchalantly, propping her chin up in her hand and trying to look like she's concentrating.

Rose continues staring at her for a moment. “You're seeing Ben tonight, aren't you?”

Rey stills in her seat before slowly raising her head and peering over at her best friend. To her relief, Rose simply looks amused.

Rose hands Rey's essay back to her, a smiley face drawn in the corner. “What, do you think he's going to jump you now that you're legal, or something?”

“No,” Rey hisses. “Of course not.” Although confirming it aloud is deeply depressing. She glares a little at Rose, who is obviously suppressing laughter. “I still don't have any idea where we stand. On that.”

Nothing too terribly exciting has happened since that waitress had confused her and Ben for a couple and neither of them had corrected her. And that had been well over a month ago.

Rey is slowly losing her fucking mind.

But today...today feels like she's finally landed on the other side of a hurdle, somehow. Her eye's flick to the clock above the door. Three more hours until she's out of school for the day. Three. More. Hours.

"Yep. Back to being odd," Rose says, more to herself. She reaches over and takes her essay from Rey's desk, since obviously a peer review from Rey isn't happening today.

It takes Rey a full five minutes to realize her desk is empty save her own essay.

\*\*

Hours later and Rey is exiting the bathroom at the studio, nearly trembling with nerves and excitement.

"Get it together," she whispers to herself, pausing to take a deep breath. "Nothing is going to happen."

It's dark out. All of Luke's classes have ended for the day and all the other students have gone home except for Rey. Luke has already given her his gift—a gift card to Blick, the local art supply store, and the opportunity to help him teach a community beginner's art class for children under ten over the summer. She'd said yes instantly.

But none of that can quite distract her from the fact that Ben should be here. Literally any minute. She's moving down the hall toward the painting room when she hears two voices coming from the kitchen-office. One of them is definitely not Luke.

Rey pauses, bites at her bottom lip. Eavesdropping has not gone well for her before. And by the way their voices are slowly rising in volume Rey suspects their discussion is growing heated.

She walks forward anyway, keeping her steps silent and sliding her hand along the wall. If she hears them move toward the hallway she'll pretend she's just rounded the corner.

"—lost your tree painting forever, is what you're telling me." Luke isn't *quite* yelling, but Rey can tell that he's upset.

"I would have to go back to his gallery to retrieve it, yes. And I can't exactly *do* that, now can I?"

Rey's heart stutters in her chest because that is *definitely* Ben.

"Only because you're barred from coming within a hundred feet of the property. Tell me, Ben, why you felt the need to quit your old job in the most violent and destructive way possible? For god sake, you nearly burned the whole place down. You're lucky you're not in jail right now."

Rey's mouth gapes a little. What the hell has Ben done in order to extract himself from Snoke? She'll have to ask him about that. But not tonight.

She hears Ben scoff. "I thought you would be happy that I finally got myself out of that situation—"

"It's your *methods*, Ben!"

And there it is. Luke is finally yelling. Rey winces.

"You're irrational, impulsive, and selfish. A dangerous combination," Luke continues. "And if you don't get a grip, Ben, then you're going to end up a felon in six months. This is the last chance I'm going to give you. Any slipups, any at all, and we'll have to go back to the way things were."

It's silent for a long, horrible moment. "Why," Ben's voice is sharp and strained, "did you invite me back here, to work out of here, to be a main feature in your show, if this is how you felt?"

"Because Rey asked me to."

It's silent again, but a different kind of silence. The tension in the air is intense and Rey debates if maybe now is the time she should pretend to be coming around the corner—

"She has been very good to you, all these years." Luke's voice has lowered again, gone almost soft. Rey finds herself taking an involuntary step forward.

"I know." Ben sounds absolutely miserable and Rey desperately wishes she could see his face.

Luke sighs a long, slow exhale. "Oh, Ben. You love her, don't you." He doesn't even phrase it as a question.

Rey's hand jumps to cover her mouth, which is good because she might let out a gasp or a squeak or a shout any second. She moves ever closer to the doorway, careful to be as silent as possible.

There's the sudden noise of a chair scraping away from a table. "I'm not discussing that with *you*," Ben snaps. And that's it, discussion ended.

Rey starts moving soundlessly backward, back back until she's in the painting room again, back until she's somehow sitting down at an empty easel. Her mind is blank and buzzing, and she shakes her head a little in an attempt to focus her thoughts.

Ben hadn't denied anything just said he didn't want to discuss it with Luke and that's not the same thing as denying it and of course she's known since forever that he's loved her at least platonically and he *did* practically kiss her last December although literally nothing like that has happened since then although he's constantly looking at her with more heat than perhaps he should and she swears that his eyes linger when they're working out together and *she is not crazy* but what does this all *mean*—

Her mind blessedly comes to a screeching halt as soon as Ben walks into the room. Rey stares up at him with wide eyes, lips parted. He is dressed simply, just jeans and shirt that has old paint stains on it, and his hair is still shower damp. But somehow he looks more beautiful to Rey right now than perhaps he ever has.

“Happy birthday, kid.” Ben smiles down at her, and it’s genuine. In fact she swears his gaze lights up a little when he sees her, as if his day has gotten exponentially better now that he’s in the same room with her.

And all Rey can think to say in response is, “I’m an adult now.” Her voice sounds breathy and stupid even to her own ears.

In her imagination this is the moment when Ben says *of course* and *your birthday gift is me* before sweeping her into his arms and kissing her.

Naturally that does not happen.

He blinks. “Yep.” He looks a little bemused. “Feel any different?”

“Not really,” Rey answers, forcing herself to calm down and act like a normal fucking human being. “Just hungry.” She smiles good naturedly and pretends to be interested in her set of paints.

“Good.” Ben sits at the easel next to her. “I ordered pizza.”

Rey is briefly distracted from being a disaster by the prospect of food. “Oh, you’re a saint, Ben. I’m starving.”

He looks pleased.

Somehow they manage to ease into a comfortable conversation, Rey painting nothing in particular and Ben watching with rapt interest. Eventually Rey’s racing heart calms. Soon their pizza comes and they pause in order to eat.

It’s over their dinner that Ben asks what she’s doing on Saturday.

“Nothing,” Rey answers around a mouthful of pepperoni. “Why?”

“Pick something we can do, then. A movie, concert, museum, anything. Pick anything.”

Rey stares at him, a little surprised. He looks dead serious.

An idea clicks in her head and she gasps, instantly perking up.

\*\*

It’s Saturday, and Rey has never seen Ben look this pale.

She, Ben, Rose, and Finn walk through the main entrance of Six Flags, and Rey could practically pee herself in excitement.

Attending an amusement park is a luxury that Rey has never known. She'd nearly shouted the idea at Ben in all her glee. And he'd agreed. Begrudgingly.

He *had* said anything.

Finn and Rose are jabbering excitedly back and forth as they make their way to the first ride, a giant rollercoaster with massive hills named Goliath. They can see the first hill sticking up into the sky from the entrance of the park, and Rey stares up at it in awe.

She can't wait to ride it, to raise her hands in the air as the coaster rockets her around, just like they always do in the movies.

They make their way to the ride, and by the time they get into the line (long but fast paced) Ben is white as a ghost.

Rey gently nudges him in the ribs with her elbow. "Are you okay?"

Ben nods once, tersely.

"You're not okay," Rey concludes, crossing her arms over her chest and shooting him a pointed look.

Ben flicks his eyes at her friends, confirming they're not paying attention to him. "I don't like heights," he mutters to her under his breath.

"Oh." Rey is speechless for a moment. "Well, shit. We didn't have to come—"

She snaps her mouth shut when Ben vehemently shakes his head. "Don't worry about it. I *did* say anything." He looks away from her, up toward the covering over their heads. It doesn't take a genius to know that he's wallowing in regret.

It almost makes Rey laugh.

Instead she bumps him companionably with her hip. A flirtatious behavior but *whatever*. He lowers his eyes and looks down at her. The corner of his mouth turns, just slightly. But it's enough to have Rey beaming.

Ten minutes later, as they creep closer and closer to the end of the line, Finn suggests they ride in the front row. Rose immediately approves, and they both turn and look expectantly at Rey and Ben.

"That would be fun," Rey agrees, casting a hesitant look at Ben. He's schooled his expression into something stoic, clearly not wanting to seem stressed in front of her friends. He shrugs one shoulder and says nothing, giving off an air of boredom.

As soon as Rey's friends turn away his eyes go wide and he looks like he wants to *die*.

\*\*

When they finally clamor onto the ride Rey is feeling nervous jitters herself. There's four seats to a row, with Ben and Finn taking up the ends while Rey and Rose sandwich themselves in the middle. They each reach forward and pull sturdy handlebars back until the mechanism is snug against their waists. It's the one thing keeping them in the ride.

The coaster starts moving forward and Rey glances at Ben out of the corner of her eye. He has his eyes squeezed tightly shut and his lips move silently, as if he's praying. Rey takes his hand and he grasps onto it desperately, eyes not opening.

And hell, when they finally reach the top of the first intimidating hill and go down it, Ben nearly breaks her fingers he squeezes her hand so tightly. But it isn't until the ride is over (and it was thrilling and wonderful and basically the perfect rollercoaster experience) that he finally lets go.

\*\*

Hours pass, and the day seems to zoom by.

Ben rides rollercoaster after rollercoaster with her. For her.

Her mind lingers on what Luke had suggested on Thursday.

\*\*

Ben finally loses it when they approach a ride called Acrophobia. It's a free-fall tower ride that brags about being taller than the Tower of Pisa. And Ben refuses to even get in line.

"I'll wait for you all over there." He jerks his thumb toward a cluster of gift shops and a rest area, eyes wild. She turns and strides off, bumping people carelessly in the process.

"Is he alright?" Rose asks quietly.

Rey bites back a laugh. "I don't think he likes amusement parks."

Finn snorts. "I don't think that guy likes *anything*." He pauses and shoots Rey a funny look. "Except for maybe you, Rey."

She flushes at that. "I'm going to go sit with him." She peers up at the ride and her stomach twists in unpleasant knots. It looks a little much for her as well, if she's being honest.

They agree on a meeting place and then Finn and Rose get in line while Rey heads in the direction Ben walked off to.

It doesn't take her long to find him. He looms over most everyone else, looking grumpy and out of place. He frowns when he sees her. "You should be with your friends—"

"I'd rather be here with you," Rey says simply.

\*\*

The bottom falls out while they're looking at souvenir mugs in one of the gift shops. Ben brushes against her briefly as he crosses his arms over his broad chest. "They'll have to close the rides until the weather clears. Bummer."

Rey peers up at him and the bastard is smirking.

"Is that what you've been muttering to herself on every coaster? A prayer to the rain gods?"

He glares at her and Rey giggles.

The pouring rain pounds against the roof of this gift shop, and the breeze mists through the open entryway over Rey's face. She relaxes at the cool touch. She feels like she's been soaked with sweat since before they rode their first ride, and frankly the idea of standing in the rain—

Her feet move on their own accord. She walks out of the shop, not hearing Ben call out to her in confusion, and lets the rain soak every bit of her. She tilts her head up a little, letting the cool drops pelt her flushed cheeks. It feels amazing.

Ben calls out to her again, and she turns, pushes now soaking hair out of her face. He's regarding her from the dry safety of the gift shop and looking slightly irritated, as if he can't believe he's going to have to get wet in order to come stand beside her.

Of course, he could just continue to stay where he is. But Rey knows he won't. He moves toward her as if he has to choose in the matter.

"it feels good," she says, watching with a coy smile as Ben shoves his own wet hair out of his face. Weighted down with water, it's longer than she realizes.

"I suppose," he agrees, tilting his head up. Rain drops catch on his eyelids and Rey's mouth goes dry. His eyes shut. He looks peaceful, out here in the rain, covered overhead by a gray sky. She can't remember the last time she's seen him like this.

She cups her hands together, gathering water until she has a sufficient little puddle. Then she splashes it into his face, unable to control her laughter.

He looks down at her for a moment, eyes blazing, and Rey's wide grin wanes into something softer.

The blazing eyes turns devilish. "Brat."

Then his arms encircle around her middle and she's yanked back against his chest. He lifts her up into the air and spins her around so quickly she's left breathless. Boneless too, maybe. Her right flip flop goes flying off in one direction and she lets out a shriek of pure mirth, so overwhelmed with joy that she thinks her insides might have turned into air.

He puts her down after a few turns and they're both laughing and maybe it takes Ben a little longer to let go of her waist than it should.

Ben retrieves her fallen flip flop and bends down in the still pouring rain, lifting her foot and slipping her shoe on like Rey is his own goddamned princess.

And she is.

\*\*

On the ride home Finn and Rose fall asleep almost instantly, so Rey jumps on the opportunity to play the same song over and over. It sounds free and elated, just like her.

And Ben lets her, even when she replays it for the seventh time. He doesn't even complain. And maybe it's because they've finally left the amusement park and he's couldn't care less what she puts on.

But it's probably because he loves her, Rey thinks.

And since Ben is too afraid to do something about it, she will.

## Chapter End Notes

Next chapter is going to be interesting.

Lovely readers, I have heard your cry for chapters from Ben's POV. I started a companion piece to this fic that will feature scenes and drabbles from Ben's POV. You can read it [here](#)!

Once again, thank you to everyone who has showered love on this fic! I cling to y'all's comments. They make my heart so happy. I got some crummy news about my nana yesterday and being able to escape into this weird little universe I've created with y'all has been such a godsend forreal. You guys are the real MVPs. Hugs to you all!

I have [tumblr](#)!

If you liked let me know?



## 2008, part five

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I know what I've done, but tell me, what did I miss?  
So please, don't save something, waste not, save nothing  
Lose the halo, don't need to resist  
A lick of the lips and a grip on your hips

“Sick, Sick, Sick” by Queens of the Stone Age

\*\*

Early May and it's already annoyingly hot.

Normally Rey would be rejoicing at the upcoming summer, but right now she's buried under the stress of her pending graduation and Luke's art show. Which is in two weeks.

Two weeks that seem impossibly far away and yet terrifyingly *close*. It's a Friday evening and she's in the throes of creating a new piece, which can currently be described as a hurricane of color. There's paint coating her hands and arms and the last time she'd used the restroom there'd been paint in her hair—

She's so anxious about working on her painting that she's not even miffed when Ben doesn't get in touch with her to hang out.

\*\*

Rey is miffed, however, when Ben fails to show up the next morning to take her to the gym. She sits out on the front steps of the home, watching a few of the younger kids draw on the sidewalk and extended driveway with chalk. But Ben's Camaro never pulls up the driveway, and he doesn't answer his phone when she calls him.

A heavy stone drops to the pit of her stomach. She sits out on the front steps for over an hour.

Rose is surprised to see her when she finally walks back into their bedroom. Her roommate pulls her earbuds out of her ears. “Wow, that was fast.”

“Ben never picked me up.” Rey is already pacing in front of her bed. “He's not answering his phone either.”

Rose doesn't look nearly as panicked as Rey thinks she should. “Maybe he had a late night and is still asleep.” She looks back down at the notebook she'd been writing in. “Or maybe something came up.”

Rey pauses, hands landing on her hips. “This isn't like Ben.” She chews at her bottom lip and bounces on the balls of her feet. There's a bad feeling resting on her shoulders that she can't

shake. “If something had come up he would’ve told me.”

She continues pacing.

But half an hour goes by and still no word from Ben. She has no car to drive, and Maz still has her banned from driving the replacement to one she wrecked. And she can’t bring herself to get her old bike out of the back shed and bike to Ben’s apartment.

At least not yet.

She huffs and turns, marching out of her and Rose’s room, down the stairs, then out onto the front lawn. The younger girls are shy of her at first, bashfully sharing their chalk and not making eye contact. But they warm up to her when she teaches them how to play four square. They warm up to her even more when she traces a unicorn into the middle of the driveway with hot pink chalk. To Rey it’s a scribble, but to a bunch of six year olds it’s a masterpiece. They beg her to draw a kitten next and she obliges.

And so the day continues.

It distracts her.

\*\*

Rey has just gotten out of the shower, dressed to go grab burgers with Rose and Finn, when her phone rings. Her heart leaps when she sees who is calling her.

She flips open the phone and holds it to her ear. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Ben answers immediately. “I’m fine.” He sounds grouchy and tired. “I’m sorry about the gym.”

Rey waits for him to elaborate and finds herself glaring at the wall when he doesn’t. “That’s it?”

He’s quiet for a beat too long. “There was an incident.” Someone who sounds an awful lot like Poe shouts ‘That’s an understatement!’ in the background. Ben sighs deeply. “Look, I really am sorry about ditching you earlier. It was not intentional. Do—for fucks sake Poe *I’m about to*—do you want to come over and have dinner?”

Rey feels her lips part in surprise, barely registering that Rose has walked into their bedroom and is watching Rey with rapt attention. “Is that Ben?” she whispers, pointing toward Rey’s phone.

Rey nods. “Yeah, that would be fine,” she says to Ben, frowning. “But you’re going to tell me what happened.”

Ben makes a noncommittal noise and Rey uses that moment to ask, “You *are* okay though, right?”

“Yes, Rey.” And she thinks maybe his tone is a slightly lighter, like he’s smiling a little. “I’m alright.”

\*\*

The first thing Rey notices when she walks into Ben and Poe’s apartment is that it’s *tense*.

Poe flashes Rey a smile and quick greeting as soon as she walks in, but otherwise keeps his head down as he darts around the kitchen. He says nothing to Ben and Ben doesn’t say anything to him.

Ben’s arm brushes gently against her as he maneuvers around her. He’d been tight lipped in the car, subdued even. And there are dark circles underneath his eyes, as if he hadn’t slept at all the night before.

“What’s going on?” Rey asks, refusing to be kept out of the loop for any longer.

Both men are silent, and Rey is this close to screaming because why call her and invite her over if—

“Ben got arrested again,” Poe finally bursts out, as if he can no longer contain the information in his body. “That’s what happened.”

Rey’s eyes whip to Ben, who is hovering by the kitchen table. He works his mouth in that way of his, looking both put out and ashamed of himself.

“Is that true?” Rey takes a step forward, brows furrowing.

Ben nods.

“What happened?” Rey demands, already picturing another barfight, or perhaps Ben’s road rage had finally landed him in trouble—

She’s surprised when Poe starts speaking again. “We ran into some asshole I messed around with in college and he said some, ah,” he pauses briefly, glancing over at Rey. “Well, he said something not very nice—”

“It was fucked up,” Ben growls, and when Rey looks back over toward him she spots him clenching his fists. “Completely unacceptable.”

Poe rolls his eyes, a muscle in his jaw jumping. “Okay, well, people say that kind of stuff to me all the time, Ben. There was no need to beat the shit out of him on my behalf. And you got arrested and I had to bail you out of jail this morning, and if Skywalker finds out about this nonsense he’s going to kick you out of that art show and ban you from the studio.”

Poe stalks over to the fridge and yanks open the door, glaring at the inside before pulling out a carton of eggs. Rey realizes with a jolt that she’s never seen Poe this angry before. Actually, she’s pretty sure she’s never seen Poe angry ever. He puts the eggs on the countertop, obviously upset, before raising his arms and looking up at the ceiling. “It’s almost like you *want* to ruin your life.”

It's quiet, after that.

Rey slowly steps over to the kitchen table and slips into the seat beside Ben, who is sulking. Poe is right; this is not a good situation. But at the same time...she bets the guy that had screamed at Poe deserved it.

Ben has both his hands propped on top of the table, and Rey doesn't spare a thought about reaching out and encircling her fingers around his wrist. His pulse jumps against her palm and she holds back a smile. When she lifts her eyes to him he is watching her, no longer sulking. His mouth twitches a little, and for a moment she thinks he is trying to appear grateful.

She gives his wrist a gentle squeeze and he relaxes.

An hour goes by and Poe attempts to make them omelets with peppers and onions and cheese. Rey takes it upon herself to steer the conversation away from Ben's arrest, instead telling them about accidentally making a seven-year-old cry over hopscotch.

By the time they eat (and it's shockingly not bad), Poe has deigned to speak to Ben again. And by the time everyone's plates are clean the two men have fallen into a tentative comradery. Rey watches the scene unfold with interest, fascinated by the way men work through arguments compared to women.

Then Poe gets a call from his boyfriend.

"He has a flat tire," Poe explains, grabbing his wallet and car keys. "I don't see this taking long. I'll probably be back within the hour." Then he's out the door.

As soon as the door shuts, the atmosphere in the room changes. Rey glances at Ben, trying to be nonchalant, only to find Ben doing the exact same thing to her. Then he stands, clears his throat, and begins clearing the dishes away from the table. Rey quickly gets up from her seat and begins to help, and soon the two of them settle into the routine of cleaning up the kitchen.

Rey has been here so many times throughout the years she knows where everything is and where everything is supposed to go. She's rinsing plates and putting them into the dishwasher when Ben walks away from wiping down the countertop and heads into the living room. A minute later music starts up, low and hard. And Rey smiles because of course even being domestic with Ben feels right.

Once she's loaded the dishwasher and has it running, she walks up behind Ben. She taps him on the shoulder, and her breath catches when he turns.

He looks down at her with a gentleness he doesn't give anyone else.

"Before I forget," Rey breathes, not stepping back even though the space between them is closer than the norm. "I need my lightning painting. I keep forgetting to ask you to bring it to the studio."

Ben smiles, and then she's following him out of the kitchen, into the hallway, and into his bedroom. It's changed a bit throughout the years. Ben has gotten new furniture, moved things around as the desire struck him. But her painting of a storm that she'd giving him for his birthday years ago still hangs off to the side of his bed. As if he likes to lay on his side and stare at it.

Rey squints at it from where she's standing by Ben on the other side of the room. "I don't remember using that much purple." She frowns, mind already whirling over how much better her work is nowadays compared to *that*—

"Whatever you're thinking right now, it's stupid."

Rey jumps, properly snapped from her reverie. She gapes at Ben. "What?"

Ben is leaning back against the doorframe, eyes glued to Rey's painting. "You're critiquing it and you shouldn't."

Rey rolls her eyes, takes a step further into the room. "I was twelve when I made that for you," she grumbles, intending to remind him about how much younger she was when she painted it, how much better she is now as an artist. She thinks about what it might look like if she were to paint a lightning storm now, the different technique she might use on the storm cloud this time around—

"I know. It's been my favorite thing in this whole apartment for the past six years."

Rey stills. She steps back and turns around, finding Ben still looking at her old painting. There's fondness in the way he takes it in, in the way his lips turn up into a smile. Then his eyes shift to her and the fondness remains.

Or perhaps it transforms, because the longer he watches her the more she thinks that it's not fondness at all, but adoration.

Her heartbeat rockets up as she makes her decision.

Rey moves, closing the distance between her and Ben before she can lose her nerve.

His eyes widen, as if he knows exactly what's about to happen. "Wait—"

But she cuts him off by standing on her tiptoes and palming his cheek, tilting his head down and kissing him.

It's been a long time since she's done anything like this, but she presses the full length of her body against him, feeling flush and petrified and *what if he pushes her away*—

There's a soft, low noise that comes from the back of Ben's throat. His hand rests on her neck and it's *hot* and his thumb and fingers trace along her jaw and suddenly he is invading all of her senses. Rey parts her mouth and then Ben's tongue is brushing past her lips, and Rey has never ever been kissed like this before. She melts into him, letting out a breathy noise of her own and feeling the heat of his touch sink through the skin of her neck down down down to between her thighs—

Then it's over, and Ben is tearing himself away from her with a swear. He disappears down the hall and into the living room in a blink, and Rey is left with the sinking heaviness of devastation.

She has two urges. The first is to go into the bathroom and cry. The second is to let the anger that's curling and boiling in her stomach take over.

Rey opts for the second urge.

She marches after Ben, chest heaving in sheer fury. He's standing in the middle of the living room, chewing on his thumbnail and looking pointedly away from her. So Rey walks around him and stands in front of him.

"What's your problem?!" she shouts, and suddenly she's so overwhelmed by the situation she just can't keep anything in anymore. "Because I don't think I can play this game with you, Ben!"

She had thought he'd look at her sharply at that, perhaps be alarmed, but he doesn't.

Instead he swallows, body tensing.

"We never talked about what happened last December, and I thought it was because I wasn't eighteen yet."

Ben squeezes his eyes shut.

"But I'm eighteen now, so whatever stupid societal standard you're holding yourself to you get let go of because—because—" Rey moves forward, still always drawn to Ben Solo despite the way she wants to thrash him right now. "Because I *want you*, Ben." She sucks in a deep breath, because really, she might as well tell him. If she is not honest with him now than when can she be?

"Ben, I—"

"I'm too old for you, Rey." His voice is low, dejected. He finally looks at her, and his expression is solemn, eyes guarded. He inhales deeply, as if desperately trying to calm himself. "I shouldn't have reacted to that kiss the way I did. It was inappropriate and I take full responsibility for that."

Her mind can't quite comprehend what he's telling her. "Ben—"

"I think it would be good for both of us if we took some time apart." He spits it out quickly, like if he doesn't say it fast enough he won't be able to say it at all.

"What?" Rey hates how thick and emotional her voice suddenly sounds, and Ben tilts his head and presses his lips together at the sight of her tears. "*What?*"

He swallows again, Adam's apple bobbing as he does so. "It's just not fair. For either of us. We both need space to move past...to move past this."

“But I don’t want to move past this.” She gasps, steeling herself. “I have feelings for you, Ben.”

