A Simple Twist Of Fate

by frazzledsoul

Summary

It seemed like the obvious father of Rory's child had to be Logan Huntzberger. But what if that wasn't the case at all? Now 100% Literati.
Chapter 1

Christmas Day may seem an inopportune time to offer up another interpretation of Rory Gilmore’s pregnancy, but here it is, anyway.

I was intending to make this a Christmas-themed story, but I put off writing it until tonight, and I only got so far, so I’m posting the first two parts tonight. This story was first birthed in my head due to extended speculation on Twitter about how the timeline in Fall could be interpreted so that Logan wasn’t actually the father of Rory’s child, and I was wondering how much drama could be taken away if we removed him from the equation entirely.

Also at fault: my deep abiding love for The Grinder, which I promise does not extend beyond the first chapter.

This will eventually be a Literati story (and by eventually, I mean in a big way in Chapter 3) but we’ve got some issues with Rory to sort out first, and Logan is one of those issues. I promise that he will go away soon.

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And for anyone who’s mildly curious: I intend to finish this up next week if these characters behave, and then I’m going to try to finish some of the rough stuff for Boundaries and then return to The Grandparents for a vastly different take on this same storyline.

So enjoy, please review, and I promise Literati action very, very soon!

"Mom?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm pregnant."


This was not how I planned to share this news.

"Rory."

She sounded so devastated.

I nervously wrung my hands. "I didn't mean to tell you today," I tried to explain.

And really, I hadn't. It was her wedding day, the wedding that she had put off for nine years. The last thing I had wanted to do was to jeopardize her happiness.

I’d been gradually weaning myself off of caffeine since the home test had come back positive a week ago. For a writer who had nursed an addiction to the stuff for over two decades as a way to fuel late-night creative bursts and manage steadily encroaching deadlines, it wasn't easy. I couldn't even gorge myself on aspirin to help get rid of the headaches because hello, pregnant.
However, three days of frantic family wedding planning, unexpected paternal confrontations, and emotional contemplation had caught up to me. Staying up all night for this whirlwind pre-wedding wedding had finally brought me to my breaking point. Especially since I was unable to tell anyone why I couldn’t use my usual panacea to help me through it.

I was feeling so much. Elation at seeing my mom and Luke finally get married. I didn't think I’ve ever seen her so at peace. Sadness at the fact that my childhood was really over. Relief that my mom had finally accepted where I wanted to take my life from here and write about the two of us.

And beneath all of that, there were all of the things I hadn't yet begun to really think about. Fear. Uncertainty. Worry. Doubt. And swirling around all of it, a deep feeling of inadequacy.

How could I be anything close to what my mom was?

And selfishly, maybe I just needed to tell her, to admit it out loud, that it was real.

"How?" she asked quietly.

I wrapped my arms around myself. "I skipped a few pills," I replied.

That was true. Mostly.

"Rory, you know better than that. Especially with Logan being engaged, you didn't know the other half of what was going on –"

I collapsed in a fit of laughter.

"Rory. Rory, it's not funny. Rory –"

Oh, man. Nobody was going to believe what had really happened, were they? Nobody.

Mom reached out to grab the sleeve of my sweater. "RORY!"

That seemed to bring me back to reality. I reached for my glass of orange juice and downed a couple of sips.

"Kid, you're scaring me. What's really going on?"

I put the glass down. "You're right, Mom. Me, pregnant with my engaged ex-boyfriend's baby? That would not be funny at all."

"Rory, talk to me."

I turned to face her. The giddy new bride before me had transformed into a frantic, harried mother, seeking to talk me out of another anxiety-induced meltdown. Once again, I felt incredibly guilty for not having the discernment to postpone this discussion to a later date in her married life. Like maybe a week?

Well, it was too late now.

I cleared my throat.

"I know that with everything going on with me, it's logical to assume that Logan's the father," I began.

Mom ran her finger around the top of her glass. I felt her eyes silently implore me to continue.
I gulped, and continued on.

"But what if he wasn't?"
All of this started in a much more tempestuous manner than I ever could have anticipated.

That’s more or less been the story of my life as far back as I can remember. I, Rory Gilmore, queen of the pro-con lists and detailed study – and life – plans, ends up being beset by circumstances the exact opposite of what was planned time and time again, mostly of my own making. I didn’t plan on falling out of love with my seemingly sweet, patient (and yet as I look back on these events as an adult, alarmingly passive-aggressive) cornfed boyfriend and falling for the rebellious nephew/ward of the surrogate father who worshipped my mother from afar. I certainly didn’t intend on that same person choosing to break up with me by leaving for the opposite coast without even telling me goodbye because he was too ashamed to tell me or anybody else who might have cared about him that he wasn’t going to graduate from high school. I didn’t intend on losing my virginity at nineteen to the same cornfed high school boyfriend I’d rejected a year earlier while convincing myself that the fact that he was actually married in the time didn’t matter because he claimed he loved me (right before taking off his wedding ring and semi-deflowering me on my childhood bed. Sure, the virginity was only a technical one by that point, but adult me is still embarrassed by how stupid I was). And I really didn’t intend on my first real sexual relationship to begin with being one of the many playthings of one of the rich and cavalier libertines I’d always scoffed at, only to have him unexpectedly transform into a stable, supportive boyfriend who could challenge me intellectually and be comfortable eating next to me at the diner while we watched Luke and Taylor engage in yet another round of their endless melee.

I thought I’d found in Logan the perfect blend of what I saw in Dean and Jess. We could talk about literature and current events and saw the world in a lot of the same ways, yet he still understood where I came from and respected that. Better yet, I never really feared that he would lash out at me because I disappointed him or abandon me because he was too scared to admit that he had failed. If it took him a while to work up to that, it didn’t matter because I was young and screwing up, too, and he was growing up with me. I’d expected that process to continue, because I wanted him in my life, wherever it would take me next.

But I was 22 years old and the world had just opened up for me. Everything was brand new and exciting and I didn’t want to close myself off to any of it. I was so intoxicated with knowing that for the first time in my life, I didn’t know what would happen next, and it actually didn’t scare me. I couldn’t commit myself to moving across the country to get married and risk losing that feeling.

I didn’t want to lose Logan completely because of that. But I wasn’t sorry for it, either.

I settled on spontaneity and unpredictability being the fabric of what made up my life, and I liked it. I headed across the country to cover Obama’s first presidential campaign, and got addicted to rootlessness and stress and deadlines and missed flights and all the day-to-day minutiae of doing exactly what I wanted to do in life. If it became its own routine, with its own disappointments and drudgery to accompany all the hard work I put into it, that was to be expected.

It was a great life, and I liked living it for a long time. There were definite drawbacks – I missed my mom, and my hometown, and in my infrequent visits back I often found that I related to Stars Hollow life less and less. I never quite became the surrogate mom to Lane’s kids that I promised her that I would be, and I never really got to see my mom and Luke settle in as married-in-all-but-name couple they became. I didn’t really grow close to April, and my jealousy over the fact that my mom was helping Luke raise a teenage girl in the house that had been ours for so long may have contributed as much to that as the fact that I wasn’t around to spend any time with her. But I figured
that this was all part of accepting that I had grown up, and that as much as I loved where I came from, it wasn’t my reality anymore. And I liked my reality very much.

I think that’s why it was so hard for me to admit it when the party was over.

I had long accepted that being a freelancer wasn’t like working a normal job, which is why I was reluctant to acknowledge it when the work started drying up. I had an apartment and sort of had a boyfriend back in New York (despite the fact that he told everyone he was my boyfriend, Paul and I weren’t anything close to exclusive and it had always been that way: my main failing was that I never got around to telling him that it was unlikely that part of our relationship status was going to ever change). However, for the most part, I made sure to keep on the move: if New York or San Francisco or various online ventures weren’t biting, surely I’d find something in Europe, right? So I dipped into the trust funds (yes, plural – my otherwise disinterested father had set one up that came to me when I turned thirty) that I would later pretend didn’t exist and starting chasing phantom assignments on other continents. I refused to admit to myself that I had almost exhausted all the work I could find in my home country.

Then I met Logan in Hamburg, and I became that besotted teenage girl all over again.

I’m not proud of it. I knew all along he was engaged to the society girl of his family’s dreams. He had given up on making an independent life for himself and returned to the Huntzberger fold, ready to fulfill all of the expectations that he had fought so hard to get away from while we were together. He was some bizarre blend of the charming, lackadaisical playboy who had swept me off of his feet when I was too young to know better and the mature, reasonable person I’d grown to know in the last year and a half of our relationship, who was brave enough to admit his mistakes and sought to find a way to rectify them. Except now that it seemed that his real mistake was ever breaking away from his family in the first place, and he didn’t especially seem bothered by the fact that it was too late to change course now.

I really couldn’t blame him. After all, I’d been lucky to live out my life’s dream, but I was in denial about the fact that I couldn’t make that life choice permanent. I think our affair was mostly both of us looking for a respite from where our paths would eventually lead. For him it meant marriage and becoming the heir to the Huntzberger empire, and for me – well, I was going to have to find a new way to make a living. It was hard to accept that.

In the meantime, I got to live in his world while not having to commit to it. As long as I had Logan’s generosity to rely on, I could chase whatever meager leads I could find without dipping into my own funds. Maybe part of me knew I’d really need that money sometime in the near future. Logan was just as charming and erudite and sexy as he been when his main selling point was how much adventure he could bring to my life. His unpredictability was controlled and almost genteel, and I really enjoyed that part of it. I also knew that he genuinely cared for me, and that he listened to me and was supportive in the way a real partner ought to be.

He wasn’t a real partner, though. Even though it had been a long time since I had actually attempted a relationship, I knew that what we shared was playing at being a couple, not actually being one. He never offered a relationship, and I never asked for one.

I don’t think he could have stopped me from imploding, from quickly burning all my bridges in New York and London and becoming that girl I’d tried to avoid becoming for the last few years, the one that shows up unannounced in her childhood home because she’s got nowhere else to go. He wasn’t mine. Paul wasn’t mine. I’d focused on being rootless for so long that I didn’t have anything or anyone that was mine, and I ended up back in Stars Hollow with nothing.

(Well, except for that money I still pretended didn’t exist).
I think I realized too late that home wasn’t home anymore. My mom tried to make me feel better by repeating the junk-food-and-crappy-movie-routine that we’d perfected years earlier, but it wasn’t the same, and both of us knew it. She and Luke were having some problems, and I don’t know to which extent my presence exacerbated them. But it had been her and Luke (and sometimes April) for a long time, and her world didn’t revolve around me anymore. I don’t think I really understood that until I had April sitting next to me, fretting about the “postcard from the real world” that was me, the elusive globe-trotting quasi-stepsister who was now a cautionary tale. I could hear Mom and Luke talking in the next room: something about April’s future plans, and Luke thinking she was still a little girl, and Mom asking why she didn’t have a job right now. I knew it was the tail end of a discussion they had been having for many, many years now.

That’s when it really hit me: this was a part of their life that they had been having for a long time without me, and I wasn’t the only kid that Mom had a big part in raising. That jealousy over April that I’d kept bottled up for so long was stupid: I had grown up and moved away, and my mother had cobbled together a life and a family in my absence. I couldn’t go back and resume the life I had as a teenager when it was just me and my mom. April had partially grown up in this house, and witnessed all of the bickering and bantering and flirting that encompassed the relationship between our parents, and now she was on her way to this grand adventure we call adulthood, too. We barely knew each other, yet in a way we were two halves of the same whole that hadn’t quite learned how much we resembled each other until this moment.

The least I could do was show her some of those wacky tap dancing videos in case she found herself in the same position I was someday and needed some sort of tool to convince herself that things weren’t as bad as she thought they were.

So I did.
And so I return! I really want to thank everyone for all of their kind comments and reviews, especially since this isn’t the ship I’m most passionate about. I’m still hoping to finish this before 2018, but as for right now we’ll see how it goes.

A few notes first:

This is not a sequel to The Morning After (if anyone even remembers that story!) It was heavily implied in the revival by Luke and Jess’s brief exchange about the wi-fi password that he did come home and stay in Stars Hollow sometime between 2007 and 2015 for at least six months. I’ve kept that part of the story because I consider that canon. However, for reasons that will soon become obvious, I’ve chosen not to have Rory and Jess not hook up during that period in this version of events.

I’ve messed around with the AYITL timeline a lot here. We’re led to believe that Lorelai and Rory’s estrangement takes place in late July/early August, at which point Lorelai fights with Luke, decides to go to California to figure her life out, and . . . time apparently stops until late September (based on what the trees look like). Then Lorelai spends half a week in California while we’re led to believe that Rory’s plotline takes place over a time period of about six weeks. Then it’s magically November when Lorelai comes back home and she plans her wedding in four days?

No. Nope. Nada. Not happening. I’m fixing it here. If the original writers couldn’t hire someone to check for logic and consistency, I guess I’ll have to make some things up. Hope you guys enjoy it, and any feedback is much appreciated.

Four years was a long time to go without seeing Jess Mariano in person.

The two of us had floated between huge changes in the status of our relationship to each other in much less time in the past. He’d been so many different things to me – the guy I secretly pined for, the first boyfriend who I felt really got me, the distant guy I didn’t know anymore because he was too busy drowning in his own anger and self-loathing to let me help him, and finally the ex-boyfriend begging me to run away with him that I angrily turned away because I knew I couldn’t trust him. Then a year and a half went by and I met him as a totally different person, and he became the guy who knew me well enough to know that I would never be happy pretending to be a cosseted society girl. He finally became the guy I wanted to use to piss off my own boyfriend but ultimately knew by that point was just too good for me to treat him that way. That was seemingly the end of our romantic involvement with each other. After playing out all of those different roles in my turbulent adolescent love story, Jess finally became something better and more permanent. He was just my friend, and I think both of us needed that for a while.