“I know.” He’s miserable.

Rey gapes at him, shocked. A tear finally slips out of her eye and down her cheek.

He’s back to not looking at her. “As much as I might—” He cuts himself off and shakes his head. “You go off to college in the fall. You deserve to have adventures and meet awesome people and fall in love with someone. And I mean fall in love for real, not infatuation.”

“You think I’m only infatuated with you,” Rey states, mind going blank with white hot anger.

He lets out a long, low breath. “Rey—”

“You’re invalidating my feelings,” she snaps.

“I’m just trying to be realistic.” He looks at her then, and the heat of his gaze is a pressing weight on her chest. “You’re only eighteen.” He says it with such sincerity; it makes everything worse.

She can feel that she’s breathing erratically, feel that her emotions are spiking to a near hysterical level.

“Well,” she begins, and stops, forces her voice not to shake. The anger is all consuming; it rips at her and howls throughout her entire body, loud and furious and bleeding. But underneath it is a little sadness, sadness for Ben. That he could think so little of himself and how he could so readily assume that the love for him is misguided.

“Well,” she continues, clearing her throat and straightening her shoulders. “How long to you intend for us to *separate*?” She spits out the last word with true nastiness, and Ben flinches slightly at her harsh tone.

He shrugs one shoulder and says nothing.

But she understands what he’s insinuating. He’ll want space from her until she’s moved on, as if her feelings for him are simply that of a school girl crush, fleeting and ultimately inconsequential.

What he’s too stupid to understand is that Rey has loved Ben for so long that it’s a part of her. It won’t fade as easily as he thinks, and she certainly can’t will it away. And she is furious with him for this. Furious that he doesn’t take her feelings seriously. Furious that he doesn’t take *her* seriously. Furious that he won’t give what’s between them a chance.

“You’re an *asshole*, Ben Solo,” she grinds out, and then her face is crumbling and she can’t breathe very well and she’s never felt a hurt like this, a pain like this before. It’s heavy and horrible and suddenly she needs to get away from this entire situation.

She turns, moves as quickly to the door as she can and nearly stumbles over BB-8 in the process. Ben moves quickly to her side, hand grasping at her elbow in order to steady her.

Probably more out of habit than anything.

She snatches her arm away. “Don’t touch me,” she snaps, and Ben falls back immediately. Rey opens the front door, phone already in one hand so that she can call Finn and Rose for a ride. She glances back at Ben before she can shut the door in his face. He looks just as heartbroken as she feels.

\*\*

Rey calls him the next day, some sad, pitiful part of her thinking *surely he didn’t mean it surely it can’t be over*.

But he doesn’t answer. She considers calling him again but doesn’t.

She knows.

Rose leaves the room unprompted, and Rey takes curls up on top of her bed and weeps in peace.

\*\*

A week later and Rey is at the studio, adding some last-minute touches to her new painting and keeping Luke company as he packs for a trip to New York. His flight leaves in several hours, and her mentor seems excited and restless. He’ll be meeting up with some of his more prolific students in order to take inventory of what they’ll be bringing to display in his show.

Rey is currently sprawled out on the couch in the entryway, sipping coffee and listening to Luke as he rambles about New York subways. She’s paging through a book, half interested, when the front door chimes open.

“We’re closed,” Rey calls out, bored.

“I know,” comes a stiff reply.

Rey drops her book into her lap and scrambles into an upright position, nearly spilling her coffee in the process. The front door is closing behind Ben. He has her lightning painting clutched in one hand and is refusing to look directly at her.

He strides through the entryway, ignoring her completely.

Maybe, if Rey had been a little older, she would have considered that choosing to ignore her makes the separation process easier on Ben. That if he were to so much as look at her he might go back on his word.

But Rey is barely eighteen, and not quite a high school graduate. She watches him disappear down the hallway and fresh hurt blooms in her chest. Hurt she didn’t think she could feel anymore. Hurt she thought she’d cried out of her system throughout the week. Is she so appalling to him? Can he really not stand to be around her?



She feels the tears prick at the back of her eyes and she wills them away. She won't do this here, she won't.

She hears him call out something to Luke, something about safe travels. And then Ben is striding back through the entryway sans painting, pointedly not looking at her. Something inside Rey breaks. And it's not her heart, because that's already broken.

She can hear Luke coming down the hallway, clearly within hearing distance, and she's not thinking at all because if she had been, she probably wouldn't have said—

“Did you tell Luke about your arrest last weekend?”

Ben freezes, hand on the doorknob.

Now he looks at her. But not in the way she wants; he stares at her, eyes wide and full of betrayal.

Rey instantly knows she's made a huge mistake.

“Come again?” It's Luke, who of course heard, and has now moved from the main hallway into the entryway. He looks between Rey and Ben with narrowed eyes.

Rey scrambles to her feet, immediately trying to backtrack. “It was nothing. He—”

“I got arrested last weekend for assault, but the charges were dropped,” Ben answers Luke. But his brown eyes do not leave Rey, and she can feel his growing irritation as if she's tethered to him.

Luke is quiet for a long time, regarding his nephew. “You know what this means, Ben.”

Ben's chest is suddenly heaving. “Luke—”

“I told you that if you had any more slips ups then I couldn't do this anymore.” Luke's voice is firm, brokering no argument.

Ben finally rips his gaze from Rey and pins it on Luke. “I created three new pieces—you said you'd display it next to—”

Luke cuts off his nephew with a shake of his head and Rey feels sick, absolutely *ill*, because she did this, she said something out of spite and what had she been *thinking*—

“He was defending Poe!” Rey speaks up, finally finding her voice, but neither Luke nor Ben pay attention to her.

“It's your methods, Ben,” Luke says, and Rey remembers the conversation she'd overheard them having last month and her nails dig sharply into her palms. She's getting the impression that Luke has been waiting for Ben to disappoint him.

And by the way Ben sneers at his uncle she safely assumes that Ben feels the same. “I'll never live up to your expectations, will I?”

Luke's blue eyes are very sad. "I just can't trust you to make the right choices."

There's a long, silent pause. And then Ben is nodding to himself, stepping backward, eyes sweeping over the studio for the last time. They land on Rey, briefly, and then Ben is gone, dashing out into the parking lot toward his car.

Ever since the incident with Snoke Ben has been on the precipice of snapping. And Rey thinks she just witnessed him reach his breaking point.

## Chapter End Notes

Ah, I know many of you are not happy. I'll explain my thought process for why I believe things have to be this way in the notes for next chapter. Just know that I've had all this planned since the beginning. Also, wow everyone needs a hug.

Once again, I LOVE YOU ALL. You're all amazing. I'm so sorry I haven't had the time to reply to comments like I used to. But I read and treasure all the feedback you guys leave me!

I have [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#). Pick your poison.

If you liked let me know?

# Saturday, May 10th 2008

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

He said I'm gonna buy this place and burn it down  
I'm gonna put it six feet underground  
He said I'm gonna buy this place and watch it fall  
Stand here beside me baby, in the crumbling walls

“A Rush of Blood to the Head” by Coldplay

\*\*

“Rey.”

Rey lifts her head up at the sound of her name, barely registering Rose sitting beside her on top of her bed, hand resting on her shoulder in concern.

How long has she been sitting here?

“Maybe you should try to get some sleep,” Rose suggests softly. “I know you didn’t get any last night.”

Rey shrugs one shoulder half-heartedly. She still can’t get the look on Ben’s face out of her head. The look he’s given her after she’d mentioned his arrest in front of Luke.

She had hurt him. And she has no idea how to go about fixing it.

The hand on Rey’s shoulder squeezes in sympathy. “Rey, it’s not like he hates you now.”

“You don’t know that,” Rey says dejectedly, leaning back against the wall. Her unkept hair falls in her face and she lacks the energy to reach up and tuck it behind her ear. She’d thought she couldn’t feel any more miserable, but she’s currently proving herself wrong. All because of her own stupidity.

She can’t believe she outed Ben to Luke. All because of one spiteful impulse.

Rose sighs and gives Rey a small shake. “Look, if there’s one thing in this universe that I *do* know, it’s that Ben Solo could never hate you. Now please, try to take a nap. For me. You’ll feel better if you get some rest.”

Rose is right, of course. Lack of sleep is making Rey’s mind more muddled, making her more anxious and prone to panic. And Rey can’t afford to panic right now.

She flips open her phone. The only message she’s received since last night is one from Luke telling her he’d made it to New York safely. Rey sighs and flips it shut, listless.

Rose leaves to spend the day with Paige and Rey, still in her pajamas from the night before, curls up on top of her bed and closes her eyes, blocking out the sunlight coming in through the blinds. Her body is exhausted and it relaxes quickly. Rey wills her mind to do the same. Succumbing to sleep means she won't be awake. And maybe then she'll stop thinking about Ben.

\*\*

Her phone rings right in the middle of her nap, and Rey flips it open and brings it to her ear without bothering to look at who's calling. She knows it won't be the one person she wants to speak to.

"Hello?" she greets, voice bland.

"Hey, Rey. It's Poe."

Rey immediately sits upright in her bed, residual foggiess from her sleep fading away quickly. "Hey!" She bites her lip, eyes adjusting to her darkened room. She must have slept for a couple of hours at least. "Uh. What's up?"

There's shuffling sounds coming from Poe's end of the line, as if he's moving around at a hurried pace. "You haven't talked to Ben today, have you?"

Rey feels her heartbeat spike. "No. Why?"

There's a sharp intake of breath. "It's just—I have a really bad feeling about Ben, Rey. Luke had all of his art from the studio delivered today. Just like that! It hasn't even been a day and Skywalker had everything of Ben's brought here, and I mean *everything*. Even little refrigerator art that Ben drew when he was in middle school. It's like Luke is wiping his hands of his own nephew, and you know what. Let me tell you something, Rey. My uncle is a homophobic redneck and even he would never do that to me. And Ben left the apartment and I haven't seen or heard from him since and—no sir, BB-8, that is not for kitties!—he's been super tense and erratic since he left his last job. I was already worried about him but now..."

A door slams, as if Poe is leaving the apartment. "I don't know, Rey. I'm nervous he's going to do something stupid."

Rey has gotten up from her bed and is pacing around her room, cursing this entire situation. "Should I call him?"

Poe sighs into the phone. "Maybe. I don't know. He was adamant that you two needed to stay separate for the time being."

For a second Rey can barely breathe. *For the time being.*

How long is that going to be?

Then her brow furrows as the implication of Poe's words settle on her. "Ben told you about that?"

There's a brief pause and then Poe lets out an awkward laugh. "He tells me everything."

"Whatever." Rey scoffs and toes at the hardwood floor, both irritated and embarrassed. Although she in turn tells Rose everything, so she guesses she doesn't have any right to be upset.

"Anyway." Poe is clearly unaffected by her surliness. "I have to work the rest of the weekend. I'm going to keep trying to get in touch with him. I'll let you know if I find out anything, okay?"

"Okay. And I'll let you know if I hear from him for sure."

"Thanks." Poe's voice distorts slightly as he bounds down the stairs. "We're all he's got, Rey." Then he hangs up.

\*\*

Rey doesn't hear from either Poe or Ben for the rest of the evening. She decides to stay in her room and draw simply for fun. She puts on an older Coldplay album and sits on top of her bed, legs tucked under her and sketchpad open in her lap. She won't draw people, because everyone ends up turning out like Ben. She starts to draw a tree, then stops because that reminds her of Ben too.

She twirls her pencil between her fingers absentmindedly. Eventually she settles on flowers, pulling shapes and colors from her memories of Luke's garden, smiling a little as her mind and body relax into the rhythm of her art.

And that's how she sits for hours, until it is pushing into the later evening. She is stealing away peace for herself, despite how broken she feels on the inside.

A little after ten, the peace fades away and her skin starts to crawl.

There it is, that tell-tale *prick* in the back of her mind that something is very wrong with Ben Solo. That something is very wrong in general.

Rey scrambles off her bed and yanks on a pair of jeans and a sturdy pair of sneakers. She barrels out of her room and down the stairs, praying that Maz is still awake and in her office.

She is.

Rey bursts into the room without bothering to knock, which doesn't faze her caretaker in the slightest.

"Let me borrow your car for half an hour."

"Nope." Maz doesn't even glance up at her from where she's sitting at her desk, hovering over stacks of papers. "You're still grounded."

"Maz, it's been five months. I graduate in two weeks. Just a half hour. Please." Rey's voice breaks a little and she forces herself to breathe deeply for a few moments. It wouldn't do her

any good to let her panic get the better of her.

But something is very fucking wrong.

Maz finally looks up, giving Rey her full attention. She scrutinizes her from behind her oversized glasses, eyes narrowing a little. Rey refuses to break eye contact with her, instead standing up straighter and squaring her shoulders. And finally, finally Maz rolls her eyes and gives her a slight nod. She opens up the drawer to her desk and tosses Rey a pair of keys.

Rey is rushing out of the office after a hasty thank you.

“But if you crash that car, child, so help me—”

\*\*

Rey calls Ben, but of course he doesn't answer. She has this feeling that he's not at his apartment, so she turns left out of the home and heads in the direction of the studio, heart hammering loudly in her own ears. She can't shake this dread, can't seem to stop her body from trembling with fear.

She wonders what will happen if she reaches the studio only to find that nothing is happening. Somehow, that seems like it would be worse, having such a horrible feeling and not being able to do anything about it or figure out what's wrong.

She rolls down the windows, hoping fresh air will help her focus.

She smells it when she turns onto the street where Luke's studio is located. Smoke.

\*\*

The next ten minutes seems to stretch on for years and impossibly short bursts at the same time.

The studio is an inferno. The flames lick up into the night sky, and smoke curls out from the blazing building, completely obscuring the stars and making the night seem pitch black.

Rey parks across the street, barely believing her own eyes. Did she turn off the engine to Maz's car? She isn't sure. She climbs out and stumbles a few feet forward, barely taking in the hulking fire truck and cop cars that are already at the scene.

There are a cluster of police officers up ahead, and taller than all of them is—is—

“Ben!” she screams, and her voice is hoarse and raw, maybe from smoke but mostly from sheer heartbreak. “*Ben!*”

Everyone looks in her direction and she pauses, takes in the uniformed cops. The one standing next to Ben has a bloody mouth and and and did Ben do that too? She almost laughs to herself because of course he did. Of course he did.

They lock eyes, and he goes blurry for a moment because of her tears.

She's never seen Ben look like this. He is not in a rage, he is not filled with hate, he is not angry or upset or fighting. Not anymore. He looks blank. He looks like nothing at all. He turns away from her and allows himself to be put in the back of a cop car.

Just like that, Rey's life will never be the same again.

She turns and takes a few listless steps towards the crumbling building that had once been Luke's studio. Falls to her knees in the grass and resolutely ignores anyone who tries to speak to her.

For a moment Rey is caught in her own hurricane of emotions, and she's doesn't know which to pick at first, what to grieve over first—and then her brain shuts it all out, forces her to go numb before she can go into a shock. Forces her to not feel anything at all.

So she stares, face expressionless and comprehending, at the fire.

She'd met Ben in there, for the first time. Luke too. How many good things has this place given to her throughout the years? And now it is crumbling under heat and flame, reduced to nothing more than wood and plaster. And maybe it is just a building, in the end. But to Rey it had been so much more. It had been her childhood.

And now she watches as her childhood burns down right before her eyes.

## Chapter End Notes

Come, dear reader. Take my hand. Walk with me.

**Long version:** I'm sure many of you are really upset with me and I don't blame you. But here's the thing. When I began to write this fic, I knew that in order for Rey and Ben's relationship to work that they would need to separate for a large chunk of time. Like, genuinely separate. They need it if they're going to work. And I know some of you don't agree and don't understand, but ultimately I want them to have a relationship that makes sense and works. And if Ben and Rey were to date now, it wouldn't work. They need to become their own people before they can have a long lasting, healthy romantic relationship. And I'm talking about Ben as much as Rey. It was also very, very important to me that Ben's character consistently be gray. I didn't want him to just be an asshole, I wanted him to be a criminal as well. That's part of why his character is so interesting to me in the first place. And perhaps I just have a penchant for the dark characters, but this was the route I was always planning on taking with Ben's characterization. And yes, I have been planning this since the very beginning. But fear not, readers. I have a plan. And I like to think it's a pretty dope plan. A plan that you will all appreciate very much.

**Short version:** Be the Jasmine to my Aladdin and TRUST ME.

I have [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#).

If you liked let me know? (So dumb to say, I know y'all ain't happy.)



## 2008, part six

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Now hang me up to dry  
You wrung me out  
Too, too, too many times  
Now hang me up to dry  
I'm pearly like the whites  
The whites of your eyes

“Hang Me Out to Dry” by The Cold War Kids

\*\*

“You’re not driving while wearing those.”

Finn turns to face Rose from the driver’s seat, looking appalled. He’s wearing shutter shades that are obnoxiously pink. “You don’t like my glasses?”

Rose blinks. “There’s no way you can see out of those.”

Finn cranks the engine. “If Yeezy can rock these then surely I can—”

They argue like this for the next five or so minutes until Finn finally relents, taking off the glasses and sticking them in a cup holder. From the backseat Rey watches all of this passively, hands clenched in her lap. She’s trying not to think about what they’re about to do.

Actually, for the past week or so she’s been trying not to think at all. About anything. It’s easier.

Finn turns out of the home and he and Rose fiddle with the radio, debating good naturedly over what kind of music to listen to. None of them talk about where they’re going, or why they’re going there, or what they’re going to find once they arrive.

And Rey is so thankful for her two best friends that she could vomit.

\*\*

Poe had called her yesterday morning. He and Rey haven’t spoken much since the incident last week, and really that’s been a blessing in disguise because every time Rey thinks about Poe she inevitably thinks about—

It’s just better to not think about Poe.

But she’d still answered when he’d called.

“Rey.” He had sounded tentative, sad. “Can you come over tomorrow? There’s something that I think you’re going to want.”

She’d almost declined. There could be nothing good waiting for her in that apartment. But she’d agreed despite her better judgement. She’d mentioned it to Rose, who had immediately called Finn.

At least she wouldn’t have to go by herself.

\*\*

Rose has scooped up BB-8 and is cuddling the cat close, cooing at him. BB-8 looks delighted at the extra attention, and he paws at Rey’s hand happily despite being in Rose’s arms.

Finn is looking around the apartment with scrutiny, as if he’s there to guard Rey. And maybe he thinks he is, by the way he crowds against her and tells Poe to hurry up with whatever it is he needs to show her.

Poe huffs, swats at Finn and yanks Rey into a fearsome hug. She returns it, her own arms tightening around his torso. He pulls away, makes eye contact with her. They both nod, as if recognizing the pain that the other is in. That the other refuses to speak about.

Poe gives her a strained smile as he steps back and turns, heading into the hallway of what is now only his apartment. “Sorry, Rey, I know you’re busy with graduation festivities—”

She almost cuts him off with a derisive snort.

“—but, uh. I figured you would want to see this. Because...well, you’ll see.”

Rey refuses to follow Poe any further into the apartment, refuses to look around, to see the record player and the collection of vinyl, refuses to take in the jacket strewn across the back of a chair. A jacket that is decidedly not Poe’s—

There’s a loud rummaging noise and then Poe is swearing. Then he comes back into the living room, dragging a massive black trash bag behind him. He pulls it all the way to where Rey is standing, her arms crossed over her chest defensively.

“What’s in there?” Rose asks, bending and setting BB-8 down on the floor.

Poe sighs, glances at Rey briefly, then pulls at the drawstrings of the trashbag.

The first thing Rey sees is a splash of color—too much purple. It’s her lightning painting. She stares, stares and stares for a long moment as the meaning of what this is washes over her.

She takes in a breath, wanting to whine, wanting to leave, but instead putting on a brave face for her friends and stepping forward. She doesn’t want them worrying for her any more than they already are. Any more than they’re about to.

She grasps the painting and lifts it out of the bag, and sure enough underneath, there it is, there *all* of it is, untouched and safe and whole and—

How could she have believed for one moment that Ben would have burned all of her art? She feels intensely guilty for a brief rush of a moment. What is she *doing* here? Why isn't she at the jail trying to see him, trying to *talk* to him? Why has she spent every second since the studio burned on the verge of imploding from her own fury? She could be—

But that feeling is quickly clamped down again. Just like that the guilt fades, the hope for Ben fades, only to be replaced by a numbing anger that keeps her from feeling *too much*. Besides, it doesn't matter, really, that he went out of his way to save her things.

It means he *calculated*.

And that makes her hate him, maybe. A little bit.

Rey swallows, shrugs in a 'what can you do' kind of way, and shoves her painting back into the bag to sit with the rest of her art. Some of it is over a decade old. She rummages a little, notices Ben even saved that stupid sketch she'd done of Luke in a Hawaiian shirt for her mentor last Christmas.

"Can this fit in your trunk?" she asks Finn, voice betraying nothing.

He nods. "Of course! I think I have some of Nana's lawn chairs back there but I'm sure I can move them around to make space."

Rose rushes to open the front door and Poe and Finn haul the bag up between them, carrying it out of the apartment and down the stairs.

And Rey lingers in the entryway, eyes swooping over the apartment.

For the final time.

She'll never be back here. She knows this, somehow, deep down. So much has happened in this place. She remembers the first time she ever came here, butterfly clips in her hair and determined to impress Poe Dameron.

How many evenings has she spent here, watching movies, eating crappy food Poe cooked, lounging with Ben and listening to music? She'd had good times between these walls. They outweighed the fights that have happened here, the botched kisses, the almost declarations of love.

And now Ben has stolen this place from her too.

Yes, she hates him a little.

But there's also a trashbag full of her art downstairs that he painstakingly saved, as if he couldn't bare destroying that part of her in the wake of his own destruction.

Knowing that, Rey figures she'll always love him a little as well. Somehow, that makes everything worse.

\*\*

Rey clutches her diploma in her hand. Her fellow graduates jostle against her as they all maneuver out into the football field, where families and friends are waiting to congratulate them.

She is dazed, heart beating quickly in her chest. Rose finds her, smiling and grinning and grasping at her arm. “We did it!” she shouts, pulling Rey close to her in her excitement.

Finn finds the two of them moments later, dark eyes wide with genuine joy. He grins at them and pulls them both into a group hug, laughing.

The sun beats down on them; the day is warm and cheerful. And it’s contagious, because Rey finds herself returning her friends’ smiles.

They find Finn’s Nana first. She walks with a cane now, but her mind is spry. “You look so handsome!” she says, moving quickly to her grandson and embracing him. She then makes a beeline for Rey and Rose, and moments later Rey is engulfed in Nana’s arms, and the loveliness of the gesture makes Rey tear up.

That’s how Maz and Paige find them, and soon Rey is being passed from one set of arms to another.

“I’m proud of you,” her caretaker says, subtly trying to wipe away tears and failing. “You’re a strong young woman and—” She snuffles, clearly overcome, and Rey simply pulls her back into another hug. Maz’s love for her as always been expressed through actions, not words, and now is one of those moments. “Thank you for everything,” Rey whispers into her ear, squeezing her close.

Maz excuses herself after that, claiming to need to use the restroom, but Rey suspects it’s so the old woman can cry in peace.

“How does it feel to be done?” Paige asks, pulling away from speaking closely with Rose and addressing Rey with a smile.

Rey laughs a little, feeling slightly awkward. “It feels good.”

But truthfully, nothing feels done. Simply put on hold.

\*\*

Luke finds her not half an hour after the ceremony is over.

Rey had nearly forgotten that he had promised he’d be here.

And he is alone. Of course he is alone, Rey knows that there’s no way, of course... Ben is still in jail, still awaiting his trial and point blank refusing bail, and there’s no way he’d attend with his uncle—

Yet Rey finds herself craning her neck to peer behind Luke anyway.

This makes the inevitable disappointment even sharper, because it is expected but still horribly unwelcome.

“Congratulations, Rey.” Luke’s smile is kind, although he looks fairly haggard, as if he hasn’t slept in a week. Which he probably hasn’t.

Rey embraces her mentor quickly. She talked to him on the phone several days ago. He hadn’t asked her about finding the studio on fire, about watching Ben be arrested. They’d merely spoken about Rey’s upcoming graduation, about how the press is having a field day over what Ben did, how Luke is staying with Leia until all of this blows over.

“Thanks,” she says. They take a walk.

“I spoke to the insurance company,” Luke says, eyes downcast.

Rey opens and closes her mouth several times, not quite sure what to say.

“I’m not going to rebuild.” Luke pauses and looks at her with sad, exhausted blue eyes. Somehow, in the past ten years, he’s grown old. It pains Rey, and she bites at her lower lip. She nods, trying not to let on to how deeply this disappoints her.

“I’m leaving, Rey.”

She freezes mid step. The wind chooses that moment to pick up, nearly whipping her cap from her head. Her gown swirls around her feet and she grasps at it, staring at her father figure with growing horror.

“L-Leaving? Why?”

Luke looks pained, and she has the feeling that he’s been dreading having to tell her this. “What happened with Ben... I have no one to blame but myself.”

Rey’s eyes widen. “Luke—”

He holds up a hand to silence her. “Let’s not pretend that my treatment of my nephew didn’t greatly contribute to what he did. He didn’t snap like that without prodding on my part.” He sighs, clasps his hands in front of him. “I need to do some serious reevaluating about what I’m trying to accomplish with my teaching.”

“But...” Many different thoughts churn in Rey’s head, and it’s impossible to pick out where to start. “But all your students are still here and, and *I’m* here, Luke—”

He pats her on the shoulder. “You don’t need me, Rey. You’re an incredibly talented young woman, and you’ll go far no matter what you pursue. You don’t need me. I’ll only fail you.” She picks up on his hidden meaning. *Like I did Ben.*

Tears prick. One escapes her right eye and starts to trail down her cheek before Rey hurriedly wipes it away. *You’re failing me by leaving*, she wants to point out. *Don’t you see, this is like having my dad leave me twice.* Instead, she says, “Okay.”

She doesn't have the heart to argue.

Or maybe she just doesn't care anymore.

Luke has already bought a house, he explains. He presses a slip of paper into her palm. It's an address for a place in the Pacific Northwest.

"That's literally across the country," Rey says with dejection.

"There's a number there too, if you ever need to reach me." Luke looks broken, Rey realizes.

He's a broken man running away from his mistakes.

He hugs her goodbye, and Rey knows that she'll see him again. But not soon.

She watches him walk away, takes in how he is fleeing from her life in the same way he is fleeing from Ben's.

Rey sets her jaw and turns back toward her friends. Maz has reappeared and is in a deep conversation with Finn's Nana. Paige, Rose, and Finn all stand in a circle, laughing together.

And Rey doesn't wander over to them. Not just yet. As soon as she does Nana will start insisting on taking pictures. In fact, Rey is amazed that she hasn't summoned her over already.

She remembers taking pictures nearly ten years ago at Ben's graduation.

He'd promised. He'd fucking pinky promised he'd be here. Something inside of Rey hardens.

She swallows as it hits, as it sinks in.

Luke is leaving her.

Ben has already left her.

She isn't sure why she's surprised, why this knowledge cuts so deeply and leaves her stinging and empty and icy.

Rey presses down on the pain, the hurt. Presses down *hard*. Wills it to go away.

Besides, isn't this something she's known since she was five? The people she loves will always choose to leave her.

## Chapter End Notes

Rey deserves all the snuggles. ALSO, OKAY. I was slightly appalled how many of your thought Ben burned Rey's art??? Like yes homeboy snapped and did A Very Bad Thing

but he was also riding all the rollercoasters with Rey like a month ago? HE WOULD NEVER BURN HER ART OKAY. (Author is frazzled. Author takes own fic too seriously. Author needs a glass of wine.)

I never attended for Ben to keep his graduation promise :( Why do I like pain so much? One more part for 2008. Yes, we'll see Ben.

I frankly was expecting to get a lot more hate for last chapter. Honestly, everyone's support and love and enthusiasm for this story is incredibly special to me. At the end of the day I am simply trying to tell a good story, so thank you all for trusting me with our babies and for being so willing to go on this journey with me! Y'all are THE BEST and I couldn't ask for better readers.

I have [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)!

If you liked let me know?

## 2008, part seven

### Chapter Notes

Two things!

First, selun-chen on tumblr did [a lovely piece](#) of the spinning moment in the rain from chapter 44. Look at it and let it warm your heart like I did.

Second, if you haven't read the second chapter of "[find my nest of salt, everything's my fault](#)", which is the companion piece to this story (drabbles and scenes from Ben's POV)...you should.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

How'd you like to be alone and drowning  
How'd you like to be alone and drowning  
How'd you like to be alone and drowning  
How'd you like to be alone and drowning

“Narcolepsy” by Third Eye Blind

\*\*

The summer passes.

Maz is able to pull some strings so that Rey can stay at the home until she starts at university in the fall, and after that she'll live in the dorm. Just like any other average college student.

Paige takes Rose on a summer long road trip across the states as a graduation present, leaving Rey to spend most of her days working at the local grocery store with Finn. It's calming and fun and Rey finds she likes most of her coworkers. She even makes out with a guy who works in the deli in the backseat of his car after a late night shift.

It's a good distraction.

And yet as the summer winds to a close, Rey finds her mind weighed heavy with thoughts. She has a lot of things to say.

A lot of things to say to a specific someone.

Poe texts her one day in the middle of August.

*He filled out the significant relationship application 4 u. U fill out yours, turn it in quickly and u could visit in 2 wks*



Two weeks, then.

\*\*

Baldwin State Prison is a two-and-a-half-hour drive south, and Rey does not have to beg Maz to let her use her the car like she thought she would.

In fact, Maz offers to go with her. So does Finn. And Poe.

But Rey declines. She needs to make the drive by herself, needs to be alone with her thoughts and everything she needs to communicate with Ben before...before...  
Before she can move on from this, she supposes.

Because the anger and the pain and the misery is still there, no longer fresh but tender. Like a deep wound that is stitched up, but the stitches aren't ready to come out yet. And Rey realizes that seeing Ben will either reopen the wound or help it close for good. Likely to scar, but still closed.

She leaves the home at 6am on a Saturday. It's already humid despite the early morning, and Rey suspects the humidity will only get worse the further south she drives.  
She doesn't listen to any music on the way down, brain too much of a whirlwind to concentrate on anything but Maz's new TomTom spitting out driving directions.

When she arrives she stares at the building for a little bit. It's a medium security facility, and frankly if it weren't for the tall, barbed wire chain link fence lining the entire building she might not have known that she's parked at a prison.

She exits the car and walks inside, heart pounding and feeling tentative. She has her completed significant relationship form clutched to her chest even though she shouldn't need it. She's on the schedule to visit today, has been for nearly two weeks. Rey is modestly dressed in her Warped '07 t-shirt and a simple pair of shorts, as the visitation rule book called for modesty.

She enters the lobby, follows the visitation signs. They search her, then make her walk through a metal detector. When she's cleared she's lead into an open room with multiple tables. Several inmates are already visiting with their families and friends. The visitations officer introduces herself and then—

And then there he is.

Ben is not handcuffed. He's already seated at one of the tables, but he stands when he sees her, brown eyes roving over her as if to reassure himself that she's still intact. That she's still whole.

She walks toward him, still clutching the application form she doesn't need, and she feels so small. So nervous and small and bone tired already.

This is a contact visit. She's allowed to greet him with a touch to his hand, or a hug, or a—

Rey sits quickly without touching him, and if Ben is disappointed he doesn't let it show. He sits too, and Rey crushes up the application form in her hand just to have something to do in the moment.

She takes a minute just to *stare* at him. His hair is neatly cut, but he's let his facial hair grow out. It makes him look older, a little more rugged. Perhaps more dangerous, even.

She realizes he's waiting for her to speak first, and Rey is feeling *so much* in this moment because this is the longest she and Ben have gone without speaking since she met him.

How did they even get here?

She opens her mouth. Closes it. "Orange isn't your color," she blurts out, already feeling her cheeks burn at how stupid that sounded. She could have just started with 'hello'.

Ben's mouth quirks briefly, but then it's gone, and maybe it didn't happen at all and it was simply a trick of the light.

"I would have brought you coffee," Rey continues quickly. "But they don't let you bring outside food or drink in."

This time Ben really does give her an almost smile. "it's not so bad in here. Jail coffee was worse."

Rey nods. "Four years is a long time to go without drinkable coffee."

And just like that, the tension snaps between them at the mention of how long he'll be in here. Rey feels the overwhelming weight of what's happening, of everything she wants and *needs* to say to Ben flooding into her brain.

And he is watching her, like he knows.

And she realizes that he *does* know. He knows exactly why she's here. Perhaps that's why his face is neutral but his eyes are alight with pain.

Where to begin?

Rey decides to start with the most difficult thing to say, but one of the most necessary. She swallows whatever pride she has left.

"I'm sorry." Her voice breaks a little but she steadies herself with a deep breath, trembling hand grasping her own knee underneath the table.

Ben looks shell-shocked for a second before he composes himself. "You—What?"

Rey bites at her lower lip, hating the fact that tears are already threatening to blur her vision. She knows she's going to cry but damnit, she didn't want to start so soon.

"I'm sorry, Ben. For outing you to Luke, for throwing you under the bus. I—you didn't deserve that and I was—I was broken hearted and I lashed out and I wasn't *thinking*." She

closes her eyes quickly, but that proves to be a mistake because she feels a tear release and trickle down her cheek. “I was horrible and, and I know that’s what made you snap—”

“You think what you said is what made me snap?” Ben interrupts, voice low and hoarse.

Rey opens her eyes and peers at him. “Isn’t it?”

Ben’s lips part a little in disbelief. Then his whole face hardens in anger. “I did what I did,” he pauses here to collect himself. “I did what I did out of spite toward Luke. I don’t want you to think that I burned down the studio because of *you*. I didn’t—It happened so fast, within a day and I barely even *remember*—”

He leans toward her a little, but keeps his hands in his lap. He opens his mouth to continue but then shakes his head, clearly frustrated at not being able to find his words. So he shifts in his seat and shrugs with one shoulder, looking pointedly away.

And it’s the casual brushing off, how he doesn’t even seem to know how this has affected her —

“You burned down my home.” Rey spits it out through gritted teeth, and her eyes are swimming now and she doesn’t know how she should she feel about this, about any of this. “You burned down my home and you just—do you even *care* about what—”

She lets out a frustrated cry and the whole visitation room goes quiet.

Rey sits up a little straighter in her chair, trying her best to get a hold of her emotions.

But the rising hysteria and growing numbness collide inside of her, and the result is that suddenly Rey doesn’t care if she appears broken.

She sniffs, wipes at her eyes. “Do you know want to know one of the reasons why I love you?”

Ben’s eyes slowly swivel to rest on her. They’ve gone wide.

Rey continues. “On the day I met you, I hadn’t smiled all day. Did you know that? Not once. But then I met you and I couldn’t *stop* smiling. You scared everyone else but you didn’t scare *me*. And I think that first day was it. It was the first day I started loving you.”

Rey pauses. Her breathing is shaky and her entire body is quaking. “And I’ve loved you ever since. You were my best friend, you made me laugh, you *understood* me, you made me feel *safe*—”

Another shaky breath. It’s getting harder to breathe. “I love you, Ben.” She shrugs her shoulder and shakes her head, because the words are so simple to her, so easy to say after holding them in for so long. “So much.”

Ben is crying. It’s the second time she’s ever seen him do so, the first being in the hospital after Han’s death.

The sight of it makes her whole being heave, lurch with the desire to comfort him. Instead she internalizes, lets it break her down further.

“But you’re in *here*,” she grits out. And here it is, all that fury surging forward and crawling up her throat. “You’re in prison, Ben, because you just do shit without *thinking*! You always shoulder the consequences as if your actions only hurt yourself but—”

Suddenly she’s twelve, yelling at Ben in his car after he beat up a middle schooler.

“—you don’t just hurt yourself, *you hurt me too!*”

She scrubs at her face with her sleeve, forcing herself to swallow deep breaths. “Except you didn’t just hurt me this time, Ben. You broke my heart. And I can’t do this anymore.” Her voice is already scratchy and broken, but now it thins with her emotions, goes high and pitiful.

Is she shrugging or are her shoulders shaking with her silent sobs?

“I can’t sit around for four years waiting, hoping you come out a better man. I want you to, Ben. I want you to be better. But I want you to be better for *yourself*, not for anyone else. Not for Luke, not for Poe, and not for me. Get *help*, Ben. Because I love you and you deserve to have a beautiful life even if I—”

Rey stills, words at the edge of her tongue.

She can’t say it.

She *has* to say it.

“Even if I’m not in it.”

The sentence hangs heavy in the air between them, and there’s still tear tracks on Ben’s cheeks and Rey had thought she knew what it meant to feel deep rooted emotional pain. But this is so horrible and *potent* and she never, ever wants to feel this way again. She’d rather live the rest of her life not feeling anything at all then feel like this again.

She presses the back of her hand to her mouth until she feels a little more composed.

Ben doesn’t say anything.

So that’s that, then. Nodding to herself, Rey stands and looks down at Ben, memorizes every single bit of him, as if his image isn’t already seared into her memory forever.

“Goodbye, Ben.”

She turns, thinking all she has to do is make it out of his presence and out of this place—

“Rey.”

She turns back to him sharply.

Ben has gotten to his feet and he looks down at her, chest heaving, gaze wild and flickering over every inch of her. Maybe he is memorizing her too.

“Rey, I-I just want you to know that I—I—”

He snaps his mouth closes and shuts his eyes briefly. Then he gives an almost imperceptible shake of his head, as if making a decision.

“I’m sorry.”

Rey suspects he was going to say something else.

\*\*

She’s alright for most of the ride home.

Really, she’d been doing just fine until Third Eye Blind came on the radio. Rey feels her mouth pop open. She hasn’t heard this song in forever because they don’t normally play it on the radio. But she used to *love* this song.

She’d heard it for the first time in Ben’s car. She’d been nine. The song takes her back, as if that day happened yesterday and not nearly a decade ago. A memory that accompanies it hits her like a truck.

*“G-Ghosts aren’t real though, right?”*

*He’d laughed at her. Rey can’t quite remember the details, but she thinks she threw something at him, which had only made him laugh more.*

*Then he’d sat down across from her in Luke’s kitchen-office. He’d ruffled her hair and smiled. “No, kid, ghosts aren’t real. But if they are I’ll never let them get you.”*

Rey pulls off to the side of the road and weeps.

\*\*

She drives over to Finn’s, lets herself in. Is grateful his Nana isn’t at home to see the state of her.

Finn and Rose, who returned from her trip a week ago, are waiting for her in Finn’s wreck room. They have pizza and ice cream and they rented some crime thriller for her.

Rey lets her bag fall to the floor and says nothing.

Rose gasps when she sees her. “Oh, Rey.”

And Rey, who is so emotionally spent she’s not sure if she’s fully lucid, says, “They always leave. They always *leave* and they *lie* and they let the ghosts get you—”

She's not sure how, but she's on the carpet and Finn and Rose have wrapped their arms around her, holding her close between the two of them.

"We love you, Rey," Rose whispers. She is crying too.

"We're never leaving you, okay?" Finn's hand squeezes her shoulder. "You're stuck with us forever."

"Forever," Rose agrees, and kisses the promise into Rey's cheek.

It gives Rey hope.

## Chapter End Notes

I've had this scene in my head since I started writing this fic. Ugh, this was hard. I am emotionally drained. But the good news is that we have nothing but an uphill climb from here on out, folks. And I like to think the view at the top will be gorgeous.

This is it for 2008. Am I doing a time jump? Kind of. But not really. You'll see. Once again, thank you to everyone who shows love for this fic. I'd elaborate but, emotionally drained. I love you guys.

I have [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)!

If you liked let me know?

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

People told me slow my roll  
I'm screaming out fuck that  
I'm a do just what I want  
Looking ahead no turning back

“The Pursuit of Happiness (nightmare)” by Kid Cudi

\*\*

Rey sighs deeply.

She had gotten most of her partying out of her system freshman year, thank you very much, yet here she is. Here she is letting Finn drag her to some random’s house on one of the few Saturday nights she happens to have off.

Really, he better be happy that she loves him so much.

“So, wait.” Rey cranes her neck as they pass by what is obviously the party house, as there are a ton of cars parked out front. “What kind of party is this anyway?”

Finn parks up the street, careful not to block anyone’s driveway or mailbox. “It’s Ryan’s birthday party.”

Well, maybe there’d be cake. “Who’s Ryan?”

Finn shrugs. “Don’t know.”

Rey blinks at him.

\*\*

Two hours later Rey sips on flat beer and watches Finn flirt with a guy she thinks was in her psychology class last semester. She tips the red solo cup back until her beer is gone, and then she sets the empty cup down on a nearby countertop and frowns, eyeing her surroundings.

She suspects Finn mainly wanted to come to this party in hopes of running into the guys he’s currently talking to, and had begged her to come along with him so that he wouldn’t be alone. Finn can be insecure like that sometimes. And since Rose is at the Technical school right in the heart of the city (the kind of college that just the *idea* of applying to had made Rey’s eye twitch in anxiety), Finn and Rey have been especially attached at the hip since the beginning of freshman year at their state university.

But on occasions like this, Rey misses Rose desperately. She pulls her new iPhone out of her back pocket (she and Finn share a phone plan now) and texts her, not expecting a speedy reply. Rose often took advantage of Saturday nights to study.

Another half hour passes. Rey doesn't go for another drink and makes her excuses whenever a guy tries to make small talk with her. This sort of thing had been fun last fall, when she was raw and wild and determined to feel something that wasn't misery.

Now she's stable, solid, and wishing she was back in her dorm room watching *Arrested Development*.

She glances back in Finn's direction, watches him laugh with his companion and place his hand on the other guy's shoulder.

Rey grumbles to herself. She's not escaping this party any time soon.

And there's no food, not even crackers to snack on. Outrageous.

She's enjoying the thump and hum of the trippy music when a large group of newcomers bustle in through the front door, making the noise in the house skyrocket. Rey winces at the increasing volume and scoots toward the back door, opening it and making her way out onto the back porch.

The instant quiet and cool late September air make her sigh with relief.

It takes her a minute or so to figure out she's not alone.

A guy is leaning up against the wooden railing that wraps around the porch. He gives her an awkward wave. "It's a headache in there, huh?"

Rey nods, leaning back against the wall of the house a safe distance away from this stranger. She doesn't return his wave but gives him a small smile instead. "More people just arrived, too. And the friend who dragged me here seems busy. Looks like I'm stuck here for a bit."

The guy laughs. He's actually kind of cute, she notices. He's got dark skin and straight, white teeth. His eyes are bright. "More people? I already don't know half the people here and it's my birthday party."

Rey tilts her head and takes a small step in his direction. "You're Ryan?"

He nods. "Indeed."

Rey presses her lips together. She could cut this conversation short and make her way back inside. But she feels at ease out here with this now almost stranger, somehow. "Well, I hate to break it to you, but this is supposed to be a birthday party but there's literally *no cake*—"

"I know. It's a pretty lousy birthday party," he finishes for her.

They both laugh, and Rey finds herself ducking her head. She feels kind of shy, now.



After five minutes he asks her what she's studying.

"Haven't declared my major yet," she answers sheepishly. "But I've been looking into Early Childhood Education."

"That's cool!" He suddenly seems not quite as far away, even though he's still technically on the other side of the porch. "Do you like kids?"

"They're fun."

"Yeah, my kid brother is seven. He's a total mess—"

After twenty minutes he mentions financial aid, a topic every student can commiserate with to some degree. Except Rey.

"I'll be in debt for the rest of my life," Ryan jokes.

Rey laughs, voice now a little strained. "I have a scholarship," she admits. It's sort of true. She pushes back the memory of Leia calling her last fall for lunch, of being given access to a bank account, of Rose lovingly but firmly telling Rey that she would be a dumb-dumb if she refused the money—

When Ryan asks what kind of scholarship, Rey tells a little white lie.

After an hour they get into the topic of hobbies. Ryan likes editing, graphics, Photoshop—

Rey talks about hanging out with her friends, the book she's currently reading (she glares daggers at him when he asks if it's a Twilight novel), and her two jobs (grocery store and diner).

She doesn't mention her art, because the truth is she hasn't opened her sketchbook in she can't remember how long. And there it is, skirting close by that fact, is an aging, barely healed wound she won't prod, the one that leads down a thousand different memory lanes. So many she could get lost.

They stand next to each other now. He's not too much taller than her but she likes that. It makes her feel at ease, like he's easily accessible. Rey likes Ryan.

But she can't tell him about her art. How do you explain to someone you've only recently connected with that, sometimes, when your heart is broken, some things die inside of you?

After the second hour Finn finds her.

"There you are!" he exclaims, and Rey is relieved to see that he isn't intoxicated. "You ready to leave?"

Rey turns back to her new friend, and they exchange numbers.

\*\*

After a week of constant texting, he asks her out on a date. Rey says yes.

\*\*

“I want *all* the details.” Rose’s insistence makes Rey grin.

She sits on top of her bed in her dorm room, dressed in flannel pajama bottoms and fuzzy Christmas socks. Rey is determined to get into the holiday spirit.

She leans back into her pillow, staring up at the ceiling. “I mean, it was nice?”

“You sound hesitant.”

Rey frowns, cradles the smart phone between her shoulder and her ear. “Well, I got a little blood on his bedsheets. Ryan was sweet about it, though.”

“Aww,” Rose coos. “Okay, but can I ask a question?”

“Go for it.”

“Did it hurt?”

“Yep.”

“Comforting.”

Rey laughs a little into her phone and pulls her blankets up over her body. “Yeah, but it’ll get better. It was his first time too.”

There’s a long pause at Rose’s end of the line. When her best friend speaks, Rey can tell she’s trying not to giggle. “So,” Rose says, “how long did it last?”

Rey almost snorts because *damnit*. “In the effort of preserving my boyfriend’s honor, I cannot answer that question.”

There’s a slight cackle and then: “I won’t breathe a word of that to anyone, I promise.”

But Rey is grinning too.

Rose spends the next few minutes singing the praises of Rey’s boyfriend, about how she’s so happy that Rey has finally found a nice guy to date, a guy she has a lot in common with and who treats her right. A guy who is *normal*, is the underlying meaning.

This bothers Rey for reasons she’s entirely aware of but refuses to dwell on. Her grin slowly fades.

Because, see, Rey doesn’t talk about Ben.

Rey doesn’t talk about Ben *ever*.

## Chapter End Notes

LOL this is such a transitional chapter it's not even funny. What can I say, Rey spent the latter half of 2008 and 2009 just trying to live her best life. It was uneventful and she DESERVES IT. She also deserves a cute college boyfriend, who I 100% imagine as a younger Daniel Kaluuya. Also, I know there are some of you who are disappointed that Rey's first time wasn't with Ben. It just doesn't fit the narrative I'm trying to achieve. And also, when I finally write about Ben and Rey Doing It I really don't want it to be a First Time scene for Rey. Writing a virginity loss scene that remains realistic *and* sexy is extremely difficult and our babies deserve the best smut, thank you.

Also, I have some super fun Ben surprises happening over these few Ben In Prison chapters so DON'T SKIP THEM! Plz. I know, I know. I miss him too.

I have [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#).

If you liked let me know?

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I wish I was a sailor with someone who waited for me  
I wish I was as fortunate as fortunate as me  
I wish I was a messenger and all the news was good  
I wish I was the full moon shining off a Camaro's hood

“Wishlist” by Pearl Jam

\*\*

“You know, for someone who doesn’t do art anymore you certainly have a lot of craft supplies.”

Rey pauses on the other side of her bedroom in her new student apartment and raises her head. Her boyfriend is giving her a very pointed look.

She presses her lips together and shrugs her shoulders uncomfortably. She’d like to say something, but frankly...she just can’t quite bring herself to.

She’d kept her art well hidden from Ryan until February, when they’d been hanging out in Finn’s dorm room and Ryan had noticed a colored sketch of Finn dressed in a flak jacket from Naruto and looking ready for battle. Rey had given it to him for Christmas their junior year of high school. Finn has it framed and hanging over his bed in reverence.

Ryan’s shock when Finn casually said it was Rey who had drawn it had been embarrassing.

He hadn’t pressured her to talk about it at first, seeming to sense that it was a very sensitive topic. Now, however, it’s late August and Ryan has taken to making pointed comments about drawing and art whenever the opportunity arises.

Rey can tell it amuses Finn and Rose, as if they’re dying to join in with him.

She also suspects Ryan is the one who has been buying her new sketchbooks, pens, and paint and leaving them on her bed these last few months.

It’s both heartwarming and deeply annoying.

Rey will pick back up on her art when she’s ready.

Whenever that will be.

Ryan sighs, shakes his head at her fondly, and heads back downstairs to grab more boxes out of his car.

An hour later she's unpacking her toiletries into the new bathroom she'll be sharing with a girl names Kaydel when Ryan calls out to her from her bedroom.

"Holy shit, Rey, did you draw these?!"

She spots her own eyebrows furrowing in the mirror before turning and exiting the bathroom.

She pokes her head around the doorframe and takes in Ryan sitting on the floor, an old piece of sketch paper clutched in his right hand. The corners are yellowing with age.

And Rey...Rey gapes.

Ryan glances from her face back to the drawing in his hand. "What is it, like a fire demon?"

Rey frowns. "What? No. It's a balrog. Well, technically it's a Maiar that was corrupted by Melkor into his services. That sketch specifically is the balrog that Gandalf famously faces down in the mines of Moria—"

Without realizing it, Ben's words and methodical tone come trickling out of her mouth. Like muscle memory.

After she explains, she pauses, feeling a flush creep into her cheeks.

Ryan blinks at her. "I mean, totally. That's what I meant to say." Smiling slightly, he pulls a binder out of the box he'd found the balrog sketch in. When he flips it open, Rey nearly groans. Carefully preserved in that binder are all of Ben's sketches from his stint in jail.

"Whoa," Ryan breathes, taking in the stylistic design of Ben's sketches. "These seriously look like they're from an awesome comic book. Rey, look, I know you haven't wanted to discuss your art with me but these are seriously *incredible*—"

Rey squeezes her eyes shut. "They're not mine."

"Huh?"

"They're not my drawings."

Ryan quiets, head going back and forth from her face to the binder in his hands. Silence stretches between them for a long moment before he asks: "Are they Ben's?"

Rey's whole being goes still. She clenches her hands by her sides and swallows thickly. She can feel her heart beginning to beat faster in her chest, can feel growing uncomfortableness swirl around the base of her spine. She sighs. "Which one told you?"