I wasn’t terribly good at relationships after I left college. I was never in one place for long enough to make them work, and the few times that I tried it they always ended up being buried under my desire to catch the next story, the next new adventure, the next place or experience or cultural disaster that I hadn’t tried yet. I’d always had such a hard time letting go of these attachments in the past that it was just easier not to form them.

Oddly enough, Jess was the opposite of me. He settled down in Philadelphia, slowly took over the book press, and had a couple of steady girlfriends that he’d occasionally bring to family functions or that I’d meet for a few minutes when I visited his city. Then his business fell apart and he ended up back in Stars Hollow for about eight months, living in the apartment above the diner and nursing his wounds while he attempted to put things back together. I know Luke helped him get the seed money
to get things started again (though Jess did tell me that he dithered over giving him the wi-fi password at the diner for months and months) and that Jess re-opened the book press himself with an eye out to avoid questionable business partners in the future. Soon he had a profitable business that was wholly his own, a townhouse he was buying himself, and a live-in girlfriend to share it all with.

Meanwhile, my career was starting to wind down. I’d decided the best way to handle it was to switch continents and take up with an almost married ex who only felt comfortable treating me like his girlfriend when the person he actually planned to spend his life with wasn’t around. I still e-mailed and texted Jess occasionally, but I’d stopped dropping into Philadelphia three or four times a year, and I kept missing him at family functions. He didn’t send me books quite as often, and I’d stopped calling him to talk about assignments or newly published articles. Instead of being the friends who understood each other enough to want to share the things we were passionate about, we’d become what I never thought we would be: the kind of extended relatives who circle away from each other until they only become the kind of people you vaguely know on Facebook.

So it wasn’t any wonder that Jess didn’t realize what a shell of myself that I’d become when he found me offering him Scotch in the Gazette Office. I could feel those same brown eyes looking at me and knowing me, understanding me, questioning what I’d become – and then slowly, steadily driving me back to the person I wanted to be again. No one else had been capable of that – not Logan, not Lane, not even my mom. Jess always felt what really inspired me and what I needed to feel like myself again.

I’d already started to let go of Logan by that point. I’d felt so out of place at home during April’s visit that my first instinct was to find an excuse to run back to him and insert myself into that pampered world again, but it was already too late. The fiancé I often tried to pretend didn’t exist had finally become a permanent fixture in his life, and I couldn’t pretend that I belonged there anymore. I still continued to talk to him; he was as supportive of me writing the book as he had been about all of my other projects, although he didn’t really understand why my mom didn’t want the more embarrassing details of our early poverty to become something that was shared well beyond just the two of us. It wasn’t until I had to bite down my impulse to call him and vent about how frustrated I was about not having her full approval to write about all of it that I really began to understand that I needed to finally stop living in denial. I couldn’t pretend anymore that I was sharing any sort of life with him. I wasn’t the fun girlfriend who comes to visit at the penthouse every couple of weeks. I was the woman standing in the way of someone else’s marriage, and I couldn’t be that anymore.

I let him take me on one final grand adventure, and that was it. It was early August by that point, and the town had grown so weary of the summer heat that they had started to put up fall decorations a full month ahead of time. The trees were still mostly green, but Taylor actually commissioned fake fall foliage to be inserted at random places around town to try to fool the seasons into transitioning before their time. I knew Luke would be furious and my mom would be delighted – except my mom didn’t want to talk to me, and Luke seemed distracted when I ventured into the diner and tried to talk to him. I had been staying at Lane’s, but it was really difficult to concentrate at her house. She and Zach practiced a lot when they were home, and there were musicians coming in and out of the house constantly. The combination of the music in the background and the ever-present din of two energetic nine-year-olds running from room to room fighting over light sabers and Legos and whose turn it was to play on Mom’s drum set today did not make for a productive writing environment. I didn’t have a car, and had to borrow Lane or Zach’s if I needed to go anywhere (though Lane finally forced me to go to the DMV after she found out I had been doing this for two weeks straight without actually having a license). My supposed freedom of movement had turned into quite the opposite, and I was getting absolutely no work done.

I needed one last respite, one night of debauchery and carefree delight with my old flame before I sent him on his way. I’d enjoyed playing in his wonderland, but it was time to become an adult now
and leave him behind. I needed my own life, not the bits and pieces I’d cobbled together from everyone else’s.

Maybe eventually there would be someone else to share it with. I hadn’t let myself think about that for a long, long time, but now that I was piecing everything together I realized that I actually missed it.

I’d decided to decamp myself in my grandmother’s empty residence to begin working on the book.

Maybe the planned move to Queens was a more logical plan, but I just couldn’t make myself do it yet. I didn’t want to make such a permanent move until things were right between my mom and me, and I was beginning to realize that it probably wasn’t a judicious use of the money that I had left to me. Jess and I were talking regularly about the project, and after hearing just what profit I could and couldn’t be expected to make as a first-time author, I decided to hold back.

After a half dozen coffeehouse/diner sessions (we’d switch between Luke’s and Weston’s) hashing out a game plan and twice as many late-night phone conversations, Jess met me with a formal-ish book contract and an offer to serve as my editor. I reminded him that he would actually be in the book. His response to toss me his trademark smirk and tell me that he could handle it.

“There’s nothing that’s transpired between us since that couldn’t make up for what happened when we were kids,” he said.

I knew that, too, but I felt a little sad about it. Because I was remembering the good stuff that we had shared before, in a way that I hadn’t let myself think about for ten years of friendship and shared manuscripts and bantering over the Christmas dinner table, and I missed it. I knew it was silly to think like this – not only were we somewhat vaguely related, but he was my editor now. But sometimes his hand would graze my knee or I’d catch him looking at me with that half-quizzical, half-mischievous look and I’d be transported back to that time when I was eighteen and in love with someone who was interested in everything I was and didn’t expect anything else of me than what he had always known me to be.

I just wished there wasn’t such a big gulp between now and then.

For right now, though, I liked the way I’d come to depend on the interplay between the both of us, whether it stayed the way that it was or not. I still wasn’t talking to my mom, and as August gave way to September it started to bother me more and more. The Gilmore estate (I could never let myself really think of it as a mansion) was an ideal place to write: it was somehow the perfect combination of pure silence and a reminder of memories that didn’t quite hurt as much anymore. I felt comfortable being surrounded by my grandfather’s books and furniture and thinking back on all the years I had spent there as a mediator between my mother and my grandparents. Jess knew my Stars Hollow life, and he knew me as a writer, but he hadn’t really known that part of me, and I wanted to talk to my mom about it. Maybe it wouldn’t make everything between us better, but if she understood why I needed to tell that part of it, maybe the rest would come a little easier to her, too.

I was thinking of just that when Jess unexpectedly came to the doorstep that September evening.
Chapter 4

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"So, Gilmore, are you going to let me in or not?"
"Oh, su-sure," I stammered as I nervously stepped ahead of him. Jess wiped the excess moisture from his boots off on the mat outside and stepped inside the foyer.

"You know, it might help to be a little more welcoming to your editor," he chided me as we stepped into the living room.

"Sorry, I just wasn't really expecting anyone right now," I apologized. I gestured to the bar. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Not right now." He raised his eyebrows. "So why don't you show me around your new digs?"

"You've been here before," I reminded him.

"It's been a few years," he replied. "Why don't you show me this place with all of the Rory Gilmore flourishes?"

I chuckled. "Well, here is the living room," and pointed to the fireplace with the chairs removed. "And here is me trying to create the right atmosphere for a Bronte novel, I guess."

"Abandoned estate, crackling fire, I got it," he responded.

I led him into the dining room. "You remember my grandfather," I said, as Jess stumbled before his oversized portrait.

"He does cut an imposing figure," he remarked as he tried to collect himself.

I shook my head. "Anyway," I continued, and led him into Grandpa's office. I gestured to his almost-empty desk where my laptop and spiral notebook now sat. "And this is where I do most of my work."

Jess smiled. He ran his fingers over the side of the desk.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"You mean, since the last time we talked about it, which would be the day before yesterday?" I answered. "The outline's going good. I have some sketches for the first chapter. I'll probably have something for you the week after next."

Jess picked up one of my grandfather's chess pieces as his gaze met mine. "I'm not rushing you," he said softly.


Jess shrugged. "I always liked your grandfather," he replied. "April got bored at one of the holiday parties and we found our way in here and started playing. He found us, but he wasn't pissed off, even though he barely knew us. He insisted on joining in. From that point, on if he found that we were stuck out here with your relatives, he made it a point to find some time for us to escape from it all and have a mini tournament."

I laughed, remembering. "I'd always find you guys with the guiltiest look on your faces. And April was usually winning."

Jess nodded. "She was." He paused and stood up. "Rory, I should have gone to the funeral. I'm really sorry. I didn't think --"
I shuffled my feet. 'It's okay.'

"I talked to April about it and we just—" he shook his head. "I guess we didn't feel it was our place. But I still should have gone to see you when it happened."

"Really, Jess, it's okay," I reassured him. "I mean, you and April only met him a few times and I had my mom here and Luke—" I shrugged. "We did pretty well by ourselves."

"Still," he insisted. "I should have done more than just call you. I should have gone to see you in person at least once."

I shook my head. "I went back to London right after the funeral," I replied. "You didn't really have anywhere to go, Jess. And I didn't go to April's grandmother's funeral, either."

"That's different," Jess replied. "You never even met her."

"You went," I reminded him.

"Oh, that was interesting," Jess cocked an eyebrow at me, and I felt myself start to blush. "That was truly a legendary experience."

"Mom never told me what happened," I confessed.

"Wow, a family secret that I've learned but you haven't," he replied. "I wonder what I will do with this information."

"Maybe you need some form of liquid intoxicant to get it out of you," I suggested.

Jess pointed back to the way we had come in. "To the bar, milady," he replied.

Chuckling, I led him out of the office and closed the door behind us.

"I can't believe your mom never told you," Jess revealed ten minutes later, as we sat down on a blanket in front of the fire, clutching identical glasses of Scotch.

"Stop stalling", I begged him. "Out with it!"

"I think April's mom was pissed I was there," he began. "She kept pointing to me. I don't know if she didn't know who I was or if she was wondering what I was doing there. I finally walked over to her and introduced myself to her afterwards, when we were back at the house. It started to go okay until I mentioned I had lived with Luke for two years before April came around. Then she quickly excused herself, found Luke, led to a corner and started wailing on him—"

I downed a sip of Scotch from my glass.

"Then your mom comes up right behind her and starts to defend Luke," Jess continued. "Something about how Luke didn't know April for all of those years and how dare she get pissed about anything he did before he knew about her. Then April comes up from behind them and starts screaming at them to SHUT UP ALREADY and START ACTING LIKE ADULTS —" He shook his head. "Kid had a point."

"So what happened then?"

"I found her and led her away," Jess replied. "People were starting to scatter. I think she was pretty mortified. Lorelai came and found her a few minutes later and apologized. We got out of there about ten minutes after that. I know Luke talked to April before he left, but we ended up coming back a
"I guess I don't –" I turned to look at him as he drained his glass. "What was Anna angry about in the first place?"

"I'm not sure," Jess admitted. "Grief does funny things to people, but she was fairly tightly wound up to start out with. Luke told me later that he didn't think that she liked being reminded that he had responsibilities before April came into his life. That she was wrong about him, basically."

"I only met her once," I admitted. "That was before Mom and Luke broke up, when he was being so strange about letting Mom spend time with April. I went and scouted out her store just to see what kind of person she was." I shrugged and swallowed the last dregs of my drink. Jess took it from me and hauled himself back to the bar to refill our glasses.

"She seemed like a perfectly nice, decent person," I continued as Jess returned to sit beside me and handed me my glass.

He snorted. "Well, she's not."

"How well do you know her?" I nursed another sip of Scotch and then turned to look at him. "Did you know her from before? From when they were dating?"

Jess shrugged. "I met her once or twice, but I was what, eight, nine? I don't remember much. I just can't respect someone who did what she did. To keep someone's kid away from him for twelve years out of spite? To force him to go to court to even guarantee she'll ever see his kid again? Then there was that tantrum she threw over Luke paying for April's college – I mean, hello, what about just saying thank you? She threatens not to let him come to his kid's graduation and April gets Luke to hightail it out to Alaska to watch whale hunters throw each other up in the air in protest –"

"Whoa," I interrupted Jess. "That's why she didn't attend her high school graduation?"


I gazed at him crossing and uncrossing his socked feet. "This really bothers you."

He turned to look at me. "It doesn't bother you?"

I shrugged. "It does. I think maybe Anna was embarrassed at first because she didn't know who the father was. All that 'but you hated kids!' stuff was just a smokescreen."


"Don't get me wrong, it was wrong of her to let it go on like it did," I reasoned. "But some of the stuff that happened later, well –" I took another sip from my glass. "it's like you said. Grief does funny things to people. And didn't that funeral only happen a year or so before all the graduation stuff came up?"

Jess nodded. "It did. I just don't have a very high opinion of her even before it got to that point."

I stared at my hands. "Me neither." I shifted beside him, starting to feel pleasantly drowsy from the alcohol and his presence. It was a good feeling. I held my glass up to him. "Refill?"

Jess grinned. "Sure." He lifted himself off of the blanket and I let my gaze wander over him. How had I not noticed how well defined and um, jacked he was these days? I tried to force those thoughts to the back of my mind by sheer force of will.
"Here you go." Jess sprawled down on the blanket next to me, his leg rubbing mine, and I felt a current of electricity travel up my thigh.

Maybe it wasn't the alcohol after all. I shifted nervously next to him.

"Are you okay, Rory?" he asked, his brown eyes turning to meet mine.