Ryan looks instantly alarmed. "I wasn't trying to find out things about you, Rey, I promise! It just sort of popped up in casual conversation and—"

Rey's eyes narrow. "It was Finn, wasn't it?"

His dark eyes go wide. "I mean—"

Rey nods to herself. "That answers that."

"Look, he mentioned something about a 'Ben' once while we were hanging out and I didn't know who he was talking about. That...that seemed to shock him a bit." Her boyfriend has dropped the binder back into the box he found it in and is focusing on the floor in front of him, unable to meet her eyes.

"I know he was really important to you," he continues softly. "But Finn didn't give me any more details and I didn't ask."

Rey finds herself exhaling deeply.

She feels funny.

Because all the sudden her carefully controlled thoughts are flinging memories of *Ben Ben Ben* at her, and she remembers the day he'd drawn that balrog sketch. She remembers the day he'd taken her to see *The Fellowship of the Ring* in theaters too.

So long ago. It was so long ago that all that happened, and yet as Rey stands in the middle of her new bedroom it somehow feels like just yesterday. Like if she goes back into the bathroom and looks into the mirror, she'll be eleven again.

"Thanks for being respectful," she mumbles, and slumps down on the edge of her bed.

A moment later the bed dips and Ryan is sitting beside her. He begins rubbing her back soothingly.

"Sorry," he says, giving her a half smile that is both genuine and concerned. "I don't mean to drudge up bad memories."

"They're not bad." The words flow between her lips before Rey can really stop and mull them over. They hang above her in the air, heavy and meaningful and true. "It's just...I don't know. I try not to think about it. About him."

Ryan's calming motions make her relax. "Is he...is he dead?" he asks, clearly curious but trying to remain kind. It makes Rey smile a little.

She sighs and shakes her head. "No. No, he's in prison for two more years."

The hand rubbing her back stills for a second. "Oh. Wow."

Rey nods. "Yep."

She flicks her eyes to the ceiling, deciding.

And then she tells Ryan everything.

Because that's what you do when you love someone. You're honest with them. And Rey is pretty sure she loves her boyfriend. He is too good to not love a little. And it's encouraging,

Rey realizes, to know that the broken pieces of her heart can rearrange themselves into something lovely and functioning again.

\*\*

For their first anniversary (which sneaks up on Rey) Ryan surprises her with a trip to the beach. Rey *freaks*.

She's never seen the ocean.

During the four-and-a-half-hour drive to the shore, they mostly chatter between the two of them. About their classes and their friends and how Ryan would love to move out to the west coast when they've graduated.

Rey doesn't think she can ever leave the state that has raised her, that has given her so much, but she nods along encouragingly. It won't occur to her until much later what this particular conversation implies.

They've been listening to a 90's radio station, and Rey is in the middle of explaining a funny thing that happened to her and Rose at the mall last weekend when—

She knows this song. Hell, she knows this band like the back of her hand. Without missing a beat she leans forward and turns the volume knob to the left until she can't hear the music anymore.

Now, where was she—

"I thought you loved Pearl Jam." Ryan risks glancing away from the road in order to give her a curious look. "And 90's music in general. You said you were raised on it."

"I was," Rey agrees. "And I do love Pearl Jam. In theory."

She doesn't let herself dwell on all the times in her life that seem to have been narrated by Eddie Vedder's voice. She nearly sighs.

Ryan shrugs with one shoulder, at ease with her explanation. He doesn't fiddle with the volume for another five minutes.

\*\*

The ocean is stunning and overwhelming.

Rey stands in front of it in awe. The waves crash against the shore and edge and swirl along her ankles. Her mouth parts and she can barely think, eyes taking in the endless stretch of water in front of her.

She's never felt so small and yet so at ease at the same time.

Ryan calls out to her, something about getting them smoothies and also not getting sand in his shoes, and Rey nods and waves at him in acknowledgement.

The sky is overcast, and without caring Rey plops down into the wet sand, letting the salty ocean water soak her from the waist down. She props her elbows on her knees and stares, stares out into the vastness of mother nature.

It's fucking beautiful.

And the colors—the blues and the greens and the splash of purple and yellow—

It takes her breath away and makes her fingers twitch.

So small, she feels so small. She dwells on the fact that there's a whole path laid out before her, just like there's a path laid out before everyone. It's her job to make the best of it. It's her job to make the best of the hand that she's been dealt.

For a long time it's just Rey and the earth. The sun begins to dip down toward the far, never ending edge of the water and she inhales the briny, salty air.

There's no Ryan, Rose, Finn, school. There's no sad, dull, tiny hole in her heart where Luke and the studio stay.

And there's no Ben.

There's just Rey.

Just Rey, gazing at the most naturally stunning color palette she's ever seen.

She wants to paint.

## Chapter End Notes

So many of you hate Ryan hahaha. Poor guy. Quick update because I miss Ben the MOST and I'm willing to fight y'all on that fact.

I'm really fucking excited for the next chapter.

Thank you all for all your kind words of love and support! I wish I had the time to reply to everyone's comments but life is nuts, so just know that I read all of them and absolutely love hearing everything you guys have to say. Thanks for being the dopest.

I have [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#).

If you liked let me know?



## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

I never lost a fight but never knew I started one the same  
I never knew how capable I would become  
I'm tired of talking to a wall when I could talk to someone else  
It's got seven days without a word and you're with someone somewhere else

“Pensacola” by Manchester Orchestra

\*\*

*Look who misses u*

Rey grins as she taps on the attachment Poe has texted her. It's a picture of a very fluffy looking BB-8 asleep, stretched across the foot of what Rey assumes is Poe's bed. It's adorable.

Poe sends her another message before she can respond.

*HAPPY BDAY. Cant believe ur 21. Celebrating?*

She laughs a little and quickly texts Poe back.

*Going out to dinner then coming home. Nothing too crazy!*

She's barely pressed 'send' when Poe is calling her. She rolls her eyes and accepts it, bringing her cell up to her ear.

“You're not celebrating?” Poe sounds properly offended.

Rey is cleaning a set of paintbrushes in her bathroom sink, and she props her phone between her shoulder and her neck. “I just told you that I'm going to dinner—”

“But it's your 21st.”

Rey lets out a little laugh. “I know that.”

Poe is silent for a beat, and Rey can easily imagine the scandalized look on his face. “Y-You're not having a party?”

“Nope.”

More silence.

Then a resigned sigh.

“Rey, sweetie, you leave me no choice.”

“Poe—”

“If I wake up tomorrow knowing that you didn’t party on your own 21st birthday I will never forgive myself.”

Rey rolls her eyes at her reflection and shakes her head. “You’re being overdramatic.”

“Where do you live?”

“Poe—”

“REY. I am not going to argue with you over this. Where do you live?”

Rey debates for about ten seconds before relenting with an irritated exhale. She gives him her address, already knowing that she’ll have to plan on wearing a different outfit. Her paint stained jeans and ratty old t-shirt probably won’t due, now.

“Great!” Poe sounds immensely chipper. “Call your friends and tell them to be at your place at nine. I’ll bring a handle of Titos.”

Then he hangs up, and Rey stares at her blank phone screen as she lowers it away from her face.

Leave it to Poe to change the entire trajectory of her birthday in under three minutes.

\*\*

Rey hadn’t realized how much she’s missed Poe. She’s seen him a handful of times in the last few years, mostly when he asks if she can come over to his new house and feed BB-8 while he’s out of town for work. They’d even grabbed lunch once or twice here and there, and he’d sent her about a billion texts when he found out that she was dating Ryan. But mostly Poe just spams her Facebook timeline with pictures of cats he thinks are funny.

Rey adores him for it.

So when he walks into her apartment, carrying a handle of vodka and a massive grin, she finds herself launching into his arms for a hug.

“You look great, birthday girl!” Poe exclaims, pulling back and nodding at her outfit, a simple skirt and blouse, in approval. He sighs happily. “I feel like I haven’t seen you in forever.”

Rey tucks a lock of hair behind her ear and takes the vodka from Poe. “That’s probably because you haven’t,” she says with a half-smile.

He winks at her, nearly steps around her to make his way to the kitchen, before pausing. “Oh, Ben says happy birthday too.”

Rey stills, feeling her eyes go a little wide. “Huh?”

The smile Poe is giving her now is a little different than the one from a moment ago, somehow. More knowing. “Yeah, I saw him yesterday for my monthly visit. He calls me his ‘period’. Dick.” Poe’s eyes flick over to the living room and settle on Ryan, who is having an animated conversation on the couch with Rose. “He’s happy for you.”

There’s a mischievous spark in Poe’s eyes now, as if he knows something he’s not revealing and finds it very funny.

Rey gapes at him and Poe laughs, shouldering past her and heading into the kitchen.

\*\*

She’s tipsy before eleven.

This might be the best birthday ever.

Rey had only invited a handful of people over. Just Poe, Rose, Finn, Ryan, Paige, and her roommate Kaydel, who is whip smart and dreadfully sarcastic. They take shots and play Never Have I Ever, and after her fourth shot Rey forgets how many fingers she’s holding up.

Eventually she leaves the game and goes to mess with the music, turning it to a song she thinks would be fun to sing along tipsy to.

\*\*

She’s drunk before midnight.

Rey and Poe are sitting on the couch together, clasping hands and having a heart to heart.

“You have turned into *such* a lovely young woman,” Poe slurs. “Remember when you came over to the apartment for the first time and you had butterflies in your hair? You were so fucking precious I thought I would die.”

Rey is very close to bursting into happy sobs. “I wanted to look nice. I got—” hiccup “—Rose and Paige to do my hair because I wanted to look nice.”

Poe looks like he might cry too. Rey wonders how many drinks he’s had. He lets go of her hands and pats her cheek. “So precious.”

And then, because Rey is very drunk, she leans forward and asks, “How is Ben?”

Poe’s glassy eyes shine a little brighter. “Well, ever since—” He cuts himself off and shakes his head. “You’ll see.”

“I’ll see what?”

Poe shrugs, swaying a little. “You’ll see.” Then he winks.

\*\*

She's shitfaced before 2am.

So when she catches Poe and Finn making out on her apartment's tiny balcony, she naturally tries to punch Poe in the face.

"Hypocrite!" she screams, and her jabs would absolutely be connecting if she wasn't seeing double. "Bloody traitor!"

Ryan drags her away and into the bathroom, where she proceeds to vomit up everything she's put into her body this evening. He holds her hair back for her, wets a washcloth and wipes her face when she's done.

"So wait, why is Poe Dameron a hypocrite?"

Rey merely grunts.

\*\*

Everyone is still there in the morning, even Poe, who looks like he's been run over with a truck. Multiple times.

Good.

Rey glares at him the entire time she brews a pot of coffee for herself, and Poe refuses to look her in the eye from where he's sitting at her and Kaydel's tiny kitchen table.

But as the minutes tick by Rey finds herself grumbling in slow acceptance. Taking pity, she pours Poe a mug of coffee when it's done brewing. She brings it to him and sits down in the chair beside him.

She slides the mug across the table until it's sitting right in front of him. "Have I told you lately that you're a hypocrite?"

Poe winces. He takes a tentative sip from the mug and then reaches for the cream and sugar that Rey has brought with her. He pours generous amounts into his cup. "That's fair," he states after taking another sip. "But in my defense, Finn isn't underage."

Rey frowns deeply, drumming her fingers against the top of the table. "You gave me so much shit—"

Then she sighs.

She's not going to go out of her way to make Poe feel the way he made her feel. It's stupid. And a waste of her time.

She sips from her own mug and smiles a little as Poe shifts nervously in his seat, obviously wary of whatever she's about to continue saying.

She sets her mug down. “If you do anything to hurt Finn I’ll break into your house, murder you with my bare hands, and then steal away into the night with BB-8.”

Poe’s tired face brightens a little, despite his obvious hangover. He pulls the collar of his shirt back and exposes a small purple and black bruise right near his collarbone. “If it makes you feel any better, you got one solid hit in last night.”

Rey beams. It does make her feel a little better.

\*\*

It’s Black Friday, and Rey and Finn are making their way through a bookstore, trying to see if there are any good deals. Finn is laden with cookbooks for Poe, and Rey is debating on whether to get Ryan a book on coding or not. They make their way over to the graphic novel section, where Finn makes a beeline for the manga.

Rey lingers in front of the DC selection, paging through a Batman graphic novel that has a unique art style. She ignores the Marvel section, and walks toward the end of the aisle, deciding to catch up with Finn.

She sees it out of the corner of her eye as she passes.

Sees it, and immediately back tracks until she’s standing right in front of it.

It’s with the other comics that are independent of DC and Marvel, sitting in between copies of *The Watchman* and *Persepolis*. She stands still and gawks, hardly believing what’s in front of her. She’d recognize this style anywhere.

And here it is, staring her in the face.

*The Knights of Ren, Vol. 1: The Awakening. Art and story by Ben Solo.*

She picks it up, hands trembling, and runs her fingertips across the hardbacked front cover.

“Oh wow, that looks awesome,” Finn says, having come up behind her and is now peering down at the novel over her shoulder.

Rey flips through the pages, mind barely able to comprehend what she’s seeing. There’s a band of masked warriors, and the leader, Kylo Ren, cuts down an old man with his sword in the opening pages. She skims until about thirty pages in, when a girl outside the main group is introduced. An angry looking girl named ‘Kira’ who has her hair up in three buns.

Rey feels her heart drop into her stomach where it burns.

She purchases it immediately.

\*\*

Rey spends the rest of the evening curled up on her bed, reading the graphic novel over and over until she has almost every single panel memorized.

It's amazing.

Like, legitimately incredible.

The main character is a murderer, and yet Rey finds herself feeling empathetic for him. He cuts down his enemies brutally and without a second thought, yet treats the captured Kira with the utmost respect. Rey still gives a little cheer when Kira spits on Kylo in the interrogation room, however.

And Ben's art... It takes her breath away sometimes. The way he's given each Knight of Ren their own cool helmet design, the way he's drawn Kira's face with minute detail. The colors of his background, the—

She hears her front door open and close, and moments later Ryan walks into her room, twirling his car keys on his finger.

Rey leaps from the bed and hands Ben's published work to her boyfriend, bouncing on the balls of her feet in excitement. "Look what I got today!"

Ryan takes it from her and flips through dutifully, taking in the pages with interest. "This is super cool! Is only the first volume out now or—Rey?"

She can barely focus; her brain is still so scattered. "Yeah?"

"Why does this Kira chick look exactly like you?"

## Chapter End Notes

Y'all didn't think I forgot about Kylo Ren, did you?

Once again, I love you all! Thank you guys for all your lovely support and for being the coolest readers ever. I wish I could have coffee with you all.

I have [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#).

If you liked let me know?

# Saturday, January 14th 2012

## Chapter Notes

I really wanted to stick this scene at the end of the last chapter, but I think it would have just been too much to unpack. So I turned it into a small specific day drabble-chapter.

This is 100% me following my own whimsy and dicking around.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The weather matches her mood.

It's raining, and Rey parks in front the studio she'll be interning at as an art teaching major. She sighs, climbs out of her car (a 2007 silver Honda Civic that she'd bought with her own hard-earned money), and peers at the studio with slight disappointment.

Studio Fulcrum had sounded a lot cooler on paper. The building in front of her isn't nearly as impressive.

Rey pulls the hood of her hoodie up, but the rain still patters against the fabric and soaks into the top of her head. She wants nothing more then to go back to her apartment and climb back in her bed.

Her phone buzzes, and she pulls it out of her back pocket to glance at the caller. She frowns.  
*Call from Ryan...*

She stares at it, lets it go to voicemail.

They had had another argument last night. Their relationship had been relatively drama free for two and a half years. And then Ryan had seen Ben's graphic novel, and it was like some kind of taunt rope had been drawn between the two of them. He'd become a little withdrawn, more distant. And he'd asked a lot more questions about Ben.

And Rey gets this. She *does*.

But how do you explain to someone that while you might be their first love, they're simply not yours?

And Ryan gets this. He *does*.

Both of them dance around the subject now. Like two people patiently waiting for a bomb to go off, intent on ignoring it until it finally explodes, embedding them both with emotional shrapnel.

Rey sighs and slips the phone back into her pocket.

She'd forgotten to tell him that she starts her internship today.

She walks toward the front entrance, curiosity growing with each step. She'd had her interview with the owner over the phone. And apparently had passed with flying colors, as she'd been asked to start as soon as the semester began. Without an in-person interview.

Rey moves through the front entrance, door dingling and announcing her arrival. The opening room is small, but cozy, and there are pictures of mostly silly and fun art covering the walls.

The smell of paint hits her, and with it about a million different memories. She breathes in deeply, feeling like a little kid again, somehow.

"Hello?"

There's movement from the next room, and a moment later a black woman, easily a decade older than Luke, walks through a doorway. She has long dreads that hang down her shoulders, and while her hair is gray around her temples, her eyes are young.

She greets Rey warmly. "You must be Rey," she surmises, shaking Rey's hand. "I'm Ahsoka Tano. We spoke on the phone."

Rey gives her a strained smile. "Yes, hello."

Ahsoka proceeds to show her around her little studio. There's only a few rooms. A small classroom, walls covered floor to ceiling in colorful paint splatters, and a room for pottery.

"Bathroom is around the corner," Ahsoka says with a gesture of her hand. "I have a handful of seven-year olds coming in about half an hour for a beginner's class..." She trails off, crossing her arms and peering at Rey pointedly. "Are you alright?"

Rey blinks, surprised. "I—"

Ahsoka is several inches shorter than her, but the old woman is pinning Rey with a knowing look that makes her feel very small. And young.

Rey lets out a slow exhale. Because really, where does she begin? Does she start with how she and her boyfriend are having real trouble in their relationship for the first time? Or should she begin with the fact that she dreams about Kylo Ren and his stupid mask nearly every night? (Embarrassing.)

"Boyfriend troubles," she finally settles on, and Ahsoka quirks a gray eyebrow at her.

She gives Rey a half smile and a nonchalant wave. "You're young. There will be plenty of men." She speaks like someone who knows.

Rey jolts a little at this woman's bluntness. "Yeah. Sure."

\*\*



“Never color inside the lines.”

Rey isn't sure she's ever said something so trivial with such intensity.

Her charge, a young boy named Temiri (hippy parents), looks positively *devastated* that his green crayon has gone outside the line art of the picture he was given to color in. “But—”

Rey cuts him off with a shake of her head. “Art isn't about precision, it's about drawing what makes you happy.” She holds up her hasty sketch of a very fluffy, fat cartoon BB-8 riding a rainbow. “See? This makes me happy. And I didn't color outside the lines, I created my own.”

Tem looks like she's told him the secrets of the universe. “Draw what makes you happy,” he repeats, voice awed. And then he's grabbing the black crayon, flipping the paper over and beginning his own drawing with renewed fervor.

Rey watches him with a smile. Then, a frown. “Is that a spider?”

“I *love* bugs.”

“Oh. Well, go for it!”

Rey looks up just in time to see Ahsoka shooting her a pleased expression from across the room.

\*\*

She ends up saying two hours later then she technically needs to.

All in all, it's a great start to her internship.

Although Ahsoka is coy when Rey asks why she was hired on so quickly.

“My friend Finn had to jump through about a dozen hoops in order to get his internship—”

Ahsoka shrugs, completely casual. “I liked the way you sounded over the phone. And I have an excellent judge of character.” She winks at Rey then, and bids her goodbye before heading back toward her itty-bitty office by the bathroom.

As Rey makes her way to the front door, she passes a painting in the front room she hadn't noticed when she'd first arrived. It's beautiful. She makes to walk by it.

Then Rey pauses, shocked, when she recognizes Luke Skywalker's artist signature in the corner of it.

I fucking love Ahsoka Tano SO MUCH I CAN'T. I've been waiting to slip her in, somehow.

Anyway, next major update should happen this weekend! Thank you guys for your continued support! We get Ben back soon...ish...

I have [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#).

If you liked let me know?

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Keep up, keep up, keep up  
That's all I want, keep up  
Keep up with me, keep up

“Kids” by Childish Gambino

\*\*

The conversation happens three days after Rey graduates from college. It lasts about forty-five minutes.

It starts with Ryan parking in front of her apartment complex after taking her to dinner. He takes her hand. “I got a job in San Diego.” His hand is trembling. Hers is not.

It ends with them both sitting on her bed, him holding a few books he’d let her bother over the years and his toothbrush. He kisses her temple and they’re both crying because, because —

It hurts. Love always hurts, whether it ends like a violent wave crashing against ocean rocks or like the last of the bath water slowly swirling down the drain.

It *hurts*.

\*\*

Rey allows herself the entirety of June to be depressed. But the summer, along with its scorching heat, brings new possibilities.

It’s ticking down, Rey’s mental calendar. It’s been nearly four years.

It’s July now. She’s growing antsy, and instead of admitting to herself that *Ben will be free soon* she shoves that thought to the back of her mind and instead shows up at her local bookstore on the release day for *Knights of Ren Vol. 2: The Scavenger*.

Rose is with her as she prowls toward the graphic novel section, eyes zeroing in on every cardboard display, heart beating much too quickly in her chest considering—

And there it is, beautiful and exciting and she can’t wait to read it.

She’s on the cover.

Well, okay. *Kira* is on the cover. And Kira is very much her own character, as Rey doesn’t ever think she’ll be as savage as her on-page counterpart. *If* she’s even her on-page

counterpart. Rey isn't sure Kira looks exactly like her, she thinks Ryan might have been overexaggerating a smidge.

Rose grabs another copy from the flashy display. She looks at the cover, then at Rey, then back at the cover. She puts the novel back.

"So," Rose begins, clasping her hands in front of her awkwardly. "Doesn't, uh, doesn't Ben get out soon?"

Rey, who has already flipped open what will soon be her copy, stills and glances up at her best friend. "Yes."

*Any day now*, her mind unhelpfully supplies.

She hasn't heard from Poe about any official release date or anything, although she hasn't spoken directly to him in a couple of months. Maybe she should call him—

"And?"

Rey shrugs a shoulder noncommittedly and looks back down.

Rose lets out an exasperated sigh. "Come on, Rey. Quit being coy."

"I'm not being—"

"You're obsessed with these graphic novels—don't deny it, we've all noticed. And I'm not saying that's a bad thing! Honestly, it's good that Ben has used his time locked away to do something positive with his life. But, Rey. Are you going to reach out to him?"

Rey closes Ben's graphic novel softly and holds it to her chest. She looks Rose in the eye, holds the contact. She presses her lips together, then shrugs again, this time shaking her head. "I—I don't know."

Rose is giving her a soft, sympathetic look. "What if he reaches out to you?"

Rey swallows. She's thought of that before, actually. Late at night, sometimes, if she's having trouble falling asleep. Of her phone ringing out of the blue one day, her answering it and just like that she's hearing Ben's voice for the first time in four years.

The idea sends little shivers up her spine, makes her heart hammer with both nerves and excitement. The thought of him reaching out to her...it burns and sears into her brain, and it'll nag at her until it happens.

And if it happens, will she be receptive?

She sighs, because *of course she will be*.

Rey's eyes go wide, and she straightens in the middle of the bookstore, realization dawning on her.

She would *absolutely* be receptive. Hearing Ben's voice again, seeing him again, getting to touch him again—these sudden thoughts are all so much, too much—

“Rey.”

She snaps herself out of her musing and focuses on Rose, who narrows her eyes a little. “if he contacted you, you'd see him again.” She states it, doesn't question it.

Rey stares for a moment, then slowly raises the graphic novel up, so that she and Kira's faces are side by side.

Because, who is she kidding. Kira looks exactly like her, and it's no mistake. And when featured side by side like this, it's undeniable.

Rose tilts her head a little in slow acceptance, pressing her lips together to hide a small smile. Then she exhales and shakes her head a little. “I will admit...that is a kind of romantic.”

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Except July bleeds into August bleeds into September bleeds into October.

And still no word from Ben Solo.

\*\*

Maybe he lost it right near the end of his sentence and shanked someone.

These are the kinds of thoughts swirling in the back of Rey's mind as she waves goodbye to Temiri, who sprints out of the studio toward his mother's waiting minivan.

She's not obsessing. She's not.

She closes the door behind her and leans against it, letting out a breath of exhaustion. Tem was her last student for the day, and while Rey absolutely loves teaching, her kids are a handful. Tem is no exception.

She locks the front door and flicks off the outside light, preparing to clear her work space before heading home for the evening. At least she has *this*.

Ahsoka had hired her on as soon as Rey's internship had ended. Which was good, because Rey couldn't really afford to work for free anymore.

Rey spends the next twenty minutes cleaning up her station and trying very hard, and failing, not to think about Ben.

It's like she's seventeen again. Ridiculous.

But according to the Knights of Ren Facebook fan page (which, god help her, she religiously checks every day) Ben is putting out his first interview with a popular nerd news website tonight. It'll be his first interview. Ever.

In retrospect, Ben putting out an interview should've been her first indication that, well—

Rey makes her way into Ahsoka's tiny office in order to bid her goodnight, but pauses in the doorway. "You made two cups of tea."

Ahsoka looks up at her with a raised eyebrow. She smirks. "Your observation skills are truly unparalleled."

Rey stares down at the two tea cups with growing apprehension. "Listen, Ahsoka, I don't care how good you say it is, I just don't like hot tea—"

"It's not for you, idiot." Her boss's eyes are alight with mischief. "I have a guest coming."

Rey blinks. "Oh."