"Okay as in—"

"Not just your grandfather. Your career, all this book stuff. Are you doing okay?"

"I guess I've been better," I admitted as I took another sip of Scotch. "It's been hard to really figure stuff out lately. The book's been a lot of help—it's been good to finally have some direction."

Jess nodded. "Good." He drained the last of his second glass and got up for a refill.

"Jess?" I asked tentatively.

"Yeah?" He sat down beside me and began to nurse his drink again.

"Was April really the reason you didn't go the funeral?"

Jess stared into the fire. "No." He took a longer sip from his glass. "It's been hard to really figure stuff out lately. The book's been a lot of help—it's been good to finally have some direction."

He turned to look at me, and I saw a slightly distant pain bubble up in his gaze.

"Yup," Jess replied tersely.

Celeste. Jess's statuesque, impossibly gorgeous live-in girlfriend of most of the last three years. I'd only met her once, at a science exhibit of April's at M.I.T. that Mom and Luke had dragged me to. However, I was immediately put off by her: here was this incredibly poised, elegant, charming creature that had bonded with April, charmed Luke, and often spoke of Jess in tones that suggested they had been married for twenty years. I'd instantly been madly jealous, not only of her, but of this perfect life that Jess had somehow cobbled together while mine was falling apart.

They had broken up the previous winter, and every time I asked Jess about it he changed the subject.

"She wasn't comfortable with me going alone there," Jess said. "She wasn't comfortable with me going with her. It didn't matter that you and me hadn't seen each other for years, she just got irrationally jealous because it was your grandfather. It ended up causing a huge fight, and that's all we were doing by that point, having one huge fight after another."

He turned to look at me with an intense glint in his eye, and I could feel myself blushing despite my best intentions. "Look, a few months after that and we were through anyway. I wish I had fought her more on that one. Being here for you—that was more important."

I took yet another sip from my glass. "I don't think I was a reason to sacrifice your relationship, Jess."

"You weren't," he insisted. "It was almost over anyway. But knowing what I know now, I wish I had been there."

"I thought that you would have married her," I told him. "Everyone said you were the perfect
couple."

"I thought that, too," Jess said in a faraway voice. He guffawed and turned the glass over in his hands. "Well, maybe a long time ago."

I turned to face him, giving him space to continue.

"She changed," Jess said softly. "Things were great between us for the first year or so. We moved in together and we had a great life in Philadelphia. She wasn't getting anywhere at the ballet company – she was stuck being a coryphee –"

"Coryphee?" I interrupted.

"That's one of the higher positions of the corps de ballet," Jess explained. "You know, the ensemble, the back-up dancers. She wasn't getting any solos, and she was getting closer to retirement age. I thought she liked working at the book press, that we could work together full-time and run the company together. But she said she wanted to finish her finance degree and move up in the world."

Jess gulped and drained the last of his glass.

"That's all she cared about," he continued. "Moving up in the world. Up, up, up. She finished her degree and started working at a real estate investment firm here. Everything became a battle because nothing was enough for her. I wasn't doing enough to make the company grow. She wasn't happy with everything staying the same as it was."

"Oh," I said softly. "I see."

"I didn't judge her, Rory," Jess clarified. "I just don't live my life that way. Sure, if the press grows, that's a great thing, but I don't want to change who we are to make that happen. Me and her – we just didn't have anything in common anymore. So, you and your grandfather – it was just something else she could point at to accuse me of not growing. But I was sick of fighting with her, so I let her win that one. But it was only delaying the inevitable. I shouldn't have let her do it. I should have been there for you."

I shook my head. I was half flattered over his constant need to prove himself to me and half astonished that he found this particular failing to be the one thing that truly mattered as his relationship was falling to tatters around him.

How on earth had I earned that kind of devotion from him? From anyone?

"Jess, don't beat yourself up on account of me," I told him. "You had a lot to deal with at the time. I would never hold something like this against you."

He shifted closer to me, and I felt that same bolt of electricity start to move through me. Except this time, it felt a lot stronger, and not nearly as bad of an idea. I held my glass up to him. "Ready for round four?"

"We probably shouldn't," Jess admonished me as he stood up to refill our glasses.

"Nope," I replied, as the gleam in his eye matched mine.

Jess settled down next to me, adjusting himself a little more awkwardly than he had before. We clinked our glasses together, and his hand shifted to rest on my knee.

He removed it a little too quickly and changed his position next to me, putting another inch of
personal space between us.

*Editor. Ex boyfriend. Sort of but not really related to you. Guy who had his heart broken not that long ago. You're imagining things.*

I cleared my throat. "At least you accomplished some sort of relationship for a little while," I dryly remarked as I took another sip from my glass. "I haven't done gotten anything close to that in a long time."

"What about P?" Jess teasingly asked.


"If he's not your boyfriend, why do you have to remind yourself to break up with him?"

"We're not exclusive," I tried to explain. "I don't even know we even got to the point where we called each other boyfriend and girlfriend. I think we just keep this going in case we need a date we can't bring the other person to. And he has someone else, anyway. He actually has a girlfriend that lives in his building. I keep hoping they'll send me an engagement announcement and this charade will be done for good."

"When was the last time you saw him?" Jess asked.

"January," I replied. I took another sip of Scotch.

"January!" Jess exclaimed.

I shot him an angry glare.

"Not judging," Jess insisted. "But I mean, eight months – I would think he would have gotten the hint by now."

"You and me both," I replied.

I stared into the fire, spinning the bottom of the glass around in my hand.

"There was someone else," I said softly.

Jess shifted closer to me, and I could feel his hand graze mine.

"Logan Huntzberger," I said turning to him.

"Your college boyfriend," Jess said quietly.

I shifted a little to put some space between us. "He's running the empire almost by himself now," I replied. "He was engaged. I knew we shouldn't, I just --" I shrugged. "I guess I just wanted to feel important again. I was just one last stop before he started his real life." I took another sip from my glass. "That's over and done with, though."

Jess put his hand on my knee. "Rory, did you --"

I turned to look at him. I wasn't imagining the look in those eyes. Soft, understanding, needing, imploring me –

Oh, man. Was this the worst idea or the best idea ever? I wasn't sure.
I also didn't care.

"I didn't love him," I whispered.

"I'm glad," Jess whispered back.

Neither of us said another word as he lowered me to the blanket in front of the fire and brought his lips to meet mine.
And so this story makes a comeback!

I'm really hoping to work on this more in the next couple of weeks: it isn't a long project, but I kind of abandoned it to work out some issues with the other stories I'm writing. Thanks so much to everyone who has reviewed and commented so far

And a note here first before we continue: yes, it is really out of character for Rory Gilmore to have unprotected sex with anyone. However, I didn't actually come up with that plot point: I just changed her partner. I hope it halfway makes sense, although it probably never will.

The protection may have gone by the wayside that first time.

Fifteen minutes later, we repeated it on the stairs. Or we tried to repeat it, but we almost knocked my grandmother's vase over and it turns out we weren't nearly keyed up enough to finish there. Fifteen years of suppressed desires (spurred on an extra heaping of alcohol and millennial malaise) wasn't enough to withstand the reality of thinly carpeted hardwood cutting into our backs.

We ended up completing that part of our encounter in the hallway, but I found out later there were logistical difficulties with the condom.

Oops.

I know, I know. Trust me, we both felt the aftereffects of that decision six weeks later. Especially since I'd missed a few pills here and there after breaking things off with Logan.

This kind of behavior really wasn't me. I had always been so, so careful with both Logan and Paul, not to mention during my solitary (and very ill-advised) one night stand. None of us were monogamous, after all, and as confused as I had been about everything else for a long time, I just didn't take chances with that part of my life.

What made Jess break that pattern? I don't know. It wasn't just that we were particularly drunk and weepy. It wasn't even that I'd been particularly prone to careless decisions lately, and that it had gotten a lot easier to make them then it had been in the past.

But for the first time in a long time it seemed that there was someone who understood me, and knew me for me, and not only liked me for that, but encouraged it because he believed in where it could take me. I wasn't an occasional participant in his world, but someone who was linked to me in ways that went back decades. It just seemed right that we could find some kind of sanctuary where we didn't have to pretend to be anyone else but who we understood each other to be.

It's difficult to convey that I really intuited all that through the haze of lust and intoxication that swirled around us that night, or that it really excuses desecrating the floor of my grandparent's home.

But for that moment, it was what I needed.

I woke up the next morning with a blistering headache and the sound of Jess snoring next to me.

Like so many moments that came after that, what surprised me most of all about it was how normal it
seemed. I didn't feel shocked or embarrassed or regretful. There was no massive OMG WHAT HAVE I DONE?! realization. I felt sated and relaxed and almost hopeful, as if this was a perfectly normal development in my life.

I kept reminding myself that spontaneously consummating my relationship with my ex-boyfriend thirteen years after the fact was in many ways a tremendously bad idea. The larger part of me couldn't bring myself to care, and didn't want to feel otherwise. I couldn't shake that feeling.

I gazed at Jess next to me. His face was slack, peaceful, comfortable. I wasn't even afraid that he would reject this.

In fact, looking at him I immediately knew that he wouldn't.

I stumbled out of bed and headed for an aspirin and a shower, hoping I'd shake off these irrational notions by the time he woke up and we had to have that conversation.

By the time I emerged from the bathroom fifteen minutes later, the pounding in my head had finally dissipated. However, my steadfast optimism about the situation had unfortunately remained annoyingly intact.

Jess was sitting fully dressed on the edge of the bed, looking dazed and handsomely unkempt.

He saw me enter the room and threw me that devastatingly sexy half-smirk, and my stomach flipped. *Calm thyself, Gilmore.*

"I thought you might need this," I told him, and crossed the room to place a glass of water and two tabs of aspirin on the end table. I saw next to him on the bed, trying to dampen the hopes I didn't even know I was capable of possessing not even twelve hours ago.

"Thanks," Jess responded as he downed the aspirin and half the glass of water in a single gulp. He turned to me and reached for my hand.

"Rory –"

"I don't want to have the talk," I blurted out.

"The talk?" The expression in Jess's eyes was quizzical, confused, way too earnest for me to believe in them.

Oh, man.

"The talk," I continued on. "You know, the talk, where you hook up with your ex and it's all 'Oh, wow, that was nice, I really had a great time, by the way let's never talk again' because we can't do that, Jess. It doesn't matter how great it was. You're my editor. You're part of my family. I can't just get rid of you. I don't want to get rid of you! I really don't think I can handle those words coming out of your mouth –"

"Rory," Jess responded, an almost amused expression on his face.

"Just don't say it," I begged him.

"I don't want to have the talk, either," he replied softly.
He gazed at me, his brown eyes open and understanding.

"I have absolutely no idea what you mean by that," I replied.

"I was hoping to postpone this conversation until after breakfast," Jess said. "But I woke up here, and I heard you in the shower a couple of feet away, and I was thinking that this isn't what I expected, but it is what I wanted. Many repetitions of this, many variations. Queens, Philly –" He shrugged his shoulders. "Doesn't matter."

"Jess –" I began. I rubbed his fingers within mine. "I'm still pretty messed up," I admitted.

"You're not," he replied with absolute confidence. He ran his other hand through my hair. "I know you're not."


"It's been almost seven months," he replied. "I'm ready." He bent down to look at me. "But what do you want?"

"I want –"

What did I want? I didn't even know if I was capable of a real relationship at this point. I'd pretended at it with Paul and Logan in different ways, but it had been a long time since I'd even let myself contemplate what it was like to be in a day-by-day monogamous relationship, one where I couldn't run away and hide from my responsibilities when the next assignment came calling. That wouldn't be happening now – and in truth, I didn't want it to happen.

A grown-up version of me and Jess, without the fights and stubborn silences and long-set expectations weighing down on us like they had before?

The thought of it made me downright joyful in a way I hadn't allowed myself to be in years. But that didn't mean that I wasn't also completely terrified.

"Rory?"

I sighed. "I want you and me, together, no one else," I said softly. "I don't know if I want to call it a relationship. I'm bad at relationships. I haven't tried one in a really long time."

"What about –" Jess let go of my hand and rubbed the back of his neck. "I mean, I don't want to be a jerk about it, but –"

I nodded. "Paul." I rubbed my hands nervously on my pants leg. "I'll handle that one, Jess. I don't want to see him, but it's kind of a difficult web to unweave."

"I get that," Jess replied. "And Logan –"

"It's over," I said sharply.

"It seems like that one meant a little more to you," Jess said.

"It did," I told him. "What I said last night, Jess –" I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear and turned to meet his gaze, hoping I could find an adequate way to explain the situation. "I did love him when we were young. I'm not saying there weren't bad moments, and that you got in the middle of some of them. But things got better for a while, and part of my always regretted that we broke it off when we did."
I took a deep breath and threaded his fingers within mine.

"I think we were trying to relive the kind of relationship we used to have," I continued. "But things had changed too much, and I was in denial about a lot of things. I feel more disappointed in myself that I let it happen more than anything. There's not a lot of—" I sighed. "I wasn't in love with him this time."

"But you don't want to go back?" Jess asked.

I shook my head and smiled at him. "I'd rather stick with something that feels real," I told him.

He turned to kiss me, and I finally felt that newfound joy start to solidify itself.

Maybe this could work out after all.
Chapter 6

Sorry for the lack of updates, guys. I’ve put a lot of deadlines on myself about when I expect to finish this story, and I end up failing to meet all of them. So I’m just going to say that it will get finished when it gets finished.

I’ve had a few people ask me if the fact that I did a fast-forward on this story and wrote Home meant that I wasn’t going to continue it. That isn’t the case, but I’m not ruling out writing more stories taking place in the present day in this particular timeline. We’ll see how it goes.

As for now, enjoy this update and leave a review if you so desire.

I retreated to the living room to clean up the detritus of our encounter as Jess headed into the kitchen to make breakfast. By the time I had put away the blankets and cleaned up the drink cart, the smells of bacon and eggs were drifting in from the kitchen.

It felt comfortable and welcoming and yet strange in a way that felt almost exhilarating. I wasn’t used to this – the expectation this might become a routine that didn’t have to end because of anyone’s restlessness or obligations elsewhere, least of all mine. That definitely wasn’t something I was used to experiencing.

And yet I wasn’t even close to freaking out.

I shook my head and strolled to the kitchen to join Jess.

“So how are we going to do this?” I asked Jess twenty minutes later, having devoured half of his down-home breakfast offerings. Eggs, bacon, even home fries. Spending his formative years under the tutelage of Luke Danes had certainly paid off when it came to Jess’s cooking skills. I was glad that I was the one to benefit from it this morning.

“So what?” Jess asked between bites, washing down his food with a gulp of coffee.

“This.” I gestured between him and myself.

Jess smirked. “I figured we’d continue as it was, hopefully with more sleepovers.”

I grinned. “I’m not sure my grandmother would be completely okay with that.”

“Where is she, anyway?”

“Nantucket,” I replied, as I consumed the last slice of bacon. “She brought her maid down there with her, their entire family – I think she likes it. She hasn’t quite moved out yet, though.”

“So you can visit me,” Jess suggested. “You haven’t seen Philadelphia in a while – a lot of things have changed. I’ll show you around, you’ll get to see what we’ve done with the press since the last time you were there. We’ll work it out.”

“I don’t have a car,” I reminded him. “I’ve got the book to finish, and I know you’ve been going out of your way to come visit me the past few weeks. That’s a long drive, Jess.”

“It isn’t that bad,” he insisted. “Besides, if you move to Queens —“
“I’m still thinking about that,” I told him. “I know I can’t stay here forever, and staying with Lane isn’t a long-term option –” I shrugged and spun my fork around my plate. “I haven’t made any decisions yet.”

“It’s not a bad idea,” Jess replied. “Queens is a good place to settle down, there’s a great writer’s community there. And it’s only two hours from Philadelphia, as opposed to three and a half.”

I laughed. “That’s the main selling point for you, isn’t it?”

Jess looked at me and took another sip of coffee, his eyes bright and dancing. “It has its advantages.”

“I need to talk to my mom about it first,” I admitted. “I wouldn’t feel right about making a decision until she knows.”

“How long has it –“

I gulped and shoved another forkful of eggs into my mouth. It still bothered me that both of us had been stubborn enough to let it go on so long. “Almost two months.”

“I could talk to her,” Jess suggested.

I shook my head. “She wasn’t crazy about the fact that it was your idea. She thought it would be all about what you thought of her at first, and when I tried to explain to her that it wasn’t the case –“ I looked up at him. “We’ve got to work things out on our own.”

“I get that,” Jess agreed. He put his fork down and reached for my hand. “But Rory –“

I looked up at him expectantly.

“I don’t want the distance thing to be what makes or breaks whatever we have going on between us,” he said softly.

“I’m not sure I want to settle down in a new city knowing that you’re going to be two hours away,” I replied. “I mean there are other factors involved – a lot of them. But you and me here – it does change things.”

“In a good or a bad way?” he asked.

“Good,” I told him as I leaned across the table to kiss him. “Definitely good.”

Jess pulled back after a minute, solemnly gazing into my eyes. “We’ll figure it out,” he promised.

“I know,” I reassured him.

The quiet moment was broken by the sound of heels hitting the linoleum a few hundred feet away from us, and a familiar but unexpected voice calling my name.

Jess dropped my hand like it was a hot poker.

“She was!” I whispered back nervously, and looked him over from head to toe. He was completely dressed and had already slipped on his boots while we were upstairs. I was barefoot but otherwise decently dressed. I reminded myself that I had already cleaned up most of the evidence in the living room from last night.
There was no way she would be able to tell, would she?

Well, except for the fact that Jess was sitting here having breakfast with me at eight thirty on a weekday morning in a city almost four hours away from the one in which he lived and ran his business.

Crap.

“Rory, what on earth have you done with the living room furniture –“ my grandmother said as she stepped into the kitchen, pausing mid rant when she caught sight of Jess. “Oh.”

“Hi, Grandma. You remember Jess, don’t you?”

“Hello, Mrs. Gilmore,” Jess said on cue.

My grandmother stood where she was, seemingly silenced for the moment. That was never a good sign.

“Jess and I are working on a project together,” I improvised. “He had a meeting in Hartford, so he came over here so we could talk about it.”

“I see,” my grandmother replied, a slight smile on her face.

“I moved the chairs so I could have room to work in there,” I continued on. “I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s fine as long as they go back where you found them,” my grandmother responded. “The carpet doesn’t look too ruffled in there.”

“I didn’t want to impose too much while I was here,” I said, nervously meeting Jess’s gaze.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that,” my grandmother said. “Anyway, Jess, I hope Rory’s not keeping you from whatever you’re in town for.”

“Oh, she’s not keeping me from what I’m here for,” Jess replied as he grinned at me and nudged my foot under the table. “Not at all.”
Jess excused himself a few minutes after my grandmother’s untimely entrance, taking his knapsack and jacket and hugging me goodbye at the door. I kept an eye out behind me to make sure she didn’t catch onto anything that seemed overtly affectionate, telling Jess I’d call him later on that afternoon.

Five minutes later, I nervously plopped into my chair at the dining room table, and watched Emily Gilmore eye me suspiciously as she sipped from her cup of coffee.

“I refreshed your cup and brought it in here,” she told me. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, that was really nice of you,” I replied as I calmly sipped from the cup and wiped my mouth with the napkin carefully placed beneath it.

She cleared her throat, clearly expecting me to continue.

“I’ll clean up the mess we made in the kitchen,” I said, willing my voice not to start shaking.

“I’d appreciate that,” she replied as she placed her own cup back down on the napkin.

The silence remained strung between us, tentatively balanced between my desire not to upset her in any way and my own diminishing ability to keep what has transpired in the last twelve hours to myself.

“What kind of project were you and Jess working on?” she asked.

“We’re tossing around a few different ideas,” I replied noncommittally. Given how my mother had reacted to the news that I was writing a book about our life, I wasn’t about to drop this bombshell on my grandmother until I was much more prepared for how she might possibly react.

“And discussing these kinds of ideas require early morning meetings at your temporary home?”

“Jess doesn’t exactly have a conventional work schedule,” I tried to explain. “We’ve been friends for a long time. He’s willing to go out of his way to help me out.”

“I see,” she replied, running her fingernail over the handle of her cup.

I could tell that she wasn’t buying any of this.

“Rory, we had an understanding when I agreed to let you stay here,” my grandmother began. “You would have a quiet place to stay and work, and in return you would take the lack of distractions this home gave you to work towards a goal. Wasn’t that the intention when you moved some of your stuff here two years ago?”

“It was,” I agreed.

“I know the circumstances are different now,” she continued. “I know you’ve now reached the point where you need the advice of other people. But in the meantime, I do not think it is wise for new distractions to replace the old ones. Do you understand?”

“I do,” I told her. “It’s not abstract, Grandma – I am committing to something. Jess is helping me with that. I just don’t want to share the details until I’m a lot farther along.”
“I respect that,” my grandmother replied. “I like Jess, and I know that he’s responsible in his business. But if you two are to spend time together here, I expect it to be in a fully professional manner.”

“We are,” I assured her. “It’s just about work at this point.”

Well, it had started that way, at least.

“I don’t know if the expectations were clear when you grandfather and I let you stay in the pool house all those years ago,” she stated. “You were very young, then, Rory, and maybe you needed to have it spelled out to you in a way you don’t need now. I respect your privacy, but the only person who is to be sleeping or residing in this house is yourself. Do I make myself clear?”


“I also don’t want your residence here to remain a permanent situation,” my grandmother continued. “It’s fine for right now, but I think you need to be settled down permanently sometime soon. You have the resources to do that.”

I shifted uncomfortably. “Are you moving back in or –“

“I don’t know,” she said. “I’m still considering a lot of options, just as you are. But I believe that we both need to start preparing to make a decision in the next couple of weeks.”

And with that, I could feel the death knells coming for my long-ingrained wanderlust.

It was way past time for them to get here.

---

I actually did make a good faith effort to break up with Paul.

The last time I had spoken to him had been back in May, when I moved back in with Mom and Luke. He didn’t offer to let me stay with him or ask if he could come see me. We had texted back and forth a few times over the summer, but there was no expectation that spending time together was something either of us desired. I still felt guilty for not being the person to actually cut the cord, especially since I couldn’t blame it on Logan or the career I didn’t have anymore. But for the most part I just didn’t think about it. I wasn’t in his life and he wasn’t in mine.

I called Paul twice and got his voice mail both times. I texted him three times. When I called him for the third time, his girlfriend answered. She seemed astounded that we were still in contact, which was a little strange, considering that she was well aware of the situation between all three of us. I told her I’d contact him on my own and hung up.

He seemed to be avoiding me. Maybe he was just hoping that if he ignored our nonexistent relationship, it would finally dissipate into nothingness. I couldn’t blame him for that. I had been doing the same thing for a long time.

I decided to settle the entire thing by breaking up with him via Facebook message. I don’t think he ever saw what I sent him, but I considered it finished. If he contacted me again to press the issue, I’d
merely point out that we hadn’t seen each other for months and didn’t have a relationship worth saving.

Every time I spoke to Jess, he kept asking if it was done. I was honest with him: I was trying to make a clean break with Paul, but he wasn’t willing to meet me halfway by actually returning my calls. I could only assume that choosing not to talk to me was his way of cutting me off. Jess wasn’t entirely happy about that – after all, much of our romantic history had consisted of him waiting on the sidelines while I avoided breaking up with the other men in my life. However, there wasn’t a lot either of us could do about it. I couldn’t force Paul to talk to me, and I didn’t feel comfortable going to him in person and confronting him if he wanted to let it go as much as I did. I was committed to Jess, and that would have to be enough.

I didn’t see Jess for the rest of that week. I continued to stay at my grandmother’s house and write. She didn’t ask any more questions about what I was working on or about Jess, and she returned to Nantucket two days after she had returned home. Jess was busy with work in Philadelphia – it turns out he had been slacking on some of his other duties in order to spend so much time working with me – and both of us agreed that we couldn’t risk being interrupted again. I’d have to start coming to him from this point forth.

My newly purchased hybrid vehicle was an excellent step in that direction. It meant that I’d finally have some independence and mobility, and wasn’t just depending on the generosity of others in order to sustain myself. It also meant that I was ready to acknowledge that I had resources to move my life forwards, and was ready to use them.

I started thinking more and more about making up with my mom. The problem is that I didn’t want to come home without a clear plan, but I didn’t want to make a plan without talking to her first. I had a car and a boyfriend and some definite career objectives: I hadn’t had those things a few months ago, but that also hadn’t been what had caused problems between us. My mom had always had confidence that things would work out for me. She just hadn’t approved of how I planned to make that happen.

I wanted to have some chapters in front of her to read. I wanted her to be able to look at what I had written and see that it wasn’t frightening or cruel or hurtful. I wanted her to be able to believe that I was honoring the way she had raised me, not chastising her for not being able to provide us with the things that we didn’t have and didn’t miss. I wanted her to be able to look at the words on the page and know that our experiences weren’t tragic or sad but were actually magical and wonderful because she had made them that way.

Maybe I was being idealistic, but I hoped that once Mom actually read it for herself, she would know that it wasn’t anything for Grandma to be afraid of, either. Grandma had changed since she started spending so much time in Nantucket – she seemed more accepting and understanding, even of situations that would have caused her to have an extreme reaction in the past. She was still adamant about the things she was and was not willing to put up with, and I wouldn’t have wanted her to lose that part of herself. But I couldn’t imagine that the same woman who had accepted the concept of me and Jess as a couple without barely a word in judgment was going to have much of a problem with what I was planning to write.

Before I could get to that point, I had to make these first couple of chapters practically perfect.
I was so consumed in my work that I didn’t even notice the familiar face approaching me at my corner table.

“Pie?”

I looked up and smiled at Luke as he refilled my coffee cup and placed a piece of fresh blueberry in front of me.

“Thanks,” I replied as I gingerly moved my laptop to the side and dug into the pastry greedily. “I think I needed a break.”

Luke sat down in the chair across from me and handed me a napkin. “I think you did, too. You’ve been at this for a couple of hours.”

I turned my head to look out the window at the darkening sky outside. “I probably ought to pack up and head back to Hartford pretty soon, actually.”

“Jess isn’t meeting you here today?”

I shoved in another bite of pie before I answered him. “He’s got a lot of work back home this week. I don’t think I’ll see him until at least next week.”

“You two have been spending a lot of time together recently,” Luke remarked.

Crap.

Jess and I hadn’t even discussed what we would tell Luke about our relationship while I was still waiting to work things out with my mom. I had figured it wouldn’t be an issue, since the next time we would see each other would be on his home turf, not mine. My mom accepted Jess as an extended family member, but the relationship between them had remained fraught with tension for years. Jess knew all of the ugly history between Luke and her that had caused them to break up ten years ago, and he had never quite forgiven my mom for hurting him the way that she did. I knew I would have to approach the subject of renewing my relationship with Jess very delicately.

I had no idea how Luke would react to the idea.

“We’re working on a project together,” I told him, wanting to avoid outright lying to him.

“The book?”


“She didn’t go into a lot of details,” Luke replied. He adjusted his cap nervously. “Rory, this thing between you and your mom –“

I looked him in the eye, waiting for him to continue.

“I know you’ll find a way to put this thing out there to make it right,” Luke assured me. “You’re a brilliant writer, and I know you won’t embarrass your mom or your grandmother or anyone else. But she’s nervous about it.”