Ahsoka glances at the digital clock on her desk. "In fact—"

A loud knock comes from the front door, and Ahsoka quickly stands, steps around Rey and out into the tiny hallway with light-footed grace.

Rey follows her dumbly, curiosity peaking.

She hovers several feet behind Ahsoka as her boss answers the door and—

Luke Skywalker stands on the other side.

\*\*

A blur.

The last ten minutes have been a blur.

The first thing Rey had done was launch herself into Luke's arms, tears already slipping out of her eyes and down her cheeks.

The second thing she does is swat at him with sudden fury, because it's been four fucking years.

Luke pats her shoulder. His hair is longer, now completely gray. And he has a beard now, which is odd. "I'm sorry, Rey," he says with the utmost gentleness. "Can you forgive me?"

Rey had frowned at that and has yet to give him an answer. But the fury had ebbed away as quickly as it'd come on, and now she finds herself standing in Ahsoka's office, her boss and Luke taking up the only two chairs.

Apparently they've known each other for decades. They met at an art festival in the early 80's and had become fast friends, each supporting the other's work. They'd even traded students on occasion, sometimes recognizing that the other's teaching methods might suit said student better.

Which is why, of course, Ahsoka had recognized Rey's name when she'd first applied for the internship.

"I confirmed it after I hired you," Ahsoka explains. "Gave Luke a call and found out this his Rey Kanata and my smart-ass intern were one in the same." Her boss gives her a slow smile. "I knew you were the right fit the moment I first spoke to you on the phone." She jabs her nearly empty teacup at Luke. "I told you, I have a knack for these kind of spiritual things—"

Luke laughs and the two old friends dive into another conversation, with Rey listening along with a soft smile.

For a while she doesn't think about Ben.

\*\*

After about an hour, Ahsoka's phone rings, and she excuses herself into the next room to answer it. Rey stays in her current spot, leaning up against the wall with her arms crossed over her chest.

She catches Luke's eye. "So, when are you leaving?"

She had gotten the vibe, from listening to him speak with Ahsoka, that maybe, just maybe... But no. She doesn't want to get her hopes up.

Luke gives her a half smile. "I'm not. I'm here to stay. Washington state is a little too dreary for me, after all."

Rey frowns. "What's the real reason?"

Luke lets out a quiet laugh. "Ah, Rey. You've always seen right through me."

Rey continues frowning, waiting for Luke's real response.

He folds his hands in his lap. "I've realized, with the help of my sister, that I'm too old to run away from my mistakes. And now, with Ben being out of prison—"

Rey's whole world stops.

Stops, and then starts up again, everything now a little louder, a little faster than before.

"What?" she bites out, arms falling to her sides in shock.

Luke looks puzzled at her interruption. "With Ben being..." he trails off, and then his puzzled expression melts into one of concern. "You didn't know."

Rey slowly shakes her head. "I thought—he hasn't said anything to me—"

For a moment, she sees her own confused desperation mirrored at her through Luke's blue eyes. But then he looks away from her, suddenly pensive. "Hmm."

There's a long moment of silence.

Luke opens his mouth, looking like he's about to launch into a deep explanation, when Ahsoka comes back into the little office, tucking her phone away into her pocket. She gives Rey a worried look when she sees her. "Rey, are you alright?"

Rey nods. A lie. "Um, I just don't feel well? I'm going to go home. I'll see you tomorrow." Then she hurriedly steps out of the office, and everything is blurred around the edges a bit. She snatches up her bag and car key and quickly makes her way out of the studio and toward it's tiny parking lot, her car a welcome beacon.

She makes it inside and manages to shut the door before she starts to cry in earnest.

\*\*

Rey pulls up the interview on her laptop when she gets home.

Pulls it up, but doesn't rush to read it. In fact, she minimizes it and pulls up a playlist that Finn had made for her several months ago, putting on a particularly poignant song that she likes. The kind of song that makes Rey sit and think.

That's what she needs right now. A good think.

She hadn't thought much on the car ride home. Mostly she'd just cried.

But then she'd parked her car in her apartment complex and had stepped out, the crisp autumn air filling her lungs. It cleared her mind and she'd slammed her car door shut and sniffed.

No more tears. She is a grown adult. She doesn't need to be crying in her car over boys.

Rey made her way into her apartment, and now she sits, thinking.

Ben is out of prison, and he hasn't contacted her. This fact cuts deeper than she'd like, but this is life isn't it? Things don't always work themselves out like they do in the movies, or the books. Or the graphic novels.

And really, after their last conversation, she had made it pretty clear that he...that he...that he could have a life without her.

Maybe that's what he's trying to do. Live a beautiful life, even if she's not in it.

Rey swallows down a little bile and lets out a shuddering breath.

And maybe, perhaps, Ben is doing her a favor. Rey shakes her head a little at that. Or maybe he just...doesn't want to talk to her. Maybe him putting her into his art is his own version of an apology, his own version of keeping her with him even though she's technically not around. And maybe he thinks that's enough.

Or maybe he thinks she doesn't want to talk to him.



Rey glances over toward her phone, sitting innocently on her nightstand. She could call Poe. She could call him right now and ask for Ben's phone number. She could be speaking to him in five minutes, if she wanted to.

And god help her, she wants to. It's as if all her feelings had hidden themselves away deep inside her these past few years. They'd resurfaced when she'd found the first *Knights of Ren* volume, because finally Ben was doing something *good*. (And at the end of the day she's still immensely proud of him for that.)

And then her feelings had cemented again after Ryan had left. And she'd loved Ryan, she had. But Ben...

It'll always be different with Ben, she realizes.

She doesn't call Poe and ask for Ben's number. Sheer stubbornness keeps her from doing so. She just...can't. Not yet.

Rey closes her laptop without reading the interview and crawls underneath her blankets, letting the song play over and over again until she drifts off to sleep.

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### **12 Questions With Ben Solo**

**This is your first interview you've given since you put out *Knights of Ren*, which you famously began in prison. Any particular reason why you've waited so long to speak to press?**

Because prison [redacted] sucks.

**Of course. Why did you start this project in prison? Why not earlier?**

I always enjoyed drawing in a comic book style. Before prison I was more of a painter, but after I began serving my sentence I just had energy and ideas I needed to get out. It was therapeutic.

**Therapeutic? How so?**

It was a healthy thing for me to focus my energy on. If I found myself growing frustrated or upset, I'd just draw it out instead of, uh, taking it out on someone else. It was also cathartic, giving the main character my own pain and anger. If I gave it to him then I didn't—don't—feel it as potently anymore.

**That's awesome. Let's take it back to the beginning. When did you discover that you loved to draw?**

When I was a kid.

**Were you very young, then?**

I...I just said when I was a kid.

**Right. You come from a fairly well-known family. Did they nurture your talent?**

I lived with my uncle at his art studio for a time, so I'd say yes. It was never discouraged.

**Sources say you've been estranged from your family ever since your sentencing—**

Your sources are [redacted]. Next [redacted] question.

**Now that shows like Game of Thrones have put fantasy back on the map, could you see Knights of Ren becoming a successful show it it's own right?**

Uh. I can't talk about that.

**Does that mean—**

I can't talk about that.

**Naturally. Would you ever consider collaborating with another artist?**

There's only one other artist on this planet that I would collaborate with, but unfortunately we're no longer in contact.

**Because of your time in prison?**

It's complicated.

**Do you think your prison sentence has given you a unique perspective when it comes to your art and storytelling?**

I mean, for sure. I think for me, the hardest thing about being in prison was being updated about the person you love most and realizing that their life is going just fine without you in it. And that sometimes you can love someone to the moon and back, but that doesn't mean you're any good for them. That was a tough pill to swallow. But it's helped round out the kind of story I want to tell in Knights of Ren. And channeling that kind of pain into art is, like I said before, intensely therapeutic.

**I feel as if that kind of sentiment doesn't bode well for Kylo and Kira.**

We'll see.

**You were in prison for four years. That's a solid chunk of time. What's the coolest thing you've discovered since being released?**

The Keurig.

SO MANY of you guys wanted Ben to show up for Rey's college graduation. To be honest, I didn't even consider that until you guys mentioned it. Not going to lie, that would've been super cute, but I've had their reunion planned out for ages. Speaking of reunions, I guess I've made y'all wait long enough, yes? ;)

Thank you guys so much for all your love and support! I feel like a broken record, but I seriously love y'all so much. You guys have made the journey of writing this ridiculous story so much fucking fun with your enthusiasm and passion and amazingly kind words and gestures. Seriously, thank you from the bottom of my heart.

I have [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#).

If you liked let me know?

# 2013, part one

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Tell me tell me, you'll meet me  
Tell me tell me, you'll keep me  
Tell me tell me, you'll meet me  
Will you meet me more than halfway there

“Clearest Blue” by CHVRCHES

\*\*

Rey has three specific memories of her time before the home.

The third one is punctuated less by sight and more by feeling. She remembers being hungry. And thirsty. And dirty.

Her parents have been gone for four days, and Rey had eaten her last Little Debbie Fudge Round two days ago. Water has stopped coming out of the kitchen faucet. The toilet won't flush.

She thinks she remembers her mother telling her to never leave the house without her or daddy. And five-year-old Rey struggles with that command as her tiny hand falls on the doorknob of the front door. She's not allowed she's not allowed she's not allowed—

But then her stomach gives a sad little gurgle and her resolve hardens. She turns the doorknob and at first the door sticks. One good yank and it finally pulls all the way open, and Rey blinks her eyes at the brightness of the setting sun.

She stands on the tiny front porch of the trailer that's always been her home, slowly working up the nerve to leave the only four walls she's ever really known. Rey is finally spurred forward by how much her head hurts, by how dry her mouth is. She steps through the doorway, not bothering to close the door behind her, and despite how exhausted she feels, how much energy taking walking only a few short feet leeches from her, that first step is exhilarating in its freedom.

\*\*

“I'm *not* having my own art show.”

Rey is adamant, but Maz's pleased, knowing expression doesn't leave her face. Her old caretaker eats the last of her brunch pancakes before gesturing to Rey with her fork. “That's not what Luke Skywalker told me.”

Rey groans and scrubs at her face with her hands. It's the day after New Years and she shouldn't already feel this stressed out.

All this nonsense had started two weeks ago. She'd been having a one on one class with Tem, and he had seemed subdued, depressed even. When she'd asked him what had been wrong, he'd pointed to the sketch of a moth she'd been working on. "I'll never be that good," he had said. It was too serious to be interpreted as a whine.

So she'd told Ahsoka that she wanted to have a day where she displays up all her old art. All of the sketches from back when she had been eight and nine and first taking classes with Luke. The messy, poorly lined drawings of ponies and robots and puppies were no better than what Tem was producing now. And Rey thinks if her students can see how much progress she's made since she was their age, that maybe they would feel inspired.

And Ahsoka, to Rey's mild horror, had jumped on the idea. "We'll take a Saturday, invite all the students and their families, and showcase your work! We'll make an event out of it, potentially pull in new students."

Which of course was not at all what Rey had had in mind. But it's Ahsoka's studio, not hers, and what her boss says goes.

Rey has spent the past week combing through all her old artwork and selecting some of the worst samples she has to offer. Seeing how much she's improved throughout the years makes her feel proud and a little embarrassed.

She's pretty sure she found a sketch of her marrying Poe that she'd drawn when she was ten.

Maz reaches across the table and squeezes Rey's hand. "You should be proud, girl. I'll be there, of course."

Rey can't help but smile a little at that and tries to swallow down some of her excess emotion. "I can't wait to see you there."

"I gather Finn and Rose will be there as well?"

Rey nods, taking a sip of iced tea.

"But not Ben Solo, correct? You haven't reached out to him?"

Rey had been setting her drink back down on the table, and she jerks in surprise at Maz's question. Some of the tea sloshes over the rim of the glass and dribbles onto the white table cloth.

Rey slowly shakes her head. She'd closed her laptop without reading that interview last October and...hasn't really opened it since. Every day she grapples with the idea of reaching out, of being the one to make the first move again...

But fear and anxiety and apprehension keep her from doing anything. Keep her from taking action. She feels as if she's in a weird limbo, torn right down the middle between packing her doubts away and reaching out, and letting him come to her. So she sits on the fence.

"Good," Maz says with a huff. "You have no business reaching out, after everything that happened."

Rey heaves a deep sigh. “I know I don’t. But what if I never say anything and he never says anything? The last conversation we had...” Rey winces at that painful memory. “I told him that I wanted him to get better for himself. That he should want a better life for himself even if I wasn’t in it. Not that I didn’t *want* to be in it, just that I wanted him—”

Maz waves a hand to hush her up, and Rey quickly snaps her mouth shut. “You don’t have to explain yourself to me, girl. I understand.” Maz leans forward and settles her amplified eyes on Rey. “Ben Solo didn’t have to see you on the day I dropped you off at your dorm your freshman year of college. He didn’t see how fake your laugh and smile were, or how you seemed so sad on a day that should have brought you joy. He missed how broken you were.” Her hand gives Rey’s another squeeze. “If he wants a second chance at a friendship with my baby, he’ll need to suck it up and call you himself.”

Rey feels her eyes get hot. “Come on, Maz,” she grumbles, blushing. But it’s halfhearted, and Maz grins at her.

“You’re my baby.” Maz points to a light, faded scar on her forearm. “I carry this bite mark with pride, you know. And you have my name.”

Rey can’t help but beam at her a little. “I love you too, Momma Maz.”

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Poe has completely different sentiments about what Rey should do about Ben.

He expresses them the night before this “art show” (Rey is still determined not to call it that). She, Rose, and Kaydel are loading boxes of her old art into her car. Then they’ll drive to Ahsoka’s studio and start covering the walls with them, displaying them in a fun, eye catching way.

Finn is supposed to be here too, but when he finally shows up he’s nearly a half hour behind.

The reason why is sitting in the passenger’s seat.

“Poe!” Rey calls out in excitement, waving at him before closing the trunk of her car. Kaydel’s car is nearly full, as well as Rose’s. “Just in time to follow us to the studio—”

Poe grips her arm, scaring the shit out of Rey. She hadn’t even heard him get out of Finn’s car. He steers her onto the sidewalk, steps harsh. Rey hasn’t seen him in a solid chunk of time, and the livid expression on his face shocks her.

“You’re the dumbest person I’ve ever met, Rey Kanata,” he seethes.

Rey gapes. She’s seen Poe angry once before, but at the time he hadn’t been upset with *her*.

Poe is kind of scary when he’s pissed.

Rey yanks her arm out of his grip. “What’s your problem?” she huffs, rubbing at her elbow.

“My pro—Oh my god, Rey.” He props his hands on his narrow hips and glares at her. “I watched you attempt to lay the moves on Ben Solo for years and now, *now* when the time is finally right you—you—”

Rey slides a step back, frowning and crossing her arms over her chest defensively. “What are talking about?”

Poe lets out an inarticulate noise of sheer frustration. “Did you not read that fucking interview?!” he bursts out, and Rey is shaking her head dumbly with wide eyes when Finn thrusts his way between them.

“You said you would help set up the studio, not chastise Rey for her perfectly acceptable decisions!” Finn shouts, back toward Rey.

Poe’s furious eyes still don’t leave her. “He’s simply giving you the space you asked for! If you would quit being so *stubborn* and *immature*—”

Finn puts a hand on his boyfriend’s chest, as if to physically restrain him from stepping closer. “Rey is doing the right thing! If that guy wants Rey back in his life then he’ll suck it the fuck up and call her himself—”

And then the two men descend into a loud argument, leaving Rey perplexed and annoyed. She doesn’t have time for this nonsense tonight.

A slender arm slips around her shoulders and gently pulls her away from the scene. Rey leans into Rose a little, enormously grateful for her best friend’s strength.

“Don’t listen to either of them,” Rose says, voice firm. “You don’t have time to dwell on that dilemma right now.” She rubs Rey’s arm in quick movements, as if to warm and invigorate her. “Your art show is tomorrow! Lets just focus on that.” She leads Rey to the driver’s side of her car before saying quietly, “Besides, I know you’re just trying to protect yourself from being hurt again.”

\*\*

Rey spends the entire night spreading all her old and new art around Ahsoka’s studio. The paintings and sculptures that had originally been displayed on the walls have all been stored away for the weekend, and Rose says if she didn’t know any better she’d say that this was Rey’s studio, not Ahsoka’s.

The sentiment makes Rey blush.

She has enough time in the morning to run back to her apartment for a shower and to change into a pair of nice jeans and a comfortable v-necked sweater. Despite it being January, the cold weather is crisp instead of bitter, and the sun is already climbing high in the clear blue sky when Rey finally parks her car in front of the studio.

Three hours later students and their parents begin filing through the tiny front entryway, each taking the time to greet Rey and shake her hand.

Tem's parents are more enthusiastic than the others.

"He's been talking about this for *ages*," his father says. "Your classes are his favorite parts of the week! This was such a good idea, he already feels so much better about his art."

Rey grins at them. "He's a talented little guy," she says, trying not to let on to how much their praise makes her want to duck her head and hide.

People celebrating her work is bizarre.

Maz and Luke show up, and of course all her friends, which is no surprise. But some of Luke's old students, people she hasn't seen in years and years, filter through the front doors. Some of them have their own kids now.

By the time the fourth old student of Luke's shows up, Rey turns and shoots her old mentor a look from over her shoulder.

Luke just waves innocently at her from where he's standing with Ahsoka.

Half an hour or so passes, and Finn walks through the front door, shuddering a little in his thin long-sleeved shirt, with Poe right on his heels.

Finn wraps Rey into a tight hug, which she quickly returns, sizing up Poe a little in the process.

"Sorry about last night," Poe grumbles when Finn releases her. "I was...upset."

Rey barely keeps from rolling her eyes. "You're *still* upset."

Poe stares at her for a long moment. "You're goddamn right I'm still upset—"

Finn drags Poe away by his coat sleeve.

\*\*

"The roster for spring classes is full," Ahsoka says lowly to Rey, having pulled her employee off to the side for a moment. "And parents are asking for your classes in particular." Her eyes are twinkling, and Rey feels her chest swell, for a moment completely overwhelmed.

"Really?"

Ahsoka nods. "Class attendance was dwindling before I hired you on, you know." She wraps her arm around Rey's shoulder and gives it a gentle squeeze. "Fate is funny." Then she winks at her and lets her go, stepping over to a small group of students peering up at Rey's old lightning painting.

A handful of minutes later Rey is sipping from a cup of coffee that Rose had run out and purchased for her, letting the hot liquid scald her insides. There's a gentle tug at the hem of her sweater.



“Miss Rey!” Temiri’s eyes are watery from laughter. “I found your worst picture!”

Rey grins down at him, slightly dying inside because he must have stumbled on her sketch of her marrying Poe. “Oh yeah?”

She allows the little boy to tug her out of the tiny entryway, past the two classrooms and Ahsoka’s office, into the narrow hallway that leads to the back door. He points with a stubby finger. “That’s worse than anything I’ve made!” He’s grinning, clearly pleased with himself. He peers up at his teacher in delight.

Rey laughs, ruffles his hair and then follows his gaze to see what picture he’s gesturing to.

She drops her coffee.

She had forgotten about this picture, because she’d drawn it over fifteen years ago. Had handed it off, had never thought about it again after.

It’s the first drawing she’d ever made of Ben. The one she’d done after her very first day at Skywalker Studios. His scowl is hilariously overexaggerated, and his hair so messy it looks as if Rey had dug her pencil into the paper and simply scribbled. And his ears. Her seven-year-old self had taken the time to color them bright red.

Because big ears were of no consequence to a seven-year-old.

The drawing has creases in it, as if it had been folded and unfolded many times before it had been framed. And it had been framed quite some time ago if the way the wood of the frame is battered and worn down is anything to go by. And in the corner of the drawing is a brown ring, a coffee stain, as if a distracted teenage boy had placed his mug down on her drawing before realizing it.

The picture has been hung up crudely with a tack, and Rey takes it down with trembling fingers.

He’d been here. Ben had slipped in like a phantom and had left his offering of support. Rey turns sharply toward the back door, which is still cracked.

She hesitates for the briefest of moments before moving through the doorway. The first step outside is exhilarating in its freedom.

She bolts out the door, and “Ben!” erupts from her mouth before she can even *think*.

He hasn’t made it too far down the street. His broad back is facing her, but he stops at the sound of his name.

Stops, slowly turns.

Rey gulps and stares at him, struck dumb.

The Ben she’d left behind in prison had been a broken shell of man. This Ben is... Christ, he’s even bigger than she remembered, somehow. Muscular, with hair that doesn’t quite reach

his chin, dressed smartly in fitting jeans and red flannel to fight the sharp winter wind. He looks like a man.

Rey feels nearly sick with incredulity. He's staring back at her with a look Rey can't quite decipher. Maybe he's staring back at her like seeing Rey and seeing stars are the same thing.

Rey's tongue feels like a useless weight in her mouth. She fumbles with the picture he'd left behind, holds it up. She opens her mouth to speak, but words fail her. All she can do is keep staring at him, and the whole entire world is tinged effervescent, as if she and Ben are trapped in their own little bubble of frozen time.

Then, finally, she manages to squeak out, "I can't believe you got a coffee stain on my very first portrait."

It's literally the dumbest fucking thing she could've said in the moment.

And Ben, he doesn't laugh or crack a smile, and Rey feels herself start panicking because what if he had wanted to leave this picture and make a quick getaway? What if—

He starts moving toward her, eyes dark and jaw set in resolve.

As his footsteps start swallowing up the space separating them Rey's heartbeat kicks into high gear. She can hardly breathe, can hardly think. What is he going to do when he reaches her? Because she wants to throw her arms around his neck and hold him close. And maybe she'll never let go ever ever again.

He's a few steps away now, and Rey is fairly certain he hasn't blinked, not once, since he first laid eyes on her, and a thrill slices through her chest. Not fear, no, but deep-rooted excitement at the unknown that is about to unfold before her.

He's almost to her, has started reaching out his hand as if to grab her and pull her into him, when the backdoor swings open behind Rey. Ahsoka steps out, and Ben pauses, the tension in the air settling ever so slightly.

"Tem says the spill in the hallway is your fault," her boss admonishes. She sweeps her gaze over to Ben, who's eyes are darting between her and Rey. "Looks like you've already found someone to help mop it up."

\*\*

Rey is in that weird state of being hyperaware of two completely separate planes of reality.

On the one hand, she is insanely focused on cleaning up her spilled coffee. She is insanely focused on the different students coming up to her to either ask questions or tell her goodbye for the day. She's insanely focused on not making any eye contact with any of her friends. She's insanely focused on seeming professional in front of all these parents.

On the other hand, she's also insanely focused on Ben. On how his gaze has not left her since he turned around and first laid eyes on her outside. On how he stays right by her, so close he might as well be her shadow. On how he looks completely startled whenever someone says

something to him, as if he's amazed that someone beyond Rey exists in this little universe that's stretched taunt between the two of them.

And finally, finally, when there's only a scattering of students left, Rey pulls him into Ahsoka's itty bitty office and closes the door.

"Ben."

He jolts at the hushed, reverent way his name leaves her mouth. "Ben, you kept that stupid picture."

"I've kept everything you've ever given me," he states, and it's the first time she's heard him speak in over four years. His voice is still as rich and deep and warm as she remembers, and he takes a step in her direction, eyes lowered to her face.

Her back is pressed to the door and he's in her space. When did that occur?

Ben smells amazing.

His hand reaches up to brush some of her hair away from her neck. "I should have reached out to you before now. I don't know what I was thinking—"

"I wasn't thinking either," Rey says quickly.

"I wasn't sure if you wanted to see me."

"Of course I do," Rey breathes out, feeling a little dizzy at the mere brush of his fingers against her bare skin. "I wasn't sure—I didn't—I mean I still think about you *all* the time. You can ask Finn and Rose, I talk about Knights of Ren way too much—"

His eyes widen a little in wonder. "You read Knights of Ren?"

"I have a sketchbook full of fanart for it," she admits. "Kira is my favorite character."

Ben stills, eyes flicking down to her mouth and Rey doesn't know what she'll do if he kisses her because *holy shit* this is a lot—

Someone knocks on the door, and for a brief moment Rey is convinced that Ben is going to shout at them to fuck off. But instead he steps back, face and body language intense.

Rey turns quickly and opens the door and is met with her roommate. "Your boss says its time to start taking down your stuff and packing it away." Kaydel cranes her neck and peers around Rey, taking in Ben with a quick nod of approval before walking off.

There's a shift of movement and then Ben is behind her, nearly pressed into her back but not quite. "I have to go." He sounds like he'd he would rather fling himself into the sun then leave.

Rey turns around so that she's facing him, trying not to look as disappointed as she feels. "Oh?"

Ben nods. "I have a meeting with my agent."

"When?"

The corners of his mouth quirk. "An hour ago."

Rey nods, the implication of his words taking a beat too long to click in her enormously clogged brain. When they do, she bites her bottom lip to suppress a dopey grin. "Don't get in trouble because of me."

He opens his mouth, as if wanting to retort but not finding the right words. And then he looks anxious, incredibly anxious. "Rey."

Her whole body comes alive a little at the sound of her name leaving his mouth.

"Rey, do you want..." He sucks in a breath, large chest briefly expanding. "Do you want to hang out? Catch up?"

And Rey, who frankly is so addled and *what is even happening*, says, "I'd like to do way more than 'catch up'."

Ben's eyes squeeze shut for a moment. Then he leans down and presses a kiss into her hair, hand brushing against her hip. "Yeah. Me too, kid."

\*\*

She reads the interview at she gets home.

## Chapter End Notes

BEN IS BACK BEN IS BACK!

Anyway hahahahaha I have greatly inconvenienced the people I'm seeing Solo with in under an hour in order to post this so...

I have [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#).

If you liked let me know?

## 2013, part two

### Chapter Notes

First, please check out [this beautiful artwork](#) that [@obliviahte](#) made of Ben and Rey's "catch up" moment from last chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Oh baby, can't you see  
It's shinin' just for you  
Loneliness is over  
Dark days are through  
They're through  
Let me be your everlasting light

“Everlasting Light” by The Black Keys

\*\*

“You’re texting Ben again.”

Rey freezes, looking up at Rose and Kaydel guiltily from where she’s seated on her couch, her legs underneath her and her right thumb hovering over the screen of her phone. “Um.”

Rose’s gaze narrows a little, although there’s a hint of amusement in the quirk of her mouth. “It’s Girl’s Night.”

“Why do you keep saying that when I’m *right here*?” Finn is sitting on the floor, back pressed against Rose’s legs and a glass of wine in his hand.

Rose nudges him with her knee, stern expression melting into one of amusement. “You’re an honorary member.”

“Great.”

Rey’s phone vibrates in her hand, and she immediately swipes across the screen to see Ben’s text. It’s a hastily taken picture of some background portraits he’s working on for the next Knights of Ren volume. Rey smiles down at the image, nibbling a bit on her fingernail.

She zooms in on the picture in order to take in all the beautiful details and colors, not noticing the quiet that’s descended upon her living room.

“Aren’t you and Ben hanging out tomorrow?”

Rey's head jerks up at Kaydel's question and finds her roommate watching her with a smirk.

Rey nods, biting her bottom lip and trying not to let on to how completely and utterly *nervous* she is.

It's been a week. An entire week since Ben Solo swept back into her life. And they've talked all day every day since. And tomorrow...

Tomorrow they're finally going to hang out. Which means that when Rey showers tonight she's going to shave *everything*.

"Well that'll be fun," Kaydel says with a knowing smile, sipping from her own glass of wine and picking up the remote for the television.

"According to Poe, Ben has been talking about it all week." Finn spins the wine in his glass and sniffs at it, wincing.

Rey opens her mouth, but Rose beats her to the punch. "Poe tells you stuff about Ben?"

Finn shrugs, clearly not understanding what he's just revealed. "I mean, sometimes. Not everything, but a good chunk of stuff."

Rey and Rose stare at him for several long, drawn out moments.

"What?" Finn takes a hurried sip of his wine, as if he can hide behind the glass.

"You could have been doing reconnaissance for us this whole time!" Rose sounds just as indignant as Rey feels.

"I promised Poe I wouldn't repeat most of what he tells me. And he's my boyfriend."

Rose kicks at Finn in irritation. "Yeah, and we've been your best friends since seventh grade! We invited you to Girl's Night!"

"I am not a part of Girl's Night!"

"You got pedicures with us last week!"

Rey grins into her hand as her two best friends descend further into their petty argument. In five minutes they'll be back to debating over what kind of pizza to order.

She uses this opportunity to text Ben back.

\*\*

Rey can barely sleep that night.

\*\*

Rey sighs as she parks, eyeing the familiar building with equal parts amusement, excitement, and dread.

Ben had suggested they start their day by...going to the gym. And Rey isn't sure why she's surprised by this suggestion, but she had been expecting something a little more...romantic, she supposes. Something involving a lot less sweat. She would wonder if maybe she misread some of Ben's physical signals last Saturday at the art show, but that interview had changed everything. It's pretty damning. In the best way.

Rey hasn't mentioned to Ben yet that she's read it. She's waiting for the right moment, and over text was most decidedly *not* it.

She climbs out of her car, walking into the gym at a quick pace. She's running a few minutes behind, and she technically should update her account and sign another waiver, as she hasn't been here in four and a half years. But the owner waves her in as soon as she walks through the front door, calling out an enthusiastic greeting in the process.

What kills Rey is if she'd stayed at this gym then she would have run into Ben a long time ago. He'd returned as soon as he was done serving his sentence.

She walks into the main room, feeling relatively cute in an old pair of black leggings and a tight fitting black, long-sleeved Under Armor shirt. Ben hears the door slam shut behind her and turns, happy smile already on his face and a greeting on his lips—

But nothing comes out of his mouth when he sees her. The way his gaze sweep over her, unabashed and pointedly, makes her skin feel heated in this drafty warehouse. If she felt cute before, she feels downright alluring now. Amazing, how one look from Ben can make her feel this way.

Rey clears her throat, dropping her gym bag at her feet and gesturing to the punching bags. "H-Hey."

She nearly cringes at how breathless she sounds. This is going to be the longest workout of her life.

He smiles at her, eyes soft. "Hey."

\*\*

Rey is going to die.

She's going to *die*.

Ben has taken off his shirt which, okay, she's seen him without a shirt countless times before. In this very gym no less! But it's *different* now. Seventeen-year-old Rey had felt endlessly embarrassed by her own ogling, and had no idea what she would do with the sweat slick expanse of pale skin that Ben is so kindly displaying for her.

But now Rey is nearly twenty-three and knows *exactly* what she'd do. She'd begin with licking along that scar, starting from his collarbone then working her way up his neck and to his jaw. Ben would taste salty, because of the sweat, but tangy, maybe. Delicious. Or she

could start at his collarbone and work her way down. That would be vastly more interesting and would lead to particularly exciting results—

“Are you okay?”

Rey blinks stupidly at Ben and realizes with slowly dawning horror that she’s basically just standing by her punching bag, staring at him.

She swallows, mouth dry. “Fine.”

She immediately excuses herself to the bathroom.

When Rey emerges, she’s stripped off her shirt for two reasons. The first is that she’s grown kind of sweaty and hot even though this stupid gym *still* has no heat. The second is that without a shirt she’s left in just her hot pink sports bra.

And Rey knows she looks good. She’d randomly gone up a cup size when she’d turned twenty, which had been annoying at the time because she’d had to get rid of all her old bras and buy new ones.

Now it’s great!

And Ben’s reaction is worth whatever embarrassment she might have felt at being caught gazing earlier. He’s in the process of executing a roundhouse and he must catch sight of her out of the corner of his eye because he just sort of awkwardly wobbles on one foot before stumbling back a couple of steps.

Rey barely represses her smirk. She grabs her battered old gloves and yanks them back on, trying very hard not to look up at Ben.

She fails, glancing in his direction as she moves in front of her bag and prepares to start a series of crosses and jabs. Ben is staring right at her, eyes greedily roaming over every inch of the skin she’s decided to expose.

He catches her catching him. And five years ago he would’ve instantly turned away, horrified with himself. But now one corner of his mouth quirks up in a boyish half-smile.

And Rey smiles right back.

\*\*

“I have the rest of the day off,” Rey says. She and Ben are standing in the parking lot, workout done and shirts disappointingly back on. It’s been over five minutes and neither of them have moved toward their respective cars.

“Me too.” Ben takes a half step toward her before shoving his hands into the pockets of his gym shorts. Rey gets the distinct impression that he’s trying not to seem too eager.

Rey shrugs with both shoulders and toes at the ground, trying not to let on to her own eagerness. She looks up at him, raising her hand to shield her eyes from the sun. “We could



see where the day takes us?”

Ben nods. “That sounds find to me.” He gestures to his body and attire. “Although I smell.”

Rey laughs. “So do I. We’ll be smelly together.”

Ben’s mouth spreads into a proper smile, and Rey feels her heartbeat pick up at how lovely it is. Today is going to be *torture*.

He pulls out his car keys and jerks his head toward his Camaro. The fact that he’s kept it and hasn’t upgraded to something nicer now that he’s out of prison and sporting a successful artist’s salary makes something warm spread across Rey’s chest. “Together.”

\*\*

“How have you not listened to this CD yet? You own it.”

Ben makes a noncommittal noise in the back of his throat and shrugs one shoulder, gaze focused on the road in front of him. “I bought a lot of CD’s after I got out. I haven’t made it through them all yet.”

“I guess that’s fair,” Rey grumbles half-heartedly, sliding the CD into the car’s stereo.

The first song starts up. It’s one of Rey’s current favorites, and after the first thirty seconds or so she can see Ben bobbing his head along to the music. Rey smiles down at her lap, pleased.

A driver cuts Ben off, forcing him to slam on his brakes to avoid rear ending them. Rey braces her hand on the dashboard as her body slumps forcibly forward with the momentum.

She looks at Ben, half expecting him to unbuckle his seat belt and scream threats out the window. Instead he grips the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles go white, letting out a stream of colorful, creative profanities.

Rey grins.

Somethings change. And some things stay the same.

\*\*

First they go to a pet store because Ben is thinking seriously about getting a dog. He lets Rey pick out three puppies for him to hold before sighing dejectedly and shaking his head.

“I think I want to adopt from a shelter. Take home some poor bastard who just wants a friend.” They’re walking out of the store and back toward his car.

“Are you projecting onto a dog?”

“Brat.” Ben reaches out and chucks her chin, and Rey hums at the brief contact. Ben pauses, eyes drifting from her mouth down to her neck. He visibly swallows.

It's going to be a long day for them both, she expects.

\*\*

By the time they walk into a Target, the air between them has shifted. Less awkward-friendly and more flirtatious-friendly. Rey filled him in on getting her job with Ahsoka on the car ride over, and Ben in turn told her about the process of getting published from prison. And then Rey, barely keeping a straight face while doing so, had asked him if he'd had a prison-boyfriend. "You know, to combat the loneliness."

He'd given her a very serious look from the driver's seat. "His name was Mitaka."

Rey had felt the stunned shock on her own face, and Ben had kept his serious expression up for another fifteen or so seconds before he'd crumbled into laughter.

That had happened less than twenty minutes ago and Rey has already turned it into a running joke. They've made their way into the clothes department, and she keeps grabbing up nice button-down shirts and holding them out to Ben.

"Don't you want to look good for Mitaka?"

They walk past the perfume and cologne aisle. Rey holds up a bottle of something that smells like motor oil. "Don't you want to smell good for Mitaka?"

There's a whole section of the store already devoted to Valentine's Day, even though it's not for another month. "Look, they have Valentine cards out. Let's pick out one you can send to Mitaka."

Ben eyes her for a long moment. "I'd rather pick one out for you," he says nonchalantly, gently shouldering past her and walking up to the display.

She gapes at him, feeling herself flush from head to toe.

\*\*

Rey is trying on hats in front of a mirror for fun, Ben off looking at sunglasses, when some guy starts hitting on her.

This happens often enough, of course. It's a simple part of being female.

"I like your hair," the guys says, leaning his hip against the wall that Rey is standing beside. Rey had twisted her hair into three buns this morning, and they were a little messy from her time spent at the gym.

"Thanks," she answers, voice crisp and disinterested.

"Your pants are cool too."

"They're leggings."

“They’re nice—”

Ben, who had walked up to them so silently Rey hadn’t even heard his approach, forces his entire body between Rey and the random guy, looking down at her and shoving some random hat onto her head that he’d haphazardly grabbed.

“Try this one on.”

The guy who’d been hitting on Rey has to press himself flush against the wall and slowly scoot out from behind Ben, staring up at him the entire time with wide eyes. Ben doesn’t spare him a glance. Doesn’t even turn his head in his direction.

Rey catches sight of her reflection in the mirror. The hat Ben had picked out at random was not great. She blanches, then laughs. “Oh wow, I look awful.”

“Well, you’re beautiful so that’s impossible,” Ben states matter-of-factly. He removes the hat from her head and walks away to return it to the display he’d grabbed it from.

Leaving Rey to press her fists to her mouth in order not to let out an audible squeal.

Ten minutes later they’re cutting through the book and magazine aisle in order to get to the front of the store. Rey hooks her hand around Ben’s elbow and pulls him into a stop.

“Look!”

Several copies of *Knights of Ren* are on display. It must be pretty popular, to be found here and not just at a bookstore and online.

Ben blinks at it, looking awed.

Rey gently squeezes his arm and he shifts his focus onto her.

She smiles a little, feeling herself grow emotional. She gestures to his novels. “I’m really proud of you, you know.”

He stares down at her for a long moment before pulling her forward and wrapping her up in his arms. He tucks her head underneath his chin and she presses the side of her face to his chest, basking in how the warmth of his body seeps into hers.

“Thank you, kid.” His chest rumbles along with the sound of his voice, and Rey hugs him closer, as if she can never get enough.

\*\*

Around late afternoon they finally stop for something to eat, both too nervous and caught up in their own emotions to be hungry before now.

They pull into the old diner not too far from Maz and the home, and Rey smiles at the sight of the old building, pleasant memories rushing back to her. She hasn’t really been back here since Ben went away.

Ben slides into the booth before her, and Rey, feeling bold, slides in next to him instead of across. She all but presses the side of her body against him, and when she risks a glance up at his face she finds him watching her with dark eyes and an unreadable expression.

The waitress takes their drink order, and suddenly all the playful energy has dissipated into something more serious and subdued. It makes Rey feel anxious and unsure, even though she knows, of course she knows, that eventually they were going to have to Talk About Things. She had just been hoping for a few more hours of peace.

Ben heaves a deep sigh from beside her. He's quiet for a beat. Then: "Tell me about the boyfriend you had."

Rey cringes.

"I'm curious," Ben explains. "I just... I just want to know if he made you happy."

Rey swallows, because this is a conversation she desperately doesn't want to have with Ben. She doesn't want to say anything that could possibly hurt him.

But he's looking at her in that imploring way of his, and he's pressed himself against her too, and well...

She tells him about Ryan. And Ben actually takes everything pretty well, listening to her intently and twisting the wrapper of his straw around his fingers.

She tells him about the few petty fights they had. She tells him about the time he'd tried to plan a surprise 20th birthday party for her but had spilled the beans by accident the day before. She tells him about how he was a fantastic graphic artist, and that he'd been hired by a really nice company and had moved out to California. He still texts her memes. She tells Ben about the time Ryan surprised her with a trip to the beach, so she could see the ocean for the first time—

"He took you to the ocean?" Ben interrupts.

Rey pauses, caught a little off guard by the way Ben's entire body has tensed. "Yeah, it was —"

She cuts herself off at the look on Ben's face, at how he's staring intensely down at the table top.

"It was the worst," she lies, throwing her hands up. "And god, the sand! It's coarse and rough and irritating. And it gets *everywhere*—"

"That should have been me," Ben says softly, causing the rest of Rey's sentence to die between her lips.

"Ben—"

"That should have been me," he repeats. "I should have been the one to take you to the beach for the first time."

And Rey doesn't really know what to say to that. "You weren't there," she says simply, choosing to stuff her mouth with a massive bite of the cheeseburger she ordered. "Don't worry about it."

Ben broods for the rest of the fucking meal, barely eating his own food. By the time Rey is finished with her own plate she is exasperated.

"Will you knock it off!" Rey finally loses her cool when they're walking across the parking lot toward Ben's car.

He pauses, staring moodily down at his shoes.

Rey decides that the best thing to do in that moment is distract him. "Listen, I've had a really awesome day with you." That makes his head snap up. "So, I don't know, do you want to watch a movie or something? I haven't seen *The Hobbit* yet and I *know* you own it—"

Ben bristles, looking affronted. "You haven't seen *The Hobbit* yet?"

"That's what I just said."

He reaches out and takes her gently by the elbow, pulling her to him and setting a quick pace the rest of the walk to his car. "You should have said something sooner."

Rey snorts, causing Ben to glance down at her with a raised eyebrow. She bites at her bottom lip. "I'm glad you're still a Tolkien nerd. It's one of the many things I love about you."

The tender look he gives her makes Rey want to duck her head in shyness.

\*\*

Ben has his own house in a nice, quiet neighborhood. It's a little bizarre, but Rey kind of loves it.

His house is sparse of things, but the furniture he's picked out for himself is tasteful. Art and framed posters hang on the walls, and Rey allows herself a few moments to wander around the lower level so that she can take in everything.

"I haven't finished hanging everything up yet. And, uh, I still need to get a dining table..."

Rey turns to where Ben is lingering in his kitchen, watching her with both apprehension and wonder. As if he can't quite believe that she's here. She moves over to where he's leaning against his fridge, brushes her fingertips against his shoulder before hopping up on the countertop.

"I like your house," she says simply, swinging her legs back and forth and gently bumping her heels against the cabinets underneath.

Ben nods, gaze flicking down to her legs. Her leggings cut off a little below her knee, baring her calves.

“You’re only the third person to come here. First was my mom—” he brushes over this admission quickly, as if he’d rather not talk about it yet “—then Poe.” He moves his eyes away from her partially bare legs and back to her face. “And now you.”

He shifts a little closer to her.

And Rey...Rey’s brain is partially scrambled. She can feel her body coming alive at the way he’s looking at her, as if he’d like to peel off her leggings as well as any scrap of clothing she might be wearing underneath.

But there’s still one thing she knows she needs to ask him about. The final thing that should, hopefully, bring everything to light.

“I read that interview.”

Ben stills.

“That very first one you did, after you were released.”

He nods slowly.

“To the moon and back.” Rey stops swinging her legs and leans backward, bracing her hands on either side of her. She hesitates, because there’s no coming back from what they’re about to talk about and what if she’s gotten everything wrong, all wrong—

“I meant it then,” Ben says. “And I still mean it now.”

All the breath whooshes out of her body and she gapes at him, aware of how she’s beginning to tremble. “What changed?” she breathes, voice much steadier than she feels. “While you were in prison, why did your feelings ch—”

“Nothing changed.” Ben moves towards her until her knees brush against his thighs. “I loved you before I served my sentence and I love you now.”

Rey...can’t breathe very well.

He trails his hand up her arm until it’s at her shoulder. “But you were too young and I was too fucked up.” He looks her in the eye, tucks some hair behind her ear. “I’m still kind of fucked up,” he whispers.

Rey wraps her fingers around his wrist, holding his hand against her neck. She wonders if he can feel how much her pulse is jumping for him.

“What you said to me that day you visited,” he continues. “I thought about it every day. Every single day. Because you were right. I needed help, and I needed to be better for myself. And I guess I did pick myself back up, in the end. With the Knights of Ren and all.” He traces the tip of his thumb along her lower lip. “But ultimately you’re the one who inspired me to be better.”

Rey feels the tears prick the back of her eyes and Ben leans forward, presses his forehead against hers.

“You make me better,” he whispers, breath fanning across her lips and making her tilt her head up toward him. “You always have. And I’m sorry that I was gone for so long. I’m sorry for taking Luke’s studio away from you, for taking myself away from you. And I’m fucking sorry that some random asshole had to be the one to take you to the ocean for the first time and not me.”

A tear slips out. She can’t help it. Her emotions are too churned up, and she twists her hands into Ben’s shirt so that she can steady herself. She can’t speak, although her lips are parted in hopeful anticipation. She inhales deeply, taking in his scent, masculine with a hint of what might be aftershave.

“Ben, I forgave you a long time ago.” Rey has finally found her voice, although it’s much breathier than she’d like. “And I hope you know that I still love you, too.” She traces the tips of her fingers along his jawline, feels the stubble there.

A low noise comes from the back of Ben’s throat. “Can I kiss you?”

Rey nods.

He doesn’t kiss her mouth like she thinks he’s going to. Instead he gently tilts her jaw, breathes against the skin of her neck. The heat from his breath lights her skin on fire and she shudders, letting out a tiny whimper when he presses his mouth to the juncture between her neck and shoulder. He nips at her, taking a little bit of skin between her teeth. Her body’s sensitivity suddenly skyrockets and Rey arches her back. Ben snakes his arm around her waist, large hand spreading across the small of her back. He pulls her against him, and Rey spreads her legs so that he can step between them.

He kisses up her neck to her jaw, stubble scratching against her skin and Rey gasps, fists pulling so hard at his shirt that she feels like she might rip it. The energy between them starts to pulse upwards, and Ben’s movements become more urgent. He sucks at the sensitive spot just below her ear and Rey *keens*, panting. Ben tears his mouth away from her neck and finally, finally, kisses her on the lips.

Rey is delirious.

She had no idea simply kissing could make her whole body feel like a livewire, electric and nearly out of her control. She presses her chest against Ben’s and slips her arms around his neck, one hand fisting in the hair at the nape of his neck. She tugs and he groans, the sound reverberating throughout her entire being. She feels herself clench between her legs, body already trying to relieve the ache that’s growing there.

Rey slips her tongue into his mouth, wanting him closer, as close as he can possibly be. Ben’s hands move to cup the curve of her ass. Then he yanks her flush against him and she wraps her legs around his waist. She squirms against his body, legs tightening around him, *needing* him, needing everything he has to give her.

In one swift movement Ben scoops her up and carries her out of the kitchen.

So much for watching The Hobbit.

## Chapter End Notes

“DOVE, WHY?”

Because I’m an evil bitch, that’s why. Don’t worry, we’ll pick up where we left off next chapter. But we needed this chapter to talk about feelings and shit. Shout out to my homie [@violethoure666](#) who MONTHS AGO sent me this super hot video of two people kissing and was like “this is how they should kiss for the first time” and I was like “YES.” And then I had to wait months and months to write it. :-/

You are all wonderful, as usual. You, my dear readers, bring me infinite joy, make me laugh, and brighten my days. Thank you.

I have [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#).

If you liked let me know?



## 2013, part three

### Chapter Notes

Mind the rating change, bitches.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

I don't mean to stare  
We don't have to breed  
We could plant a house  
We could build a tree  
I don't even care  
We could have all three

“Breed” by Nirvana

\*\*

“The *couch*?”

Ben has exited the kitchen and is in the process of carrying Rey into his living room. At her indignant tone, however, he pivots and makes his way toward the staircase.

“You and I are on the same page, then?” he asks between kisses, voice husky and low and warm.

Rey nods, nose sliding against his jaw as she mouths at his throat.

Ben bounds up the stairs two at a time, and the sudden jostling pulls a giggle out of Rey.

There’s no time to take in the new artwork hanging on the walls of the upstairs hallway, or that wow this place has three bedrooms and why does Ben need a house this big?

All Rey can focus on is that Ben seems to be moving at record speed, footsteps soft and thudded against the carpet. The master bedroom is at the end of the hallway, door already ajar. Ben shoulders it the rest of the way open with perhaps more enthusiasm than necessary. The knob harshly bangs off the inside wall, causing both Rey and Ben to briefly wince.

All concerns over a new hole in the wall are gone, however, the moment Ben deposits Rey on his bed.

For a second she’s overcome by how surreal all of this is. It’s early evening, but the winter sun is already setting, casting a dim glow about the room. It pulls at the shadows in Ben’s face, makes his pale skin starker in the dark by contrast. He hovers at the edge of the bed,

staring down at Rey with a rapidly rising and falling chest. As if he can't really believe what he's seeing.

Rey's heart is thundering so loudly inside her own head she's amazed he can't hear it too. They're both a little nervous, she realizes, both waiting for the other to start up this new rhythm.

Rey decides to go first.

She sits up straight on the mattress and peels off her long-sleeved shirt. The snug collar snags on her head, making her top and middle buns come half undone, but she can tell Ben couldn't care less about the state of her hair.

He's busy taking in her chest, her flat stomach and the curve of her hips.

While he's distracted, Rey begins working off her bra before she can lose her nerve.

It's a sports bra, however, so getting it off is hardly sexy. As Rey finally gets it over her head and divested onto the floor, it's all she can do to hold back an exasperated sigh. But any frustration dies and is quickly replaced once again by anxiety as soon as she looks back up.

She's naked from the waist up before Ben.

Ben, who for some completely unknown reason is still fully clothed.

He's staring. Maybe gawking would be the better term. Rey has to resist the urge to reach up and cover her exposed breasts, feeling a little shy and insecure. She likes her body well enough; it's the only one she'll ever have. But she's working with a B cup at best, and all the jump squats in the world can't make the jiggle in her ass go away—

Ben all but falls on top of her.

He catches himself on his forearms, keeping the majority of his weight off of her, and ducks his head to nuzzle at her chest. He hums, clearly pleased, as if he's a cat attempting to purr. Then he sucks a nipple into his mouth, eliciting an unexpected gasp from Rey. Her eyes flick up to the ceiling in shock as Ben rolls her nipple gently between his teeth, relentless until it is completely puckered. Rey's fingers entangle themselves into his hair because where else is she supposed to grab onto exactly, when his head is right *here* and his mouth is doing—

He shifts his head to her other breast and gives it the same treatment. Rey gasps *again*, even though she'd been half expecting it this time, because the way his stubble scratches and drags along the soft and delicate skin of her chest is intoxicating. Little pings of pleasure are shooting down her body and gathering between her legs and she's already so, so wet.

The situation grows even more dire when Ben moves, nudges his knee between her legs. Rey can't help but rock against it, and the sudden sturdiness against the core of her alleviates the ache...but only for a moment.

And Ben, who seems completely satisfied with worshipping her breasts for the time being, is much too overdressed for this occasion.

“Shirt,” Rey huffs out, and *holy shit*, does she sound embarrassing. Voice high and breathy and definitely desperate. She thought she’d have more of a grip on speaking but—

“What?” Thankfully Ben seems to be in the same sort of daze as she is. He looks up at her with half-lidded eyes, as if he’s growing drunk off the touch and taste of her.