“Maybe you can talk to her,” I suggested.
“She’s not listening to what I have to say about it,” Luke remarked, staring out the window. “I don’t think I’m helping.”

I didn’t really know what to say to that.

Luke turned to face me again. “I think you should reach out to her,” he told me. “I know she misses you.”


He looked at me pointedly.

“I’m working this out in my own way,” I said. “I don’t intend for it to go on forever. Or for even much longer. But I am working on a way to make her feel better about it.”

“I know you’ll do the right thing,” Luke said. “Just don’t – don’t wait too long, okay?”

“I won’t,” I promised him.

Privately, I wondered if I had maybe reach the point of too long already.

These chapters had to be absolutely perfect.
Chapter 8

This update is a little shorter than I had intended, and unfortunately this story isn't quite as far along as I hoped it would be. I brought Lane in because I needed to kind of give an update on her life and have her give Rory some tough love about what she's getting herself into.

I'm going to try to deliver another chapter by the end of the week as we get ready to finally end the Rory/Lorelai stalemate and get past the show's timeline (and Jess will actually show up in that one!) But for now, read, enjoy (or don't), and leave a review if you desire.

"Jess?"

Lane looked up from where she was perched on her bed, surrounded by mountains of her family's clean laundry.

"Jess," I confirmed. I shifted my position next to her and rested my hands on my knees.

"Wow . . . that's not really what I was expecting you to say," Lane replied as she rolled up tube socks and tossed them in the laundry basket.

I looked at her quizzically.

"Don't get me wrong," Lane reassured me. "I just thought you were going to tell me something about your mom or the book or Queens or something. Or that you went back to Logan."

I guffawed. "Definitely not Logan."

"Well, I'm glad, but – why Jess? Why now?"

I shrugged and fingered the ruffles on Lane's throw pillow, unable to stop the grin that insisted on forcing itself onto my face. "I don't know. I wasn't expecting it, but once it was happening – it just felt right. Like I was rushing down all of these side avenues chasing all these bad decisions and I turned around and there was someone who actually cared about me offering me something better."

"Is he still editing your book? Even the chapters about him?"

"I haven't gotten that far along," I admitted. "Maybe I'll have someone else look at it when it gets to that point. So far, it hasn't raised up any old ghosts."

Lane pushed the laundry basket aside and started picking up pairs of jeans to sort and fold. "What does Lorelai think?"

I remained silent as I ran my thumb around the edge of the basket.

"You're still not talking to her," Lane mused aloud.

"No," I admitted. "I'm still finishing the first few chapters. I wanted to show it to her in person so that she could see that it's not as scary as she thought it was going to be."

"Are you sure you're not just avoiding her?"

I looked up at Lane. "It's not like that."

Lane held her hands up. "I know, I know – just trying to help."
"I should be done soon," I added with a tad more optimism than I actually felt.

Lane nodded. "Good." She picked up the piles of folded jeans and placed them on the other side of the bed.

"My grandmother knows about Jess," I confessed.

Lane turned around to leer at me. "Really."

"She came in the morning after we hooked up and he was there," I said. "She took it pretty well, but she made clear that there weren't going to be any more overnight visits. And that I'd have to get out of there in a few weeks."

"That doesn't sound like her."

"She's changed since Grandpa died," I replied. "I think it's a good thing."

Lane lowered her gaze as she began to pick the few vaguely feminine items out of the remaining piles of clothing. "So you're about to be evicted, huh?"

"Lane—"

Lane looked at me, her dark eyes slightly regretful. "I was actually wanting to talk to you about a few things."

My stomach quivered slightly. "About what?"

"Zach and I got an offer. Two offers, actually."

"That's great. Where?"

"Brooklyn," Lane said. "It would be just Zach, but I would back him up. It's a residency, actually. We'd be there for at least five months. It's great money, four nights a week, and Zach could even transfer his day job there. Plus, Brooklyn would be really great for the kids."

I smiled. "It's a really nice place for families. What about Hep Alien, though?"

"We'd go on hiatus again."

"Are you okay with that? I asked.

"Mostly," Lane said almost shyly, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "We came back here two years ago because we did that residency in Queens and it was nice staying in one place instead of having to drag the boys on tour again. So we'd try to get our old band going again, and do the middle class stability thing, Sookie and Jackson were leasing their house out, and they were only going to be gone for six months—"

Lane sighed and looked at me. I rubbed her arm encouragingly.

"We didn't like it as much as we thought we would," Lane continued. "The band didn't really take off. But Sookie didn't come back, and Zach got promoted, and we thought we'd stick it out for the kids, but it turns out my kids aren't that really good at soccer. Or karate. Or baseball. They prefer to be making noise and playing with our spare instruments. They liked our life."

"So you're going back to it."
Lane nodded. "If we don't do the residency, we'll go on tour. It would be me, but Zach would be backing me up. It would be at least until December. I know that might put you in a bind, but –"

"Don't worry about it," I told her. "You guys need to do what you need to do."

"You could take over our lease if you want to stay in Stars Hollow," Lane said. "But if it's long term, if we decide to move to Brooklyn, and you don't want to stay here, they're going to need to rent out to other people."

"I don't want to stay in Stars Hollow," I said, as I repeated aloud what I'd been saying for months.

I'm not back. No matter how many times you ask me, I'm not back. It's been almost half a year, but I'm still not back.

I had been in denial about how isolated and stuck I had felt for most of that time, but Jess had helped me find a way to claw myself out. Now that I finally had some semblance of a future, I couldn't keep making excuses for myself. It was time to move forward.

"You're right. My grandmother is right," I assured Lane. "I need to find someplace permanent to stay."

"What about Queens?" Lane asked. "You seemed so excited about it back in the summer. You could still get a place there."

"I wanted to –" I fumbled for the right words. "I wanted to set myself up there, but then my mom and I stopped talking, and the cost alone –"

What a miserable mess of excuses I was. I hadn't gone through with getting a place there because I hadn't needed to.

"Look, let's take a day for ourselves," Lane suggested. "We'll look at some apartments in Brooklyn for me and some places in Queens for you. Zach and I've been to the club in Brooklyn a few times, but you can take a look at it and see what you think. We can even visit the club in Queens that the tour manager mentioned."

"And if it doesn't work out?"

"Then it doesn't," Lane replied. "But we won't know unless we see it for ourselves."

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"I don't like it," I admitted to Lane as we sat at a corner dessert shop in Queens a week later, snacking on the remnants of our shared cocoa sponge cake.

Lane wrinkled her nose. "I don't either," she stated, twirling one of the last bites on the edge of her fork.

"It's too –"

"Pristine," I finished. "And way out of my price range. The first two were too –"

"Grungy," Lane finished for me.

I took a sip of tea. "I've kind of been suspecting for weeks that this isn't what I want, anyway."

Lane nodded. "I know that feeling." She sighed. "Brooklyn was a bust. Guess we're going on tour."
"I liked that blues club we stopped at," I remarked. Lane's solo work tended to be a jazz/blues hybrid, whereas Zach's had more of a country/folk vibe with some occasional blues overtones. The punk pop stuff was reserved for Hep Alien, but occasionally it snuck into Zach's work. I had seen Lane play all kinds of venues, but I preferred the ones that showcased her over the others. They actually allowed you to take time to breathe and enjoy the music without wondering what kind of substance was gluing your feet to the floor.

Lane grinned. "I did, too," she said.

"I don't want to take over your lease," I told her. "It doesn't feel right to me to settle in Stars Hollow. I'm at home in a city. I like the noise. It's what I'm used to."

"Do you want to move further into New York?" Lane asked.

"No, I –" I blushed as I felt the words come out. "I want to move to Philadelphia. I want to be closer to Jess."

"And the book press," Lane prompted.


Lane raised an eyebrow.

"I wouldn't live with him," I clarified. "I'd get an apartment somewhere else in the city. That way I'd have space for myself and we wouldn't have to keep arranging two hour trips every time we wanted to discuss something in person."

"And if things don't work out between you two?"

"Then they don't work out," I said. "I'm still working with him. He's still publishing my book. We can be professional."

Lane took a sip of tea and pushed the crumbs around her plate as if she were pondering what to say next.

"I know what I'm doing," I assured her.

"It's not that," Lane said softly. "It's just – you guys are connected. You'll likely always be connected."

I had wondered when someone was going to bring up the kissing cousins – or screwing cousins – subject.

I folded my hands over each other and looked her in the eye, feeling a little perturbed. "We're not related by blood," I pointed out. "Or even marriage. We were together before. We broke up and remained friends. If it happens again, it happens again. We're adults. We know how to handle the situation."

"It took both of you years before you could be around each other again," Lane reminded me. "And by the time you guys finally got to that point, you weren't even in the same time zone often enough for it to matter."

"What are you saying, Lane?"

"I'm saying that you guys will have a relationship for the rest of your lives whether this relationship
succeeds or not," Lane explained. "I know you aren't speaking to your mom right now, and I don't know whether Luke knows –"

"He doesn't," I said shortly.

"You can't ask either of them to choose sides if things go sour," Lane continued. "You aren't going to be able to avoid each other afterwards. I just want to know that you're prepared for that."

"I am," I said with conviction. "This is the most secure I've felt about anything for a long time, Lane. I thought you supported this."

"I do," Lane said. "I just – you haven't been in a relationship for a really long time. Jess is different. He had that one girlfriend forever and he's just now coming out of that. He's going to come to this with different expectations than you will. It's going to be an adjustment for both of you."

I stared at the dessert plate, watching as a fly loitered around the few remaining crumbs scattered there before flying off into the distance.

I turned to look at Lane. I didn't want her to be right, but she was.

I thought of all the times I had given her advice on boys when we were young, supposedly the voice of wisdom and experience. Now it was years later and she was married and a mom, having lived her romantic endgame for the past decade.

I knew very little about what it was like to have a monogamous relationship as an adult. I had given it a few tries after I graduated from college, but even those attempts were four or five years in the past. Had I learned anything about how a relationship was supposed to work? Did I remember anything?

"I feel like everyone's going to compare me to her," I confessed to Lane.

"Jess's girlfriend?"

I nodded.

"No one's going to compare you to her," Lane said. "From what I hear, it didn't end well."

"It didn't," I replied. "Jess said they grew apart. They ended up not having a lot in common by the end."

Lane reached out for my hand. "Then you've already got an advantage. You and Jess have way more in common than is healthy for you. It's always been that way."

I grinned, feeling my insecurities starting to taper off. "It has, hasn't it?"

Lane smiled, trying to encourage me. "Yeah."

I cleared my throat. "I'll talk to Jess about moving to Philadelphia before I actually plan anything," I clarified. "Just to make sure we're on the same page."

Lane rubbed her thumb over my wrist as I saw her wedding ring catch a glimmer of the departing sun. "That sounds like a good place to start."
I have had this chapter written in my head for many moons, but I kept avoiding actually finishing it.

We're at the halfway point in this story: I'm going to strive to make the chapters a little shorter from this point on. We're about two chapters removed from the end of AYITL, and I expect it to go pretty fast from this point on.

So, apologies for the long wait period, and I hope I didn't sully Jess's adopted hometown too much with what I've written here.

Any reviews or comments are always welcome.

The last time I saw Jess before I began my whirlwind tour of attempting to attract journalism assignments in Europe didn't seem like a particularly significant occasion at the time.

I had stopped in town for the Harvest Festival before planning on joining an old colleague in Berlin to report on a soon-to-be-shuttered arts festival there. It wasn't the most interesting subject matter in the world, but I was running out of places in New York who would agree to let me write for them. I figured that a change in environment might be just the thing I needed to turn things around.

I would end up telling myself that many, many times over the next four years.

Jess seemed happy to see me. He was still living at the apartment above the diner, but he told me he was going into Philadelphia about once a week to seek out new spaces to rebuild the press. He was confident and enthusiastic and organized and was even finalizing plans to put out new material by the next spring. He had business plans and blueprints and only seemed to lack the means to place his operation into a physical space.

We went down to K.C's to have a drink and watch Lane put on a blues set, and chatted about the New York literary scene. He mentioned that he was seeing someone, but I didn't ask what her name was.

Jess e-mailed me pictures of their grand opening three months later and told me to stop by the next time I was in town. He had renamed the press Dodger Books.

I didn't ask Jess about that significance of that name until we were ensconced in our new romantic relationship.

"I wasn't really thinking about you and me in a romantic sense," he told me as we lay side by side in his bed, running his hand through my hair distractedly. "I was thinking about how I made my way in Stars Hollow, how I sneaked in there and somehow stole away the town sweetheart. And I thought about how I let everything fall apart here with the business, but I still could sneak back in and built it into something great." He chuckled. "At least that was the idea."

Dodger Press wasn't an especially glamourous outfit at first glance: there was a colorful bookstore downstairs and a crowded office upstairs shared by Jess and his two (male) partners. There were boxes of rare editions of books everywhere, and the bookstore remained fairly busy. It was a cozy, comfortable, artist's haven, but one that didn't seem like it was likely to go to seed anytime soon.

Jess's apartment was much of the same: he had books everywhere. Half of the living room was dedicated to his vinyl collection. The apartment still displayed the touches of the residence of a long-term couple: the art on the walls was carefully chosen, the furniture matched, and I spied a set of
matching monogrammed towels shoved in the back of the linen closet. The room that was designed as Celeste's practice space had been converted into a makeshift gym: the ballet barre had been removed, but the mirrors remained intact and Jess hadn't done anything about the floor.

I teased Jess relentlessly about his vanity, but I didn't mind being the one who was benefitting from it this time.