“Your shirt,” she barely manages.

His brown eyes widen a little in sudden understanding. His mouth quirks and he sits up just enough to tug his offending clothing up over his head, tossing it onto the floor to join her discarded sports bra.

Rey’s mouth grows dry at the sight of him.

Granted, she’d seen him shirtless literally this morning.

But it’s different this time, just like everything else.

Now she can *touch*. So she does what she had fantasized about doing to him this morning at the gym.

Rey hooks an elbow around his neck and tugs him down until he’s looming right above her. She licks, flicking out her tongue and dragging it along the lower half of his scar. She presses a kiss against the tattoo that it distorts, licks and sucks kisses over his collarbone and then drags her tongue up along his neck.

Next time she’ll lick down.

But this time she follows his scar all the way to where it just misses his eye, then presses sweet fluttering kisses along his cheek, over the bridge of his nose and then finally landing on his mouth. Ben makes a noise against her. It starts off as a moan but ends as a whine, as if in that moment he is just as needy as Rey is. And needy for *her*.

The thought makes her dizzy, makes her press herself up and against him in excitement.

*When* are the pants coming off?

As if he can read her mind, Ben sits all the way up and leans back slightly, bracing most of his weight on his knees. He reaches out and curls his fingers into the waistband of Rey’s leggings, pausing before he begins removing them. Their eyes meet, and Rey realizes after a beat that he’s silently asking her for her permission.

She smiles, bites at her bottom lip and nods. Probably entirely too unaware of how alluring she looks to Ben in that moment.

He jerks her leggings and damp underwear down in one go and with probably more force than necessary. But his enthusiasm actually calms her nerves, makes her feel sexy, makes her feel desirable. When the rest of her clothes are tossed to the side, when she is finally completely naked and laid out before Ben, she finds herself feeling at home and relaxed underneath him.

Rey's knees are still together, but she slowly parts her legs and lets them fall open for Ben to see her, all of her. She keeps her eyes pinned to his face, and the way his lips part at the sight of her spread out before him is a treat. She memorizes the expression, memorizes this exact look. As if she's some treasure that he's finally found after wandering around for years searching.

Rey is nearly grinning now, feeling her confidence grow more and more under his appreciative stare. She nudges at the waistband of his gym shorts with her foot pointedly. A part of her is half tempted to nudge his very noticeable bulge with her foot as well, but before she can truly consider it, Ben shifts his body and all but flings the rest of his clothes away.

And now it's Rey's turn to stare.

Ben is correctly proportioned.

Ben is correctly proportioned, and Rey nearly whimpers at the sight of it. And suddenly it's like an itch spreads from the tops of her ears to the tips of her toes, and she's done with foreplay. All she wants is to feel Ben, all of him, around her, buried within her, filling her. She needs it, is frantic for it in a way she's never felt for anyone else before. She's never wanted to be whole with someone quite like this, as if the world won't fall into balance until every empty space in her body is filled with him.

Ben, however, seems perfectly at ease to continue at the pace they're going. He runs his hands along her legs, moving his head to the side to kiss at her knee.

Her whole body is suddenly so sensitive, and her mind is so completely spent already and *holy hell they haven't even properly started*, that the simple press of his lips to her skin makes her feel like she's been set ablaze.

"Ben," she moans out his name, teeth biting down so hard on her bottom lip that she wouldn't be surprised if she drew blood. "Ben."

"Hmm?" He's lowering his body and scooting down a little on the bed, preparing to settle his head between her thighs. He swipes a thumb from her clit down her entire slit then back up, punctuating the movement with a sudden twirl of motion, making her hips buck up slightly off the bed. He smiles lazily up at her, as if he's perfectly content to get to know every crevice of her body at this completely unacceptable pace.

And Rey...Rey almost lets him continue like that. Because she gets the feeling that Ben is *very* good at this, although she's never been a huge fan of receiving head before because it takes too long and sometimes it feels more odd than pleasurable but—

She doesn't want the first time he makes her come to be with his tongue. She wants to come wrapped around him, wants to be so filled with him that when she reaches that peak her body has no choice but to skyrocket upward. And she is *definitely* going to come for him, if the way her wetness has spread to her inner thighs is any indication. So she tugs on his hair to get his attention, hand dropping to trace a finger along the curve of his upper lip before he can lower his mouth to her.

“Ben,” she moans out again. She’s needy, silly with want for him.

And thank god, he gets it. He looks back down at her cunt longingly, as if he’s being forced to decline a very delicious meal, before moving up her body so that he’s flush against her. He gives her a slow, deep kiss, cock pressing against the soft skin of her lower belly. Rey squirms underneath him, delighting at the feel of how hard he is for her, at how amazing he’s going to feel once he’s finally, finally inside of her. She’s so wet for him it’s embarrassing.

Ben pulls his mouth back slightly. “You,” he reaches blindly for his bedside table, refusing to remove his gaze from her, “are beautiful. So fucking stunning.” He opens the table drawer, presses another kiss to her mouth. “Later I’m going to take my time kissing you all over. I’m going to taste every inch of your skin.” He promises it.

Rey turns her head, sees him pulling an unopened box of condoms from the drawer.

“I’m on the pill,” she blurts out, and Ben pauses over her, box still clutched in his left hand. He raises an eyebrow at her.

“And I’m clean,” she tacks on quickly.

Ben stares at her for a long moment.

Maybe Rey shouldn’t have said anything? Because she wants to feel him, all of him, wants to feel him come inside of her. It’s primal but it’s visceral and she wants it, *needs* it maybe, more than she’s ever wanted or needed anything else in her *life*.

Ben blinks, swallows. “I’ve never not used condoms before.”

And Rey nods, trying not to let on to her disappointment because of course having Ben with a condom is better than not having him at all.

“It was just a thought—” she begins, but is cut off by the condom box clattering to the floor and Ben’s lips suddenly on hers. There’s a desperation to his movements now that weren’t there before, and the atmosphere has suddenly shifted between them and Rey’s heart is racing. Their bodies move, working seemingly on their own, and suddenly Rey’s legs are wrapped around Ben’s waist, drawing him closer and closer and—

“Rey,” Ben presses another kiss to her mouth, hips shifting above her. Her body floods with hot anticipation and she’s shaking. Little needy noises are coming out of her mouth, noises she’s only half aware that she’s making. She grasps at his shoulders, as if she can yank him even closer to her. *Please please please* her body commands.

Ben nuzzles at her neck, gently pushing her legs farther apart with his hands. She feels him, large and thick and unyieldingly hard at her entrance as he positions his body.

Rey is so wet that when he pushes inside he easily slips in all the way to the hilt.

She makes some kind of noise, maybe she cries out or maybe she legitimately yells, but she feels her cunt tighten around him, feels his cock jolt inside her. It’s growing increasingly darker in the bedroom, but Rey can still see the outline of Ben’s face. He looks like he’s

trying very hard not to come, and that by not doing so he is accomplishing a near impossible feat.

Ben's heaving chest brushes against her sensitive breasts and Rey's mouth parts at the feeling. She can hear him panting above her, knows that when his breathing stops for a moment it means that he's swallowed.

She brings a palm up to cup his cheek, tilts her head up so that she can press her forehead against his. She clenches around him and rolls her hips up experimentally and the instant slick, warm pleasure is exquisite.

Ben stays still for several more moments, however. As if he's preparing himself, setting up a game plan. He suddenly snaps his hips forward in the most delicious way and Rey feels as if its all over for her from that point on.

Sex with Ben is indescribable. Rey tries to take all the sensations in at once, from the way Ben hikes her leg up further so that he can hit a deeper angle, to the way he likes to dig his fingers into the flesh of her ass as he fucks into her, as if she's his anchor holding him steady and keeping him from shattering into a million pieces. She memorizes the expression on his face, of his mouth agape and eyes taking her in. Ben looks dizzy, as if he's never felt anything like her before. He makes sounds as he moves inside of her, little gasps and grunts that make her center flood with more wetness for him.

The feeling of his cock filling her mixes with the feeling of never having loved anyone like this before.

If Rey dies tomorrow morning she'd be okay with that. Because nothing as ever felt this right before, this real and raw. As if everything she's ever been through in her entire life happened simply to lead up to now, this moment. Of Ben being inside of Rey and her feeling whole. Like finally there are no empty spaces left in her that he can't bury himself inside and fill up.

She loves him so much.

Ben's breathing has grown ragged and he snakes his hand between their bodies, thumb swiping across her clit in quick, disjointed movements.

The sensations, both physical and emotional, start churning and mixing together until Rey can't take it anymore. She's saying things, nonsensical things, urging Ben, urging herself, until her lips can't coherently form words. She presses her teeth against his shoulder.

It's almost as if her orgasm starts outside of her body, hovering over her but edging more and more into her reach with every roll of Ben's hips into her. And then finally it dips inside of her. It pricks deep between her legs and then crashes outward, rushing over her in beautiful white hot agony.

Rey screams into Ben's shoulder as she comes, the sound muffled against his heated skin.

He peppers kisses and praises across her face as she floats back down. *Lovely perfect so fucking perfect going to make you do that again.*

It takes a second for the meaning to click, and then Ben's thumb is back to her clit, circling around the nub but not quite touching it. Rey whole body twitches, still insanely sensitive and she squirms, half wanting to escape his touch and half forever wanting more.

He nudges along her clit, teasing her, making her wince and squeeze her eyes shut until suddenly she swears she's melting into this mattress. She's going to fall apart again, she can feel it, feel the way it's suddenly building up again.

Which is Ben's plan, she suddenly suspects, given the staggered, uncoordinated rhythm of his thrusts. His eyes are determined and he watches her with gritted teeth. The entire bed lurches back and forth with the power of his movements and a drop of sweat drips off of him onto her.

Rey feels as if every part of her body is wet with either sweat or sex, and she is hot, so overwhelmingly hot and her body rocks with Ben's, as if her cunt can suck him deeper and deeper with every pummeling movement.

And then he's pressing down on her clit again, bottoming out in her over and over and he's worked her back up to a peak, she realizes, head heavy and thick.

When she orgasms again her chest heaves with dry sobs. It's as if every muscle in her body clenches around him. Her cunt around his cock, her legs around his waist, her arms around his shoulders, as if she needs him to be as close to her as he physically can be.

Ben is gasping into her neck, thrusts suddenly unsteady and sporadic. "Rey—"

And then he's jerking his hips against her with a long, low cry. She feels the way his cock starts twitching as he comes deep inside of her, sees how his fist curls into the bedsheet so severely that it pulls out from the corner of the mattress. She has never seen him look this way before, spending himself in her and utterly vulnerable to her, just her, in this moment. Rey presses the heel of her right foot against his lower back, as if she can hold him inside of her body forever.

Ben mouths at her collarbone with barely there kisses, delirious.

And Rey, whose entire body is trembling, feels her dry sobs turn into not-so-dry sobs.

It takes her a moment, as if she has to come down from a high, but finally she raises her hand and cups his face.

"Ben," she chokes out. And then her chest is heaving with shuddering breaths and hot, hot tears fall from her eyes down the sides of her cheeks.

Ben is trembling just like she is. He kisses her tears away.

Rey has never loved anyone more than she loves Ben. He is hers and she is his and here they are, both together sharing the same connected body.

The feeling of home presses down on her so intensely that Rey begins to sob in earnest. So Ben holds her, tenderly kisses the tip of her nose and her eyelids and the corner of her mouth,

only pausing occasionally to wipe at his own eyes. Because he is crying too.

\*\*

They shower together, after. Ben puts on some music that they both know every word to, although Rey is much too worn out to sing along.

Ben washes her hair.

He washes her hair, and no one has done that for her before, not even Ryan. She stands under the piping hot water stream, lets Ben trail his fingers through her hair, careful not to snag a tangle. He lathers her hair for her, rinses it for her, then grabs soap and begins to wash her.

She closes her eyes, leans into his water slick body for support. She is exhausted but sated to the bone. And she can tell Ben is too, from the dopey, pleased expression that seems to be in permanent place on his face.

He hums along to the music, eyes dancing over her every curve as he rinses soap suds from her shoulder blades.

And then, just because he can, he says, “You’re the only girl I’ve ever loved, you know.”

\*\*

They only make it about forty-five minutes into The Hobbit before they’re both passed out asleep on Ben’s couch.

## Chapter End Notes

So like, (good) sex is really hard to write. Am crossing my fingers that this isn’t the worst garbage I’ve ever put y’all through and that it was worth the wait. I know, for me, it was nice to finally get here. It only took fifty-five motherfucking chapters.

Next chapter is the last, and then we’ll have an epilogue. It’s been dope as fuck going on this ride with y’all. Thank you all for reading and holding my hand throughout this journey. We’re almost at the end.

I have [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#).

Let your girl know if she did okay?



## 2013, part four

### Chapter Notes

Please do yourselves a favor and check out this [adorable artwork](#) of young Ben and Rey done by the awesome [@vanta-gold](#)! It put a big fat smile on my face.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

I've been waiting a lifetime  
For this moment to come  
I'm destined for anything at all

“Waiting” by Green Day

\*\*

Rey is in the process of scrubbing blue paint from underneath her fingernails when she hears Temiri call out from the front of the small classroom.

“Rey, your boyfriend is here!”

“OoooooOOOOooooooo!” her handful of students all exclaim in unison. Grinning, Rey turns around and raises an eyebrow at them, water still running in the sink.

She turns the faucet off with her elbow, resigned to have stained fingernails for the rest of the day. “You’re supposed to be finishing up your finger painting, not looking out the window, Temiri.”

Her favorite student smiles up at her sheepishly, front teeth missing. Rey shoos him back into his seat, trying not to let on to how charmed she is by this precocious little boy.

When Ben walks into the studio clutching two cups of coffee, all the children go quiet. They pause in their work and stare up at him with sheer hero worship. Ben gives them all an awkward wave, still not at all used to his new celebrity at Ahsoka’s studio.

But when you’re a popular published artist of course a bunch of young, aspiring artists are going to look up at you.

“Mr. Solo!” Temiri is squirming in his seat with excitement. “My dad showed me some pages from the new Knights of Ren volume! It’s super cool!”

Ben pauses, then backtracks until he’s at Tem’s seat. He leans over and peers down at the young boy’s work, offering up praise and words of encouragement.

It makes Rey's heart clench in her chest.

And then Ben is at her side, kissing her forehead and handing her a much needed cup of coffee. It's barely noon on a Saturday in late August, but Rey's eyelids are already drooping. She adores her students, but sometimes their rambunctiousness wears her out.

"Thanks," she says, accepting the coffee and beaming up at him. Ben takes a moment to steal a proper kiss, causing the kids to erupt in a chorus of "ewwwws".

"Of course," he says, leaning back against the countertop that stretches across the back of the classroom. He jerks his head towards her students, who have gone back to conversing amongst themselves. "How are they today?"

Rey snorts. "Energetic." She sips her coffee and instantly sighs with relief. She needed this. "So." She nudges Ben's ribs gently. "Are you nervous about today?"

His eyes go a little wide and he runs a hand through his hair. "Nervous? What do I have to be nervous about?"

Rey blinks up at him. "The tattoo."

He visibly relaxes. "Oh. Right. No, that'll be fine."

Rey stares him down for a long moment and he stares back, expression unmoving.

She finally turns and calls for her class to come wash their hands and to prepare to be picked up by their parents. The oblige, clamoring out of their chairs and lining up at the sink, occasionally asking Rey questions or making jokes.

Rey can't believe she gets paid to do this.

\*\*

Rey and Ben have been together for eight months. And frankly it's as amazing as Rey could have ever hoped it could be.

No more shame, no more hiding away feelings, no more judgements from friends and family. Just the two of them doing what they've always done, really. Except now Rey can grab Ben and kiss him whenever she wants.

It's so freeing that she walks around everywhere with lighter footsteps and a brighter smile.

And one of the best parts of finally being able to openly date Ben is that he likes to have his hands on her wherever they go. His hand on the small of her back when they're walking somewhere or standing next to each other. His palm on her knee when he's driving. His arm around her shoulders whenever they're sitting on the couch together.

Right now is no exception to this new but welcome habit. Ben sits in a lounge chair, right arm bare under the buzzing needle of the tattoo artist. His hand holds hers. Not so that he can

squeeze it when he feels pain (her barely even winces), but just so that he can be touching her. Like she calms him, grounds him.

It brings Rey joy, because she loves being connected to him too.

She runs her thumb over his knuckles absentmindedly and peers over at the tattoo process. “I still think it’s too much purple.”

“Hush,” Ben says, but his voice is soft. He gazes down at the work, clearly pleased with the result so far. “It was perfect back then and still is. Especially now that all I have to do to see it is look at my arm. It might be my favorite painting of yours.” He’s being bias, but still.

The tattoo artist pauses in their work and looks up at Rey. “This painting was yours?”

Rey represses a sigh and instead nods.

“She doesn’t think its that great.” Ben’s voice is disapproving, and the artist’s eyebrows shoot up.

“One of the reasons why I wanted to do this piece is because I thought the original painting was so beautiful! You’re very talented.” She cocks her head to the side, assessing Rey. “Have you ever thought about being a tattoo artist?”

Rey chuckles, feeling her cheeks heat up. “Ah, no. I don’t even have tattoos.”

The artist cocks her head. “We could fix that.”

Rey swallows and gives a single shake of her head. “I don’t know. I mean, I think they look cool and all *obviously* as I’m here with Ben while he gets one but I just haven’t come up with a design—”

“You literally told me last week you’d love to get a fox, because that’s Kira’s familiar in the comic,” Ben points out, trying not to smirk and failing.

Rey *glares* at her boyfriend. “Well, yes—”

“We could do it after I’m finished with Ben. He’s my last appointment for the day.”

Rey feels her spine stiffen in anxiety. The truth is she’s really just apprehensive about the pain and knows whole heartedly that this makes her a big fat baby.

Both Ben and the artist are watching her expectantly.

She scowls at them both and lets her shoulders slump in defeat. “Fine,” she grumbles. She crosses her arms over her chest and tries not to let on to her impending panic. She stares down at Ben’s not-quite-finished tattoo. “I still think it has too much purple.”

Ben smiles. “And I still think it’s perfect.”

\*\*

The artist took about twenty minutes to sketch out a fun, cartoony fox head for Rey, who has decided to get the tattoo right above her left ankle.

She's trying not to let on to how nervous she is as she and Ben wait around at the front of the parlor.

Rey nearly jumps out of her skin when Ben steps forward, freshly tattooed arm enveloped in plastic wrap. The artist really did do a beautiful job, and the ink is brightly colored with fantastic line work. Her lightning painting looks good on him.

He cups her face in his hands and leans close. "Rey, you realize you don't have to get this done if you don't want to. It's not the end of the world, just a fun idea."

She sighs and shakes her head. His thumb traces gentle circles over her cheek bones. "No, it's okay. She's already designing it."

He quirks an eyebrow. "Rey, really. It's not a big deal. If you don't want to—"

"Honestly, if I don't I'll be irritated with myself. I've always wanted a tattoo. I think I'm just nervous because I don't know what to expect."

Ben nods and touches his forehead briefly to hers. She smiles a little, comforted.

But when the tattoo artist comes into the front and announces that she's ready when Rey is, Rey feels a wave of sheer nausea wash over her like a tidal wave.

\*\*

It's not that bad.

In fact, Rey is slightly ashamed by how worked up she got over this.

Granted, getting a tattoo feels exactly like what one would expect a buzzing needle going into one's skin and moving to feel. But the pain is more annoying than upsetting, and since the tattoo is small the artist is nearly finished after only fifteen minutes.

Even though he's sitting in a chair by her side, Ben still manages to hover over her. He has her hand in his and he squeezes it occasionally, as if he's trying to reassure her. It's soothing to Rey, to know that he looks after her so thoroughly even though he doesn't have to.

When the artist is done she dabs off the last of the blood before rubbing a thick, clear ointment into the new tattoo with her gloved hand. "Take a look and tell me what you think."

Rey peers down at her leg, happy that she wore shorts today. The tattoo is simple; just line work. She might have color added later, but for now this would do. The lines are clean, and the fox head that the artist drew up for her manages to be both cheeky and adorable.

Rey is instantly smitten with it.

“Oh, I *love* it!” she exclaims happily, gazing at it and tilting her head to the side, as if trying to implement it in her mind from every angle.

The artist claps her still gloved hands together happily. “I’m glad!” She then launches into an explanation on how to care for the new tattoo, and Rey listens with rapt attention.

They leave the parlor not too long after that, Ben fiddling with the edges of the plastic wrap to make sure that his vulnerable arm is properly protected. They climb into his car and, smiling, Rey leans her head against the head rest and looks over at her boyfriend.

Ah, it still feels so very good to think of him as such.

“Are we still cooking dinner at your place?”

Ben pauses, key in the ignition. He glances over at her nods, Adam’s able bobbing as he swallows. “Y-Yeah, if that’s okay with you?”

Rey blinks at him, slightly confused. “Of course. That’s what we planned on.”

He watches her for a moment then slowly nods. “Okay, good.” He quickly starts the car and pulls out of the parking lot, leaving Rey to eye him suspiciously out of the corner of her eye.

\*\*

“Ben. You’re distracting me.”

He’s kissing the back of her neck. “Hmm, am I?”

“Yes.” Rey bites her bottom lip and tries to concentrate on the steak she’s cooking in a skillet. “If you make me burn this steak then this one is going to be yours *oh—*”

He’s pushed her hair out of the way and has traced his tongue along the shell of her ear, causing her to gasp. He presses his face against the side of her neck, and Rey can feel his smile.

“I love you,” he hums into her ear, arms coming to wrap around her waist. He moves so that her back is pressed against him and she can’t help but bite at her bottom lip, grinning.

“I love you, too.” She flips the steak and inhales deeply as the meat sizzles, giving out an enticing aroma. Ben’s hold on her waist loosens a little, and he nuzzles at the juncture between her neck and shoulder before stepping away completely.

“Also, I bought some Kraft mac and cheese if you wanted me to make some as a side. I know it’s not at all sophisticated, but that stuff is delicious so whatever.” Rey moves the finished steak onto a plate she has waiting next to the stovetop, singing along to the music coming from the living room. Ben had purchased an Alexa about six months ago and since has had way too much fun yelling at it to play whatever band he wants whenever he wants. And at top volume. The slender speaker is currently blaring Green Day, and Rey bounces around to the vibe of the music. They’re the same band Ben had been listening to the very first time she’d met him. So she is fond of them.

“Whatever you want, kid.” Ben’s voice comes from the other room, and Rey glances in that direction before walking over to the pantry, gazing inside and tapping her chin thoughtfully. She picks up two different Kraft boxes. “I bought Original but I also got the Spongebob shaped ones because I thought that might be fun.”

She waits a moment for his answer, and when none comes she frowns. “Ben?”

Silence.

Eyebrows furrowed, Rey turns around, both mac and cheese boxes still clutched in her hands. That’s when she finds Ben Solo down on one knee before her.

## Chapter End Notes

**[PLEASE CLICK HERE FOR THE COOLEST, FUCKIN’ DOPE AS SHIT SURPRISE THAT I’VE HAD TO BE TIGHT LIPPED ABOUT FOR WEEKS. BASK IN THIS AWESOMENESS MY DUDES.](#)**

I couldn’t help but finish off the main story with that cheese. I feel like maybe Ben and Rey didn’t get around to eating any time soon ;)

Thank you so much for all your lovely responses to the last chapter! I was frankly hella nervous about posting it, so I’m glad you all, uh, enjoyed. Also, I hope y’all know that even though I don’t have time to respond to every comment like I wish I did, I read and cherish each and every review! Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for taking the time to share with me your love for this story. It means the world.

Only the epilogue left lads. I can’t wait to share it with you.

I have [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#)

If you liked let me know?

# Epilogue: 2018

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Didn't they say that only love will win in the end

“Only Love” by Mumford & Sons

\*\*

“*Shit.*”

Rey, eyes half lidded and sleepy, smirks at her husband’s swear. She’d sunk all the way down on him in one easy motion, and maybe Ben hadn’t expected her to be so slick and ready for him since they’ve only been awake for approximately three minutes.

Yet he himself is incredibly hard inside of her.

His back against the headboard, Rey props her palms on Ben’s shoulders and sets a languid rhythm, biting her bottom lip and gasping every time she slowly lowers back down onto him. She loves being able to ride him like this, being able to feel him inside of her at this angle. And she gets to take in his face, every minute expression. The way his lips begin to part as she shifts her hips, the way his pupils are wide in arousal and the low morning light. He moans a little when she braces more of her weight on her knees and picks up the pace.

Rey loves having sex like this with her husband. The kind of sex that isn’t frenzied, isn’t a rush to feel physically whole or to find release. In fact, Rey isn’t too bothered with her own orgasm, too entuned to watching her husband slowly fall apart underneath her.

Ben has different ideas.

“Touch yourself,” he orders, voice barely above a whisper. His gaze flicks away from hers, down to where her hips meet his. He watches, chest heaving, as Rey rises up and slowly sinks down on top of his cock. He whines, hands gripping at her hips. “Touch yourself. Please.”

Grinning, she obliges him, hand reaching between them so that she can nudge at her clit with two fingers and Ben groans at the sight, entranced. She feels herself tighten around Ben further and they both make little strangled noises at the heightening pleasure.