I had exhausted all of the tourist-y Philadelphia excursions in my first few years visiting him: Flyers games, Liberty Bell, running up the Rocky steps. Jess's life these days was that of an aging hipster: record stores, used bookstores, out-of-the-way bars. The press was across the street from the club with vintage video games and arcades stacked side by side, with the town's best food trucks often parked outside into the wee hours of the morning. We usually made it there at least once while I was in town.

Jess took me to some of the places where he went for inspiration when he was writing himself: the penitentiary that was now in ruins, the cave at the end of the park that used to hours the ancient doomsday cult, the hidden furniture shop that made chairs and tables out of trash and sold pre-Prohibition liquor. He talked about taking me to the secret illegal swimming hole but I wasn't game (it was too cold, anyway). Mostly our life seemed to revolve around our creative pursuits and his artistic friends of various stripes, most of whom were in the position of actually making a living out of their craft.

It seemed like a place I could settle, a place I could start to call home. I didn't feel like wandering anymore. I had found somewhere I might belong.

"So, have you narrowed down the final contenders in your apartment search?" Jess asked me a few weeks into our new relationship. He had piled his plate high with food from the makeshift taco bar on the counter and had brought a bottle of wine and two glasses over to the kitchen table.

"I like the one named after chocolate," I said as I filled up my own plate.

Jess grimaced. "Pretty pricey," he remarked as he prepared to pour each of us a glass.

"Half of one for me," I told him as I brought my plate to the table and sat down. "I also like the one named after the sugar refinery. It's a bit cheaper." 

"Are you sure you're not actually searching for a gingerbread house?" Jess asked as he sat down across from me.

I chuckled as I took a sip of wine. "I don't think that would be much of an advantage when the seasons change again," I remarked.

Jess looked at me questionably. "Are you feeling okay?" he asked.

"I feel great," I told him as I sprinkled some pico de gallo over the top of my taco.

"I mean, you're the one that suggested we downgrade from margaritas to wine," he said softly as he gestured to my wine glass.

"I'm fine," I reassured him. "I've just been a little more tired than usual the past few days. You know, with preparing to resume adult responsibilities and everything."


"Is it?" he asked as he reached for his wine glass.

"We've only been together for three weeks," I pointed out. "I really like this city, Jess, and I love this thing that we're doing. Not just you and me together, but the book, too. Even staying in one place and actually being in a real adult relationship – it's all new to me. I don't want to rush things."

"I get it," he told me. "I do."

"Look, if things are still good in a year or in six months, even –"

"Rory," he admonished me, and I stopped fretting. "I understand. You're probably right on this one."

I smiled, hoping it was enough to reassure him.

"The guys at the press seemed to like you," Jess told me, clearly seeking to change the subject, and I breathed a sigh of relief. "I think they thought you were slumming it a little to be working with us, actually."

Slumming. That word used to have innocuous connotations when it came attached to my work. Now it only seemed like something that was associated with me from the other direction.

And yet it set off little pinpricks of guilt in my gut anyway.

"I guess what they don't know about what's left of my career won't hurt them," I remarked dryly.

"We're more than lucky to be even associated with someone of your pedigree," Jess told me, his eyes shining with pride and conviction. "You know that."

I nodded, still unsure.

The thing was that he was right, but not in the way that he thought he was. And I'd been hiding it from him.

"Jess, I have to tell you something," I blurted out.

Jess raised his eyebrow. "What's that?"

"I'm not broke," I said softly.

"Really," Jess replied, seemingly nonplussed.

How could this not be a big deal to him?

"I lied to you," I told him. "I told you I didn't have any money, or credit, or a car, or a license, and some of that stuff was true, but not because I couldn't go and get it for myself. I could. I have money. It's not mine, I didn't earn it, but I have it. I let you sit there and offer to buy me underwear and give me a loan. I don't know why I wasn't just honest about my situation in the first place –"

"Rory –"

"No," I continued to babble. "It was really fucked up of me. You built this business all on your own, this house, this life. It's a really great life, and I want to be part of it. And you did all of this by yourself a long time ago. Meanwhile, I'm traveling around the world, telling myself I'll chase after every stupid, pointless assignment I can get, and I end up crawling back home because I'm telling
myself I've got nothing. But I didn't. I was just in denial."

Jess remained silent as I continued to flagellate myself.

"I don't even just have one trust fund, Jess. I've got two. I inherited a lot of money when my grandfather died. I haven't earned a paycheck for anything I've written in over a year. But I was never in a place where I needed for you to lend me money. And yet you're here, giving me this lifeline by handing me a book contract with no questions asked, and I can't even be honest with you about how we got here."

Jess reached out for my hand, rubbing my fingers inside of his grasp.

"You're not telling me anything I didn't already know," he said gently.

"Why did you offer me money, then?" I asked him. "Who even gets in the situation where their ex boyfriend offers them money so they will no longer be commando? Even if it's true." I scoffed. "I'm such an embarrassment."

"You're not an embarrassment," Jess told me firmly. "You were spinning out of control, and I wanted to do what I could to reassure you. It wasn't about the money,"

"I lied to you, though," I told Jess, unable to let go of the subject. "I mean, we're in a relationship now. That kind of thing matters to you. I know it does."

"It does matter," Jess said. "But you didn't tell me this when you were clear-headed and had a plan for your life and wanted to deceive me for some reason. You told me this when you were desperate and didn't know what to do. I mean, think about it, Rory. We've known each other for fifteen years. Do you honestly think I'm ignorant about what kinds of means you have access to?"

"That wasn't ever a part of our relationship, though," I pointed out. "That part of me that knew how to move in those circles – you never knew that. I wasn't that kind of person around you."

"You're the same person, Rory," Jess stated adamantly. "That person who planned on going to an Ivy League college her whole life. That person who was valedictorian of her prep school. That was you. I liked that you could appreciate where your grandparents came from but not want to live their life. I always liked that about you, even from the beginning."

I squeezed his hand, feeling unbelievably grateful for him for the thousandth time in the past few weeks.

I didn't even remember the person that I had been in high school.

"Besides, I've met your grandparents," Jess went on. "I like them. I think your grandfather and I even bonded. I don't think it's a bad thing that you're taking what advantages they can give you."

"It's not what you did," I reminded him. "You built everything that you had by yourself."

"That isn't exactly what happened," Jess corrected me. "I got lucky. I came to this place and somehow convinced these guys who worked in publishing to not only let me tag along, but to actually publish my book. I thought they were crazy, but it turned out that they were crazy in an entirely different way."

Jess sighed, and I could sense a long-hidden weariness start to surface in him.

"Truncheon Press wasn't sustainable," Jess continued. "There were a lot of bad decisions made
before I came along. I probably should have noticed that something wasn't working after I had been here for a few months and was half-running the place with a partner who kept forgetting to pay the bills. It wasn't long until they were gone, too, and it was just me."

I looked into his eyes and saw a sadness and a disappointment there that I had never suspected in him. He wasn't deflecting anymore. This was him, the real him that didn't always have it together.

I may not have remembered the person I was in high school, but I did remember Jess, that brokenness in him that hid under his sarcasm and rebelliousness. I could still sense that now, even if the anger and the stubborn silence he carried around with him back then was gone for good.

"I hung on, Rory. I tried. I tried for a long time. I kept it going for six years. It came crashing down on me anyway, and I had to shut it down. I came crawling back to Stars Hollow just like you did." 

I'm sorry," I told him, feeling at a loss to be able to comfort him, even for something that had happened a long time ago. "I didn't know."

"I was where you were," Jess said. "I wouldn't have wanted you to see me that way, but I know exactly how it feels. I cooped myself up in Luke's old apartment and worked night shifts at the diner. Luke didn't know what to do with me. He kept withholding the wi-fi password because he thought that if he gave it to me I'd have an excuse to stay there forever."

"I can't imagine you being like that," I told him honestly.

"Until it happened, I couldn't either," Jess replied. "I don't know how long I would have stayed that way if Luke hadn't come to kick my ass himself. He kept reminding me how much I had hated that town, how much I had wanted to get away, how he knew that I didn't belong there. My home was here, in Philadelphia. I had to find a way to get back."

Jess turned to look me in the eye. "Luke was the one that got me on the right track. He gave me some of the start-up money and helped me secure a loan for the rest. I learned how to do things the right way and how to find people I could trust so that I wouldn't end up in the same mess as before. I let the people that cared about me help me so that I could get where I am. I wouldn't be where I am without that."

"I wish I would have known about this, Jess," I told him. "I would have tried to help you like you helped me. I guess keeping a continent between us didn't really help me be a less terrible friend."

"You couldn't know what I didn't want you to know," Jess replied. "If you had seen me back then, I don't think we'd be sitting here right now. I'm not sure how anybody who saw me at that point could still manage to like me."

"You saw me at my lowest and you still like me," I reminded him.

"That's different," he said, sliding his hand up my arm. "I can't imagine ever not liking you."

I let the moment sizzle between us as I took another sip of wine. Jess reluctantly removed his arm and polished off the rest of his taco.

"I guess I should have figured you knew what was up when I started talking about renting an apartment above 2K a month with no job," I mused aloud.

"Not to mention the car," Jess retorted.

"I got the car so I could come see you," I told him.
"I appreciate that, Rory," he said with his trademark smirk. "But I think we both know you needed it anyway."

I giggled and downed the rest of my wine. Jess grinned at me and reached over to refill my glass.

"There are still a lot of differences between us, Jess," I said, trying to steer myself away from the giddiness that was slowly coating my insides. Something about the wine and Jess and our newfound revelations was turning this new relationship euphoria into something a lot more potent than I had remembered it being in the past. It would have been nice to drown in it with him, but I felt the moment called for a little more clarification before we got to that point.

Jess sighed. "I'm aware of that," he said.

"I'll always have this money, and this connection with my grandparents," I said. "I'll always have my dad, too, even if I barely see him. I don't want to live in that world anymore, but it's there. It will always be there. If I stumble, it's there to catch me, and sometimes it ends up with me abusing it instead of moving on. If you find yourself in the same situation, you've got Luke and your mom, but it's never really going to be the same thing."

"You've got Luke just as much as I do," Jess replied. "Maybe even more."

"That's my point, Jess. I'm always going to have that part of me. I can't really escape it. I'm always going to be tied to my grandparents and everything they gave me."

"This isn't new to me," Jess said, finishing the rest of his taco and wiping his mouth with a napkin. "Celeste came from money, too. Not the kind of money your mom came from, but more than either of us grew up with."

"Oh," I replied, feeling a bit smaller as I let that new piece of information sink in. I wondered if she and my mom had bonded over this. I tried to remember if Jess's girlfriend had ever met my grandparents.

"It wasn't a part of our life," Jess clarified, shaking me out of my stupor. "Well, eventually it became that way, but when things were good, it wasn't really something I thought about. We had other challenges. It can be tough being in an interracial relationship."

"I can't imagine you'd have any problems in this city, Jess," I remarked. "Not in this day and age."

"I'm not talking about those kinds of problems," he replied quickly. "She got a lot of media coverage at first. Maybe her background had a little bit to do with it, but she was the only black female dancer at the company for a while. Sometimes I'd get mentioned as the bookstore owner who lived with her, and we'd get recognized in public. She had obligations to live up to that I didn't, and eventually being a ballet dancer wasn't one of them."

Jess let out a huge breath, as if he had been wanting to tell someone this for a long time and hadn't been able to.

"It put a lot of pressure on the two of us," he said softly. "It wasn't about us, or how we felt about each other. It was what the rest of the world thought."

I reached out for his hand again. "I don't think the differences between us rise to quite that level," I reassured him.

"It wasn't why we broke up," Jess insisted. "We broke up because we wanted different things. If I learned anything from that, it's how to deal with these kinds of differences. It isn't insurmountable,
what's separating us, Rory. Not if we both know where our heads are at."

"I'm still struggling with that a little," I confessed.

"I know that," Jess said. "It means a lot that you're willing to move here, Rory. It really does. I do kind of wonder if you'll miss moving around, though."

"It's not really an option anymore," I reminded him. "I think I was kind of doing it to avoid dealing with things. It wasn't really about the work for the past few years. Not as much as it should have been."

"The life you had with Logan –" Jess began.

"I didn't have a life with Logan," I corrected him.

"I guess I mean that world, Rory. I don't know a lot about it, but all the outward trappings of it. I don't know what that's like, but –"

"I didn't exactly hate that stuff," I admitted. "It's nice to be catered to. I wasn't in it for the right reasons. If everything else hadn't been screwed up, I wouldn't have felt drawn to it. And I will never go back to being someone's mistress."

"And the traveling?"

"I think it's time for me to give that up, too," I told Jess firmly. "I don't feel a need for it at this point. I'm not even sure I'll miss journalism. When I had a chance to chase stuff earlier this year, I didn't feel any passion for it."

Jess squeezed my hand. "I'm glad. Maybe I shouldn't admit that, but I am."

I smiled at him, trying to bite back my insecurities. "And the money, Jess?"

"Like I told you before," he assured me. "Not a problem."

"I think it's better for me if I mostly leave it alone from this point forth," I told him. "I've kind of been thinking about what kind of job to get after I finish the book."

"You could work for us at the press," Jess suggested. "We could use a female editor."

"That and someone to handle your e-book division," I replied.

"We don't really have an e-book division"," Jess pointed out.

"That's my point. You've got access to all these old print rights and you barely utilize them. You don't even promote them on your website."

"Almost every book we put out has a digital version attached," Jess replied, his voice taking on a defensive tone. "We just don't focus on that. It's not what our press is known for, and it's not why people come to the bookstore. They like having something tangible that they can hold in their hands."

"You can have that and still point out to people that you provide digital copies of the material you put out, Jess," I contended. "Not everyone has the ability to have access to physical books. Do you know how much of a miracle it was to find out I could carry the entire Western canon around with me wherever I went? That I could pop it open in the middle of a boring conference and read a few chapters of Elena Ferrante on my phone? You should be shouting that out from the rooftops about
your authors."

Jess smirked at me. "Don't you lose something with that, Rory? How much can it really mean if you can parse everything down to a few MBs of data. There's no room to get lost in that if you're in the midst of gaining distraction to a hundred other things on your phone."

"You can put the book down just as easily as you can the app on your phone," I argued.

"It's not the same. And I'm not alone in this. E-book sales went down last year," Jess contended. "I know you saw that article in the New York Times."

"I just think there's a place for both," I argued.

"Come and work for us and make it a place for both," Jess offered.

"We'd get sick of each other," I replied.

Jess chuckled. "I doubt it," he said.

"I'll think about it," I told him. "I don't want to make any further lifestyle changes until I know what's going on with my mom."

Jess sighed. "I don't think whatever you plan to show your mom is going to be the perfect cure for what's gotten between you too," he said. He picked up both of our empty plates and retreated back to the other side of the kitchen to wash them off.

"I just need to work on these chapters a little bit more," I replied.

Jess crossed back over to the table and two plates of peanut butter malt cake in front of us.

"Your chapters are great," Jess said as he plopped back down in his chair. "I wouldn't have suggested this book or given you the contract if I didn't know you were capable of writing it. It was never about me feeling sorry for you or needing to rescue you or anything like that. I'm taking you on as a client because you're an amazing writer. This isn't me saying this as the person you're sleeping with or whatever we're calling out relationship this week. I gave you this opportunity because you earned it."

I blushed at his compliment, but forced myself to steer him to the point.

"I feel that there's a but coming," I retorted as I picked up the fork and took a bite of the cake.

"I'm not sure it's going to make Lorelai feel any better," Jess continued. "You'll always see your childhood in a different way than she did. I know that she tried her best to make everything seem magical and wonderful and adventurous for the two of you. That's the way you saw her. But it was different for her, and it's always going to be that way."

"I can't believe you're defending her in this," I told him, feeling a little dismayed.

"I'm not –" Jess stopped himself, than began again. "I think I had the same experience with my mom. Just in reverse."

I remained silent.

"There's a lot of stuff I remember about growing up with her that she doesn't," Jess said. "She can't remember it, because she was so strung up at the time. It took me a long time to forgive her, because she doesn't feel sorry about any of it. Your mom is different. She put a lot at risk to raise you on her
own, and she has a hard time forgiving herself because you were too young to remember the bad parts. Knowing how you remembered it might not help that much."

"I guess you got the flip side of having a teenage mother," I said. Once again, I felt at a loss of knowing how to comfort him.

Jess shrugged. "It happened a long time ago."

"Maybe I should just go talk to her," I mused.

Jess straightened up and turned to me. "I don't think that's possible right now," he said.

I felt my stomach start to clench. "Why not?"

"She's in California," Jess told me.

"CALIFORNIA?!" I practically shouted back at him.

Jess cringed. "Don't punish the messenger," he implored me.

"When did this happen?"

"Earlier this week," Jess told me. "I stopped by to see Luke yesterday, when you and Lane were checking out that club she'll be opening the tour at in Queens."

"And you waited nearly an entire day to tell me?"

"I didn't really know how to break it to you," Jess said. "I'm not worried about your mom. She knows how to handle herself. She's doing Wild."

"Book or movie?"

"Book."

"She definitely does not know how to handle herself," I contended. "The woman hates nature. She hates the smell of bug spray. She won't even go camping with Luke."

"She fishes with Luke," Jess reminded me. "They go on the boat. They used to spend a lot of time at the cabin."

"That's different," I replied. "Luke is there to watch her and protect her the entire time. He won't even clean the fish in front of her because she gets sick. She's not going to survive all by herself out there."

"Luke's the one who took her to the airport," Jess told me. "I know he wouldn't let her leave unless she had everything she needed."

I shook my head. "I did this. I pitched the woman her own life story and told her I was going to write it whether she liked it or not. Then I stopped talking to her completely for months. She wouldn't even be there if it wasn't for me."

"Rory, that's not it," Jess assured me, reaching out to take my hand again. "I don't think it's about you. I think it's about Luke."

I stopped to ponder this, remembering the conversation I had overheard about April earlier in the summer.
"Did you notice anything while you were still living with them?" he asked me.

"I don't know," I told him. "Things seemed pretty normal. I thought there might have been issues with April, but –"

"April's fine," Jess replied. "She got back from Germany last week and went back to school. I talked to her a few days ago. I don't think anything's changed in that department."

"Then, what –"

Jess shrugged. "Luke said that she's been keeping things from him, going to therapy. She said she told him she needed some time apart to think about things. She'll be gone for three weeks. He's pretty much a mess."

"Does he talk to you about their relationship?"

"Sometimes," Jess admitted. "It's the same for you, right?"

I shook my head. "Not really." I had mostly put an embargo on that topic after the year Mom broke up with Luke and quickly married and divorced my father. I hadn't wanted to be stuck in the middle of her relationship drama after that, even if reconciling with Luke had mostly put an end to all of the drama. I still checked in every now and then, but I hadn't wanted to hear about the details.

"I can't imagine a world without them together," I told Jess.

"Me neither," he agreed.

Silence overtook the both of us as we considered what this development might mean for our new equilibrium.

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The buzzing of my phone woke me up early the next morning. Jess, mostly dead to the world, rolled over next to me while I scooted over to the end table to find out what possibly could have been so important that I had to be alerted at 4:45 AM.

It was an e-mail from my mom.

She was back from California.

She was engaged to Luke again, and they were getting married in three weeks.

And she wanted to see me.
Chapter 10

The resumption of Mom and Luke's engagement brought most of my plans to a screeching halt.

Jess and I agreed that we wouldn't tell either of them about our relationship until after the wedding. This was their moment, the wedding they had held off for years and years. They had earned this. We didn't want our burgeoning relationship – or my upcoming move to Philadelphia – to be a distraction.

I still didn't know how my mom would feel about Jess and I becoming a real couple. I kept thinking back to what she had said the last time I had seen her – that she didn't want the world to know what Jess thought of her. It wasn't that she still had a bad opinion of him, but that she worried about his bad opinion of her, and how that would color whatever I chose to let the world know about our long-ago days in the potting shed. I didn't want our relationship to make those insecurities even worse, or to upset her again at what should have been the happiest time of her life.

I thought about what Jess had said about my mom needing to forgive herself for everything that had happened during those ten years when it was just the two of us in that shed, surviving more on affection and determination than anything else. I thought about him and all the stories he had only hinted at from growing up with his mom. I thought about what it must have taken in order to let go of all that pain and hurt in order to forgive her for all of the things she'd never be able to acknowledge. He had to be strong enough in order to let go of the past because that's what had mattered to her, even if it was easier to keep holding onto it.

Maybe I had to learn to do the same thing. At the end of the day, she was still my mom and my best friend, and the life that we had shared together had been her life, too. If the book still was something that hurt her, then I couldn't go through with it. As much as it meant to me, I didn't feel that it was something that completely defined my future anymore. I had a boyfriend and a life waiting for me in Philadelphia, and possibly a job at the book press if I wanted it.

Looking at my mom across that darkened kitchen table as I handed her those chapters, I knew that even if she didn't know the details yet, she accepted this as well. If she didn't give me her blessing on this, then I would simply focus on the other good parts of my life.

My future wasn't anywhere near as bleak as it had seemed before. I had options.

It turns out that our estrangement had been a very small part of what had inspired my mom's trip to California.

"I had a lot of things to figure out," she told me a few nights later as we sat sprawled on the sofa, her plans for invitations and floral arrangements momentarily abandoned on every available surface of the coffee table. Kirk had been appointed wedding planner and had spent the last three evenings talking late into the night with Mom over the upcoming nuptials, but he had gone home early tonight. Luke had long since succumbed to sleep, grumbling that he would be the one to clean up the mess early in the morning as he had after every single one of these late-night planning sessions.

As it had been so many times before, it was just her, me, and coffee, and talk had gradually turned to deeper subjects than whether the floral arrangements would match the tablecloths.

"Was I one of those things?" I asked her.

"I was nervous about the book, and what was going on with you," my mom admitted. "You didn't
seem to know what you were going to be doing, and the thing with Logan was still going on, and all of that really weighed on me. But it wasn't just that."

She took a deep breath and swallowed another sip of her drink.

"Sookie was gone, and she wasn't coming back. Michel wanted to leave because the Dragonfly wasn't doing enough business to keep him here. Mom was moving on, and I was still having a hard time dealing with Dad being gone. I could deal with all of that, but it kept piling up. But then Luke and I started fighting, and we'd been keeping some secrets from each other, and whenever anything else happened I count on him more than anyone else, and I had to –"

Mom stopped herself and turned to look at me. "I had to take a break from all of that. Or I thought I did. I had to let go of everything that scared me, and what had been scaring me for nine years was the idea that I could let this relationship go to hell again if I let my obsession with getting married take over like I did in the past. I just went in the other direction for so long because I didn't want it to get screwed up again. And I didn't have to do that."

I sighed, half relieved that I hadn't been solely responsible for my mom making such a risky and spontaneous decision and half guilty that I hadn't been here to support her when everything else was falling apart.

"I should have come back and tried to talk to you, Mom," I said. "I hate knowing that you felt so alone."

"Oh, I'm not sure I could have told you about most of the Luke stuff," Mom assured me. "I put you in the middle way too many times before, and it didn't work out for any of us."

Mom put her cup down and met my steady gaze with her own. "I didn't ever intend on leaving Luke," she told me forcefully. "I just needed to figure out why what we agreed on wasn't making either of us as happy as it had in the past. We've been at this for a long time, and there's always going to be ups and downs. But we're going to keep going through them together."

"But you're happy with the way things are now?" I tentatively asked her.

"I am," Mom said, her eyes shining with contentment. "But Rory, I just want you to promise me that if you're in this same situation yourself that you'll try not to hold off on the things that you might want because you're afraid. You'll miss a lot of opportunities that way, and I don't want that for you."

"You've never really seemed like that kind of person to me, Mom," I told her honestly.

"I let the mistakes we made in the past haunt us for a long time," Mom replied, draining the last of her coffee. Her eyes darkened slightly, and I saw a tiny bit of what looked like regret in them. "If this wedding had happened seven years ago like it maybe should have, or five, or four –" she shook her head, and her gaze was steady and confident yet again. "What's done is done, and there's not much use in thinking about the what ifs. But I want you to promise me that you'll try not to do the same thing."

I smiled, thinking of all the upcoming life changes that she didn't know about yet. "I promise," I told her.

I wanted to tell her about Jess so much at that point. But I'd made a promise to him first to hold off until after the wedding, and I wasn't going to break it.

I only hoped that my mom would be happy with the exact way in which I planned to take her advice.
Fortunately, my mom was much too busy to notice that I never quite moved back in with her. She had initially planned to get married four days after returning from California but had quickly realized that she would need at least a month to really arrange the wedding that she wanted. Still, the timeframe was pretty tight, and she didn't have a lot of time or energy to wonder where I was most of the time.

My grandmother had put her house up for sale and was officially moving to Nantucket, so I wasn't even spending occasional nights there anymore. Gil's son had moved into Lane's house with his girlfriend and two of his bandmates, but aside from dropping in unexpectedly at Lane's request a few times, I wasn't using it as a place to work or crash. Paris's missed period last spring had turned out to be an early indication of the conception of the third Gellar-McMaster baby, so they had reconciled and were planning to move into a slightly smaller apartment.

I think my mom thought I was with Paris when I wasn't with her, but that quickly proved not to be a feasible option. Paris was vicious when she was pregnant because she knew everything that could go wrong and everything that could be done to keep it from going wrong, and anyone who didn't bow to her wishes quickly found themselves to be the targets of her immediate wrath.

No mere mortal ever wants to be the target of Paris Gellar's immediate wrath.

Paris knew about Jess and I, and we had even joined them for a slightly uncomfortable double date about a week after my mom announced her (re) engagement. Doyle seemed to have toned down on his hipper-than-thou attitude and seemed more like the amiable person he had been back in our college days, but Paris's gestation had only sharpened her acerbic attitude: she spent most of dinner attacking the book press's backlist when she wasn't busy terrifying the wait staff into submission. Jess left right after the check came and told me he'd call me the next day.

Her real concerns came to my attention when we shared a solo cab ride back to her apartment, Doyle having already departed on his own to pick up some of Pari's requested pregnancy-related delicacies on the way home.

"Are you sure the real motivation for you two isn't to live out some sort of Ada or Ardor fantasy?" she asked me as soon as the doors shut and we were alone together.

"You don't approve," I remarked.

"I didn't say that," Paris insisted. "I'm just wondering if this is some kind of strange literary experiment between writers, that's all."

"It's not," I told her. "We're serious about it."

"You won't call him your boyfriend," she pointed out. "You introduced him to Doyle by explaining that you used to date in high school. You say you might work at his company. What did you call yourself around them? Partner, lover, soon-to-be stepcousin because you just happened to hook up at the same time that your relatives decided to finally make their relationship official –"

"It's new," I tried to explain. "I haven't done this in a long time. Mom and Luke don't have anything to do with me not knowing what label to place on it."

"But they don't know about it, do they?" she asked me.

"We're waiting until after the wedding," I told her. "It's not because we're ashamed or because we see this as some sort of fling. I'm moving out of the state for him, Paris. I haven't felt comfortable enough in a relationship to do that – well, ever."
"You said that part of the reason you were doing that is because you were working together," Paris retorted.

"That's still true," I replied. "I wouldn't feel it was right if the only reason was because I was with him, but I wouldn't move just because he's editing my book, either."

"But you're happy?"

"I am," I told her with conviction. "I haven't felt this confident about anything in a long time."