His hands squeeze against her and he starts to thrust his hips upward, and Rey smiles a little at his sudden impatience. At how he’s staring up at her now, as if he’s meant to worship her always. She leans forward, nips at his bottom lip. And Ben moves his hands around to cup and squeeze and slap at her ass cheeks and the sound coming from between their bodies is delicious, makes her tremble—

Her orgasm rushes her without warning and Rey cries out, voice echoing around the room in surprised bliss. She convulses against her husband, seeing him but not really seeing him and

he is kissing her neck, letting himself pulse inside of her now that he's made sure she's come before him.

They both sigh in unison, and Ben drapes his arms loosely around Rey's waist, bringing her closer with a look of contentment.

They both could go back to sleep with ease.

But they're supposed to leave in ten minutes. They shower quickly, and Rey throws on clothes and pulls her hair into a bun in a rush, laughing at Ben as he runs downstairs to quickly feed the dog and let it outside.

Rey is lucky enough to begin her days like this often.

\*\*

They pull up to Leia Organa's massive house, and Rey still finds herself amazed that Ben grew up in a place that has *columns*.

"Looks like everyone else is here except for Poe and Finn," Ben observes, parking next to Rose's car.

"I think," Rey says, scrolling through their friend group's group chat, "that your mom forgot hamburger buns, so they ran to the grocery store for her."

Ben nods, climbing out of the car and then making his way to the passenger's side to open Rey's door for her.

He kisses her quickly before shutting the door behind her, and Rey smiles, titling her head back and basking in the rays of the early afternoon sun. It'll be a scorcher of a day, but Rey would expect nothing less from the Fourth of July holiday.

Ben holds her hand as they walk slowly up to the front door.

"Last night was fun." Ben is looking at her with a soft smile. But his eyes are mischievous.

"And peaceful," Rey agrees, bumping her hip playfully against his. He laughs, gently squeezing her hand with his own.

They step into the house, both relaxing a little in the rush of air conditioning.

"Is that you, Ben?" Leia's voice is coming from the kitchen.

"Yep!" Ben says, lifting his voice to be heard over the smattering of conversations and the whirl of the kitchen fan.

There's a happy shriek and hurried footsteps.

Pleased, Rey crosses her arms over her chest and steps aside. It's been this way for the past three years.



A little girl comes hurling down the hallway, chocolate smeared on her face and messy brown curls pulled into a tangled ponytail. “Daddy!” she exclaims, and Ben crouches down and opens his arms wide, grinning stupidly as their daughter hurls herself into his embrace.

He stands, easily holding her up with one arm. “Hey, sweetheart,” he croons. “How was your stay with Nana?”

The three-year-old is beaming, hazel eyes bouncing back and forth between her parents. Her hands form little fists into her Moana t-shirt and she says, “We makin’ brownies!”

“I can see that.” Rey licks her thumb and attempts to wipe some of the smeared chocolate batter from her daughter’s face. The little girl squirms, and Ben’s eyes bug out a little as he reaches up to keep her from tumbling out of his grip. “Hanna, be still—”

“Did she tell you we’re making brownies?” Leia is standing at the end of the hallway, and she beckons them with a wave. “Come on, Finn and Poe just got back with the hamburger buns. Everyone else is heading out back.”

\*\*

Rey sips at her cold beer.

“—just because Jackson might be involved and they might film in New Zealand doesn’t mean it’s going to be any good.” Ben is impassioned, which means his voice has overtaken the conversation Rose and Rey are trying to have, as well as the backyard speaker booming music.

“Agreed.” Rose’s boyfriend sounds almost bored, but Rey knows him well enough by now to know that that’s just him. “But I doubt Amazon would give the project a billion-dollar budget if they weren’t taking this very seriously.”

“It’s unnecessary.” Rey presses her lips together to keep from laughing at Ben’s petulance. “I don’t want to be disappointed again, and while Jackson’s original Lord of the Rings trilogy is a cinematic masterpiece I’m not sure I trust him after the fucking *garbage* that was Battle of the Five Armies—”

At this both Rey and Rose roll their eyes and shuffle away toward the koi fish pond and accompanying fountain. Finn appears at their elbows, looking a little sweaty in the face.

“What’s with you?” Rose asks, tilting her head at her friend in concern.

Finn jerks a thumb over his shoulder, indicating to where Poe is standing near the grill, Hanna propped on his hip. He’s got his phone out and is showing the toddler pictures of BB-8, who has now grown gray around the whiskers.

Rose turns back to Finn and blinks at him in confusion. “I don’t get it.”

Finn sucks in and releases a big breath. He levels a Look at Rey. “Ever since you and Ben asked us to babysit last month Poe can’t stop talking about starting a family.”

Rey and Rose are both silent for a beat too long.

“Oh, is that...bad?” Rey asks, glancing at Rose for support and backup.

Finn opens his mouth to answer, then closes it. Opens it again. “Well, no. Actually, I can’t *wait* to be a dad. But we’ve been dating for six years and I kinda thought Poe would’ve proposed by now.”

Both Rey and Rose stiffen and then quickly try to look nonchalant.

“So? It’s 2018,” Rose supplies after a moment. “Why don’t *you* propose?”

Finn looks shell shocked, as if this thought had never occurred to him before now, bless his heart. He taps his finger against his chin. “I just—I never—huh. Ladies, I need a minute.” He walks straight over to the cooler and scoops out a beer.

Rey raises an eyebrow at Rose. “You’re going to get Finn all in a tizzy when Poe is literally proposing tonight at the fireworks.

Rose grins devilishly. “I know. But he’s fun to torture.”

\*\*

“Luke, I know more about Paw Patrol than any grown man should.”

Ben and his uncle are talking about the state of children’s cartoons, and Ahsoka chimes in periodically. They sit at Leia’s long kitchen table, everyone agreeing that it’s simply too hot and humid to try to eat outside. Rey finishes the last of her beer, eyeing her empty plate and leaning back in her chair in contentment.

Hanna is across from her, sitting in a high chair sandwiched between Poe and Rose. She tugs on the former’s sleeve, asks her Uncle Poe-Poe for more chips. He proceeds to dump half of his plate onto hers in a single offering. Rose and her boyfriend have their heads together, deep in conversation. They’d met three years ago in grad school. Finn sits on the other side of Poe, laughing with Paige and Leia, looking much more at ease than he had been about an hour ago.

It’s loud in here, enough to give anyone a headache.

But Rey loves it, loves all of it. Loves everyone at this table. This is her family. Some she chose for herself. Like complimenting a classmate’s ugly green sweater in the cafeteria during 6th grade. Some the universe deemed to give her. Like being a lonely seven-and-a-half-year-old and walking in on an equally lonely teenage boy flinging paint at a sheet.

Ben kisses her temple to grab her attention. “Make funny faces,” he says. He puffs out his cheeks and Rey crosses her eyes and gives him bunny ears, and Hanna lets out a delighted squeal of laughter from across the table. Her laughter gets everyone else laughing, and Rey and Ben break form in order to laugh too.

It is simply joy personified. And it is beautiful.

## Chapter End Notes

That's all, folks. Also, \*slams fist on a table\* Ben Solo would be the best daughter dad. Like just thinking about it is the cutest shit ever. It's funny, I don't really do Reylo babies because, cheese. But I felt like it fit for these two.

I have four specific people I need to thank for this fucking Reylo novel I just wrote.

First, thank you to [audreyii-fic](#). Once again we find ourselves completely immersed in a lovely, beautiful trash ship. Thanks for talking to me about characterization, listening to me bitch and vaguely panic, and for giving me the idea that Ben should burn down the studio. Originally, my plans for Ben were a lot darker. I actually wanted him to commit murder (YIKES in retrospect lmao) but couldn't figure out how to do it without him being in prison for way longer than four years. In swoops audreyii-fic, who was like, "Maybe he burns down the studio instead?" Which of course worked way better for the narrative I was going for. Thanks my dude. Couldn't have done it without you.

Second, thank you to [violethoure666](#). Becoming homies with you was definitely one of the coolest things to come out of this writing project. Thank you for being my cheerleader when I was a mess over writing the prison chapter, for continuously providing unwavering support and enthusiasm. You are a lovely human being and it has been a pleasure getting to know you.

Third, thank you to [kikisoothercat](#). This HOE probably won't even see this thank you note for another couple of months, because her ass is still in 2007 somewhere and she actively chooses to look at crime scene photos and read about serial killers instead of my fic. But she also is my best friend and would listen to me wax poetic about characterization and symbolism while we'd hotbox her car. Honestly, getting to talk through elements of my story with her was a godsend. Thank you my dear for your unwavering support and pride. And for bragging about this story in front of my brother, making him want to read it and lowkey horrifying me in the process.

Fourth, thank you, readers. You guys have made this process otherworldly. When I started this fic I wasn't expecting it to receive this much attention or love. So many of you have faithfully read and reviewed every chapter since the beginning, and I cannot adequately express my gratitude for your support and patience as I've posted this story over the past six months. To everyone who sent me lovely asks and art on tumblr, and to the twitter crew who are a delight and constantly make me laugh, from the bottom of my heart thank you.

It's true that fanfiction is shared not given, but part of the fun of sharing it is seeing the community it creates. Some of you guys have even told me that this story has been the highlight of your days, or that it's the only thing that makes you smile. And that frankly means the world to me. As I look back over the past six months I honestly can't believe I've gotten through some of the personal shit I've been hit with without losing it. And I think it's because I've been able to bring you guys along on this journey with me.

In the end I hope this story brought you all joy. And I hope it made you laugh out loud at least once. I really love to make people laugh.

Thank you all for everything. And be on the lookout, I absolutely have more Reylo projects on the horizon.

I have [tumblr](#) and [twitter](#).

If you liked let me know?

# Saturday, December 23rd 2018

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Like some drunken Elvis singing  
I go singing out of tune  
Saying how I always loved you darling  
And I always will

“Christmas Lights” by Coldplay

\*\*

Her husband is in a foul mood.

Ben’s hands are gripping the steering wheel, knuckles white and lips pressed together in a stern line. It’s the face he makes when he’s trying very, very hard not to swear in front of Hanna.

And Rey finds it endlessly amusing. She shifts a little in the passenger’s seat of their car, trying not to let on to her own gathering impatience with the way their drive is currently going. They’re moving at a snail’s pace, making the already irritating traffic they’re stuck in nearly unbearable to creep through.

Rey looks forlornly down at her phone. “Google Maps says we’re still forty minutes out.” She cuts her gaze over to her husband, not surprised to see Ben inhale deeply before exhaling slowly, clearly trying to keep calm.

It’s a sharp contrast to the happy humming coming from the back. Hanna sits in her car seat with Ben’s tablet resting in her lap, wide hazel eyes glued to *The Little Mermaid*. This is already her second viewing during this car ride alone. Rey had suggested that it might be fun to take Hanna to Callaway Gardens to see the Christmas lights, and Ben had agreed, albeit distractedly.

He’d been in his office, pouring over preliminary sketches for *Knights of Ren* when Rey had poked her head into the room and mentioned it. He’d said yes immediately, although in retrospect Rey suspects he would have said yes to just about anything to have an excuse to escape his work.

Neither of them had anticipated, however, just how busy Callaway Gardens would be three days before Christmas. Hanna hadn’t seemed to mind, though. She’d pointed and giggled and awed at all the lights despite the crowds, as if the lights weren’t just lights but tiny stars lit up all around her, creating scenes of magic that only come this time of year. Seeing her daughter’s face bright with wonder had brought Rey a happiness she hadn’t realized she could experience yet. And seeing the nearly dazed expression on Ben’s face as he took in

both his daughter and his wife, *his family*, made her think he was feeling a similar sort of happiness.

But his tolerable mood has dissolved about an hour ago, when traffic had started backing up on I-285, turning their hour and a half drive to a two-and-a-half-hour drive.

And everyone is *hungry*.

It only takes ten minutes for Ben to finally snap. “You know what,” he growls. “Fuc—”

He cuts himself off.

“Fudging fudge this fudge.” He flips on his blinker and begins the arduous process of crossing six lanes of traffic in order to get off at the next exit. “We’re going to Waffle House.”

\*\*

Waffle House is extremely busy. Rey can see a line of people waiting in line for seats as soon as they pull into the parking lot.

Ben sighs deeply as he pulls into an empty parking spot. “I’ll go grab us a table, if you want to get Hanna out of her seat.”

Rey nods, looking at her husband with watchful eyes as he cuts the engine and climbs out of the car, steps purposeful as he strides into the restaurant. She turns in her seat to look at her daughter. “Daddy’s being a Grinch right now, isn’t he?”

But Hanna has finally noticed the bright yellow Waffle House sign shining through her window. She gasps in delight, tiny hands losing grip on Ben’s tablet. It falls to the carpeted floor of the car with a *plunk*.

Hanna goes on about waffles for the next two minutes, for as long as it takes for Rey to climb out of her own seat and open the back door to reach her daughter. She’s helping the almost-four-year-old out of her restraining buckles when she pauses, thinking of a particular phone call to the doctor’s office that Hanna had accidentally overheard.

Rey taps Hanna gently on the shoulder, gathering her daughter’s attention. “Remember what we discussed last night, about Mommy’s big secret?”

Hanna’s hazel eyes widen. She nods quickly, her chocolate waves bouncing about her shoulders. “Daddy can’t know.” She straightens a little in her car seat, looking very serious. She takes a deep breath. “It’s-It’s his Christmas surprise.”

Rey smiles and presses her finger to the tip of her little girl’s nose. “That’s right. So we don’t want to ruin it by spilling the beans over dinner, do we?”

Hanna rapidly shakes her head, looking as if she feels Very Grown Up by being tasked with something so important.

Rey helps her out of the car and into the chilly air of the parking lot. “Good girl.”

Hanna takes her hand and suddenly a very Leia-like expression crosses over her face. “Mommy, can I have chocolate chips on my waffle ‘cause I’m good?”

Rey blinks, mind going over how late it already is and how much sugar is sure to be in a chocolate chip waffle. “Hanna—”

“And peanut butter?” Her daughter is gazing up at her with Rey’s very own eyes and it isn’t *fair* how easily they make her melt.

She sighs, unable to repress the way her mouth curves upward. “Sure.”

\*\*

Ben is at a table with a cup of coffee in hand by the time Rey and Hanna make their way inside the restaurant. He gives them a small smile when they slide into the seat across from him and pushes his phone over to the side of the table.

“Work?” Rey raises a questioning eyebrow as she helps Hanna out of her jacket, the little girl humming ‘Part of Your World’ under her breath.

Ben nods, sipping from his mug before slowly setting it down. There are bags underneath his brown eyes; he’s exhausted, and Rey hates that he’s pushing himself so hard this close to Christmas.

“I just got an email from my editor and...” Ben frowns and shakes his head once, obviously not pleased with whatever his editor had to say. Ben has spent the past several months going over how he wants the next arc of the comic to go, wanting to tell a certain kind of story but also not wanting to alienate or disappoint any fans.

Rey reaches across the table and brushes her fingertips along his knuckles, giving him a small but reassuring smile. “Don’t worry about that right now. Let’s just get something to eat.”

As if on cue, their waitress, a perky blonde wearing a Santa hat with a nametag reading ‘Sunni’, appears by their table with a pen and notepad in hand.

Ben’s eyebrows disappear into his hair when Rey orders a chocolate chip and peanut butter waffle for their not-quite-four-year-old at nearly nine-o’clock at night, but he doesn’t protest. He proceeds to order two waffles with a side of hash browns, and then everyone turns and looks at Rey expectantly.

“I’ll do an All-Star,” she says, not needing to look at the menu. “Waffle dark, grits, eggs scrambled with cheese, raisin toast, and bacon. Can you make that a double order of bacon? Oh, and can you also put chocolate and peanut butter chips on my waffle as well?”

Sunni the waitress nods and smiles, repeating their order back to them to make sure it’s correct before turning toward the elf-hat-wearing line cook. “Cas, I need an All-Star special with...”

Ben is staring at his wife, eyes round with surprise. He wraps his large hand around his coffee mug and offers her a small smirk. “Hungry, huh?”

Hanna lets out a stream of giggles. “Mommy’s *real* hungry.”

Rey shrugs and surreptitiously nudges her daughter with her knee, already knowing that it will accomplish nothing. The little girl grins and happily entertains herself by trying to sneak a sip of Ben’s coffee.

When Ben finally lets her, she gags and proceeds to dramatically exclaim about how much she doesn’t like it. “That’s *gross*, daddy. *Ewww*.”

“Then quit trying to steal it,” Ben admonishes, but his tone is soft and amused. His gaze swivels over and meets Rey’s and he tilts the corners of his mouth for her, taking his coffee back from his daughter and shooting Rey a wink from across the table.

Hanna’s squeal of delight moments later when her heavenly sugar bomb of a waffle is placed in front of her gentles the rest of Ben’s face. It fills Rey’s chest with an emotion that feels light but manages to take up the entirety of her chest.

They dig into their meal as a family.

\*\*

Despite devouring the majority of her waffle, Hanna manages to fall asleep about ten minutes into the ride home. Rey nudges up the volume to the melancholic Christmas music that’s flowing through the car stereo, hoping to dull out the sound of the conversation she’s hoping she and Ben are about to have.

The streetlights illuminate her husband long enough to show him flicking glances in Rey’s direction every so often.

“What’s wrong?” she asks softly, turning her head and shifting her body so that she’s facing him as much as she can be.

Ben gives a brief jerk of his head and Rey has to resist the sharp urge to roll her eyes.

“What’s wrong?” she repeats, this time her tone a little more forceful. “You’ve been...*off* these last few weeks. Don’t think Hanna and I haven’t noticed.”

He’s shaking his head again. “Honestly, Rey, please don’t worry about it. You have so much else going on right now, what with my freaking mother insisting on having our Christmas Eve gathering at our house this year, and doing all the shopping and gift planning for everyone because I’ve been so fucking consumed with...” Ben trails off, clearly frustrated and unable to quite spit out the words that are churning around so thunderously in his head.

So Rey does it for him. “Because you’ve been so consumed with your comic,” she says quietly.



Ben nods, presses his lips together in that way of his. “I want to end it.” His head whips toward her quickly, as if gauging if there’s shock on Rey’s face. “I want to end the comic. Well, no. I *need* to end it because it just feels—it just feels—”

Rey knows what he’s going to say next. She knows the same feeling he’s about to express. She gets it too, when she’s painting or sketching. It always comes to her in a rush. She’s able to step away from her work after putting in the last finishing touches, the straggling details, and view her work as a fully realized concept that her mind has birthed out into a physical entity. An idea she can finally share with others.

“—done. It feels done.”

Neither of them says anything for a moment. Which is alright, it gives Rey a few extra seconds to decide with confidence what she’s about to say next. She turns to Ben with a growing smile, but he must miss it in the low light because he plunges forward.

“And I know that I should keep going. I know there’s definitely other things to explore in the Knights of Ren universe, not to even *mention* how much it contributes to our income—”

“If it’s done then it’s done.” Rey happily interrupts her husband, basking a little in the shocked silence that descends between them afterward.

“What?”

“Ben, if your comic feels done to you, then it’s done. You’ve told the story you wanted to tell, and now it’s time to move on. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“But—”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.” They’re pulling into their neighborhood now, music softly playing in the background. Ben remains thoughtfully quiet as they turn onto their street and finally into their driveway.

Rey is unbuckling her seatbelt when another thought occurs to her. “Besides, this means you’ll have more time to concentrate on new beginnings.”

\*\*

Ben removes Hanna from their car as surreptitiously as possible, but in the end it doesn’t really matter. Hanna stays passed out all the way into the house and into her bedroom, head lulling against Ben’s shoulder as he carries her to bed. Rey follows behind them, carefully pulling off Hanna’s shoes and jacket in a way that won’t disturb her.

She doesn’t wake up even when Rey delicately pulls her Moana nightgown over her shoulders.

“I’m *amazed* she can sleep like this,” Rey whispers, voice still loud enough to carry over to her husband. “She’s definitely your child.”

She expects some kind of reaction from Ben, a light laugh or even a huff, from where he's placing the outfit Hanna wore all day into her laundry hamper. But when Rey turns to look at him, Ben's mouth is back in that firm line. And she knows without having to ask that he's mulling over the Knights of Ren again, anxious mind zeroing in on what's causing him the most amount of stress.

It's not how her husband should be spending Christmastime with his family. He should be excited. They would see all their friends in just two nights, would get to give Hanna the massive Lego Batman Cave that the little girl had seen at Target two months ago and had had a complete meltdown over. This is supposed to be a holiday about joy, both giving and receiving it.

And in his current state Ben Solo seems incapable of doing either.

Rey makes a snap decision. She has other gifts planned for Ben on Christmas morning; getting this one early shouldn't put a damper on anything. In fact, Rey hopes that this will help improve his mood.

"Hanna wrote out her list for Santa this morning," Rey mentions nonchalantly. She tucks the covers in around her daughter before standing up and tip toeing over to the child sized desk beside the closet. There are crayons and markers and bits of paper spread out all over the desk and surrounding floor. "We thought it might be something fun to do..." She trails off with a frown when Ben slowly walks out of Hanna's room and across the hallway to his office, as if he hadn't heard a word of what Rey had just said.

She follows him, softly closing the door to Hanna's bedroom behind her. Ben is already sitting at his work desk when she walks into his office, already opening his laptop and pulling out one of his drawing tablets.

Rey props her hip against the doorframe. "Did you hear me?"

His head jerks up in surprise. "Hmm? Sorry, kid, I'm just—"

"Distracted?"

He flushes and nods, leaning back in his chair and running his fingers through his hair. He makes a grand attempt at giving her a strained smile, but fails. "What were you wanting to tell me?"

Rey holds up the yellow piece of construction paper. "Hanna made her list for Santa today." She steps forward and insists on handing it to him. "You should read it."

Ben blinks at her before making the decision to humor his wife. He takes it, looks down at the paper now clutched in his hand. "The glitter and Batman stickers are a nice touch." He clears his throat. "Dear Santa, I want snacks." At this he pauses.

"We hadn't had lunch yet," Rey explains.

His mouth is finally quirking. “Right. I want snacks, Legos, and...” He squints, clearly trying to decipher his daughter’s attempt at the English language scrawled across the page. Rey already knows what it says.

*A brother in mommy’s tummy.*

Her husband stares, mouth opening and closing in disbelief several times.

When Ben looks up at her, it’s the emotion in his eyes that makes Rey’s chest clench.

“You’re pregnant?” he asks, voice so small and so earnest and so *hesitant*, as if he desperately needs her confirmation before he can assume, before he can allow himself to be amazed.

Rey starts nodding vigorously, words not able to come out of her mouth fast enough. Shit, she’s already crying and—

Ben is up out of his office chair and crowding Rey’s space in the blink of an eye. He cups her face between his big palms, peppers kisses across her cheeks and her brows and her nose.

Rey wonders at how some of the happiest moments of her life have happened in such unassuming places. In a kitchen-office by an old stereo, outside of a gift shop in the rain, in a courthouse.

In a darkened hallway with maple syrup still sticky on her Christmas sweater.

She wraps her arms around Ben’s shoulders, grinning into his mouth as he kisses her hurriedly and sloppily, too excited to fully decide what he wants to do with her just yet. He settles with pressing his forehead against her own, peering down at Rey with—

And there it is, in his gaze. *Joy*. The joy he’s been missing all season, leaking out of his smile and his eyes and in the way he holds Rey with such tenderness. All consuming joy.

“I was going to tell you Christmas morning,” Rey whispers into the now sacred space between them, “but I couldn’t wait any longer.”

“I’m glad you couldn’t.” Ben’s grin is a lovely and precious thing, all for her. All for Rey and their little family. He pulls her closer into his embrace, if that’s even possible, mouth trailing along her jaw until it settles near her ear. “I love you.”

Rey hums, says *I love you too* right back. Her fingers are playing with the soft hair at the nape of Ben’s neck when he pauses in kissing at the skin below her ear. He pulls back, but only enough so that he can look her in the eye again. “Fuck, what if it is a boy?”

Rey shrugs one shoulder. “What if it’s twins? You know they skip generations.”

She does not miss the sheer *panic* that crosses Ben’s face. “That’s a myth.” He’s trying to sound lighthearted, but Rey can almost hear the wheels turning in his head. The *what ifs*.

Somehow, Rey thinks she’s just spoken something into existence.

\*\*

Not twenty minutes later Rey is sprawled in bed next to Ben, chest heaving. She's still wearing her syrup stained Christmas sweater. Ben had been too insistent on having her as quickly as possible that neither of them had bothered with stripping it off.

Ben rolls onto his side and slides a solid arm across her middle, pulling her close. He nuzzles into her hair. "I was thinking. If we do have twins, hypothetically, and they're boys, hypothetically, Merry and Pippin would make great—"

"Absolutely not."

## Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas, folks! I hope you enjoyed our brief return to this universe. I was [prompted by Waffle House to write this on twitter](#), so here we are!

This is dedicated to Sunni ([@PoppiWillow](#)) and casmé ([@theforcebond](#)). They are two of the most lovely and wonderful ladies in this entire fandom and one of the reasons why writing this story is so much fun. Thank y'all for your constant support and for showering this story with so much love. I don't deserve it <3

And thank you to everyone else who has read and shown love for this story. You all are simply amazing. I might return to this universe next spring/summer. The characters might have more to say.

I have [twitter](#) and a [dying tumblr](#)!

If you liked let me know?

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!