"I guess I have to give it the patented Paris Gellar seal of approval, then," Paris said, letting a small grin creep into her features. "Well, semi-approval. I'm going to keep my eye on him."

"I'm sure Jess appreciates that," I said, chortling slightly.

"I had a feeling about you two as soon as you told me," she continued. "I've seen in a lot in my practice. Two people in their thirties who were in long-term relationships that didn't end up like they thought they would. They meet up with that old flame or that friend they've known forever and instant marriage and kids. The first kid pops out okay, but they have trouble getting the second one. That's where I step in."

"That's not why we're together," I clarified quickly. "That doesn't even make sense, Paris. Why would you jump into a relationship just because you want marriage and kids? That doesn't sound like a very healthy foundation to build a life out of to me."

"Well, it happens," Paris retorted. "And it ends up working out a lot more often than you would think."

"Well, that doesn't apply to me," I told her. "Jess broke up with his last girlfriend a year ago. And I haven't dated anyone seriously for a long time—"

Paris looked at me incredulously. "You think I don't know about you and Huntzberger? That you were spending half your time in London and meeting him occasionally for social visits? Come on."

I wrapped my arms around myself, feeling instantly guilty at having failed to hide my indiscretions as thoroughly as I should have. "That's not supposed to be common knowledge," I said softly.

"Rory, I've known you for decades. How long did it go on, anyway? Two years?"

I nodded. "Just about." I sighed. "That wasn't a real relationship. It wasn't at all like it is with Jess."

"Then it looks like you're right on schedule," Paris said, rubbing the bulge of her stomach. "I've got a feeling about these things. If it's as good as you say it is, you'll end up where I am before you know it."

We shared a laugh as the cab sped towards the apartment, both of us contemplating possible – and seemingly improbable – futures.

Paris was right, of course.

Three days after I returned home from that trip, my period failed to arrive on schedule.

I waited it out almost a week, figuring it was just a fluke. After all, between helping my mom plan her wedding, working on the book, and traveling to Philadelphia every four or five days to spend time with Jess and look at apartments, I was under a lot of stress. I figured my body would get back
to its normal rhythms in a week or so.

We were on day eight when I forced myself to bring the pregnancy test home.

Throughout it all, I felt oddly calm. I should have been frenzied and worried and terrified about the possibility of such a huge life change, but I wasn't. I kept telling myself I was in denial or in shock about what was happening, but my brain didn't seem want to accept it.

The odd thing was that seeing that little plus sign in front of me didn't change that.

I knew three things in that moment.

I had irrefutable proof that I was pregnant with Jess Mariano's baby.

I was happy about that fact.

And I wanted to keep it.
Okay, a few notes before we head into this chapter.

I've tried to tread carefully with this version of Rory's pregnancy. Despite the fact that she's in a stable relationship with Jess and is enthusiastic about the pregnancy, there's still a lot of reasons why she would be uncertain and afraid in her situation, and I've tried to convey that.

This is probably going to be the only chapter that deals with Christopher in depth, and I think it's obvious here that I am not fond of the guy. I think Rory has a lot of reasons to be angry with him that have absolutely nothing to do with love triangles or breaking up engagements. I've tried to articulate them here because the show wouldn't let her express these things, and even though that last scene in AYITL went a long way in establishing that Rory did want more from him, there is always going to be something holding the OG writers back when it comes to criticizing Christopher.

So that said, I hope you enjoy it and please leave a review if you so desire.

The thing that terrified me the most about discovering that I was pregnant was how much this news didn't terrify me.

I was happy. I was calm. Almost the first thing that popped into my head was that I wouldn't have to search for an apartment for myself in Philadelphia anymore, and that we might have to take the mirrors down from the workout room to put the baby in there so that it wouldn't spend its infancy living out the plot of *Poltergeist*. I fretted a little about my alcohol consumption, but then I reminded myself that I had only had the equivalent of a glass and a half of wine since the night I suspected the baby was conceived.

The reality of the situation set in at that point, and I was actually angry that I wasn't as freaked out as I should be.

Both Jess and I had recently emerged from long-term relationships. I had only the vaguest of career plans at the moment, and I still didn't know if my mom would agree to let me continue working on the book. I was moving to a new city in a few weeks and had been in a relationship with the father of my child for less than two months.

How could I not be horrified and devastated by this?

I let the practical side of me take over and sat down to write out a pro-con list. Almost everything I could think of went on the con list. I wasn't prepared to have a baby. I was just now settling down to a relationship and a stationary existence, two things I hadn't had for a very long time. I didn't have to worry about money, but the funds that were set aside for me weren't given to me for the purpose of supporting a small child.

The pros list was appallingly short, but it overweighed everything. I wanted the baby, and I wanted to raise it with Jess.

If this had happened ten or five or even two years ago, I would have felt differently. I would have had to carefully think about whether I could fit a baby into my life and what the best course of action was. I had loved Logan in the past, and I had honestly cared about most of the people I had been with (even the Wookiee had seemed like a decent person). I just couldn't see fitting something as life-changing as a baby into those relationships, and none of them had existed on a sturdy enough foundation to support it. Even as new as it was, I felt that my relationship with Jess could.
And then there was the other thing.

Jess and I weren't that young anymore. We didn't have a lot of time to ponder what might happen in the future.

This could be my only chance to have a kid. I had barely contemplated that possibility before this point, but now that I knew it was real I knew that it was something that mattered to me. The fact that it was Jess's baby cemented my conviction even more. I knew now that I loved him, and that part of the reason I wanted this was because of him.

I only hoped he felt the same way about it that I did.

My decision was made within an hour of the test results. I started making plans to wean myself off of coffee and made an appointment with my OB/GYN to have something concrete to tell Jess.

The soonest I could have my test results confirmed and have an ultrasound performed was four days away.

Four interminable days.

I started getting morning sickness on the second one.

I was actually grateful that the house was enmeshed in nonstop pre-wedding activity. Luke and Mom didn't have time to wonder why I was tired all of the time or why I was spending so much time in the bathroom. The distractions worked for me, too: if I hadn't been so busy helping Mom out with the wedding, I would either be constantly worried about the pregnancy or if Mom was going to change her mind about the book. I also didn't want to tell Jess about the baby until I could confirm a few basic facts for him. I knew that if I didn't keep busy that I would spend the majority of my time not worried about the two biggest complications in my life but would instead be consumed in wallowing in guilt for not allowing myself to tell him yet.

There were only about two months separating my last night with Logan and the night Jess and I had begun our new relationship on the floor of my grandmother's living room. I had gotten my period between those two incidents, but I didn't know if Jess would be able to trust that. I wanted to have a sonogram picture to give him with a due date and a date of conception. I did not want to begin the next phase of our lives with Jess asking me if the baby belonged to him.

I was going to do everything I possibly could to keep those words from coming out of his mouth.

In the midst of all of this, Jess called me and asked me to spend the night with him in Philadelphia.

"I don't want to do anything that might make them suspicious," I told him. "Mom dragged the Paris news out of me a few days ago. I think she knows that I've been seeing someone."

I heard Jess let out a sad and harried sigh. "I know it was my idea, but I'm beginning to regret not telling them the truth three weeks ago," he said. "I haven't seen you in over a week, Rory. I'm ready for all this secrecy to be over. I miss you."

"I miss you, too, Jess," I replied. And despite the other factors that were complicating our situation, that was absolutely true. I did miss him. A lot. "I just think it's going to make everything much more tense for them this close to the end date."

"I guess I can understand that," Jess conceded. "What about the book? Has she said anything?"
"She hasn't," I confirmed. "I'm going to ask her at the reception if she still hasn't said anything."

"Before or after we tell them about us?" Jess asked. He sounded a little desperate, and that guilt that I hadn't allowed myself to feel for the past couple of days started to wash over me. "After," I assured him. "We'll let them know about our plans first."

"Good," Jess replied, and I could almost feel his relief three states away. "I'm looking forward to things getting back to normal between us. I just want everything to be settled, you know?"

For the first time since that test came up positive, I began to feel some trepidation about Jess's actual reaction.

Would he be as happy as I was? Could he be?

"Things will be settled soon," I told him. "It won't be long."

I won't dwell on the details, but getting an ultrasound at six weeks along for the sheer purpose of being able to assure your boyfriend of his paternity is not a pleasant experience.

About halfway though, I began to regret the whole thing and wished I had just had the courage to tell Jess the truth right away. Was this really necessary? I didn't have a history of miscarriage. There hadn't been anything to indicate that this wasn't a completely normal pregnancy. I could have just waited a few weeks for us to come in together and do this the normal way. Of course, those might have been weeks when Jess was looking at me in a way I never wanted him to look at me, and I wasn't sure if I could have managed it . . .

"That's your baby," the doctor stated cheerfully, knocking me out of my self-induced paranoia. "Everything looks perfectly healthy. That's the heart."

The tiny white blob seemed to move on the screen as she pointed to it, and my heart suddenly swelled.

That was our baby. Jess and I created it. It's alive and it's healthy and it's ours.

"How far along am I?" I managed to croak out.

"The ultrasound date coordinates with the date you gave us of your last period," the doctor confirmed. "You're seven weeks along."

That lined up almost exactly with the defilement of my grandmother's floor.

I made the lab tech write how far along I was on the ultrasound photo along with my due date.

If nothing else, I wanted to be sure of that much. The bigger question still loomed large in my mind.

What was he actually going to think?

I didn't intend on visiting my dad that afternoon. I hadn't seen him in almost two years, and the last communication between us had been a disinterested e-mail he had sent back in February. He didn't even know I was back in Connecticut.

I was getting more and more nervous about how Jess would react to learning that we were going to have a baby. I halfway suspected that my fears were completely unfounded, but they existed nonetheless and were just as real as my attachment to him and to the person that we had created. I
had kept this a secret from everyone I knew for the sheer purpose of reassuring Jess that the baby was in fact his and I didn't even know why anymore. Was the fact that I had been afraid of him reacting badly to the unconfirmed paternity of this baby just an outward indication that I secretly feared that he would react badly in general? Did I have any reason to expect that?

I knew that Jess had wanted to marry Celeste, but I didn't know if they had talked about or wanted kids. We certainly hadn't discussed the subject in the six weeks that we had been together. I knew that he generally liked kids and that he got along really well with Lane's boys. he and Doula had bonded early on and he frequently discussed books with her (Neil Gaiman and Roald Dahl were her favorites, but Jess's latest mission was trying to get her to try S.E. Hinton). I knew that he would support whatever decision I made. I knew that he would support and care for our kid no matter what.

I just didn't know if he would want this baby in the way that I did. I didn't know how this was going to affect our relationship. We didn't have years to figure out how a kid was going to upset the life we had just begun to build. It was a circumstance we were going to have to deal with right away, and I didn't know what was going to happen.

I guess it was inevitable that all of these stray thoughts would lead me back to the one man in my life who had never been able to deal with his responsibilities.

Dad's role in my life was decided long before I even was able to figure out why he wasn't there. I always had my mother, and the two of us who depended on each other for everything. She had declined his proposal and had left home so we could start a life on our own, and nothing was ever expected or asked of him after that point. He might remember to send a present on Christmas or my birthday, or he might not. He might follow thorough with his plans to visit, or he might not. When he did show up, I was always delighted to see him, and would watch my mother and him and how much they enjoyed each other's company, and I would think that it would be great if it was like this all of the time. Then he would leave again, and the next time he missed a birthday or a promised visit I'd see the sadness on my mother's face as she used whatever meager means she had at her disposal to overcompensate for this latest disappointment.

Then he would come around again, and the cycle would repeat itself. For twenty years. It only ended for good when my mother married and divorced him in the wake of the destruction of her relationship with Luke and then reconciled with the one man who always really been there for us. My dad didn't make much of an effort to keep in touch with me after he knew she wasn't going to be a part of it. He didn't even try to keep things going with his second attempt at fatherhood: he sent my half sister away to live with her mother in Paris about a year after my mother broke things off with him for good.

I wanted to be angry with him, but I wasn't allowed to be angry with him. My mom always encouraged me to remain on good terms with him and accept whatever scraps he gifted us with, hoping that one day he would grow up and remain stable enough to be a permanent part of our lives. I know that part of her heart belonged to him for a long time, but I also know that she did it because she was afraid of letting anyone else interfere with the life that we shared. Now that I'm older and I know that he was never going to be capable of the first part, I can't help but lament that she held onto him for so long. I know that she wasn't wrong in prioritizing our life together, but some part of her should have been able to let go enough in order for him to know what he did was wrong. He hurt me, and he hurt Mom, and even though there were a lot of other factors involved, I know that Luke ended up being hurt by all of this as well. My parents' inability to realize that my dad's role in their teenage romance did not mean that he was built for a grown-up relationship caused a lot of us to suffer, and I wish that everyone involved had found that out a lot sooner than they did.

I can't blame my mom. I repeated the same cycle with Logan, after all. I know she sheltered me from
as much of the bad stuff as she could, and I'll never be able to thank her enough for that. I also know
that no one else – the grandparents that loved me, the other grandparents that refused to acknowledge
me because they blamed my existence for everything my dad had failed to accomplish, or least at all
my father himself – ever even considered that he owed something to me regardless of whether my
mother was there to hold his hand or not.

Of course, nobody ever asked me what I wanted.

My parents had cut off ties with each other at Luke's request years earlier, so I wasn't really
expecting for him to crash the wedding. I only brought up that bit of news with him in order to
confirm that the part of him that had changed enough to respect that my mother's chosen happiness
didn't include him remained intact, and I wasn't disappointed in that. The real reason I went to see
him was to find out if he had regretted the role he had chosen not to play in my life.

He didn't. Once again, he blamed the entire situation on my mother, and even insinuated that she had
actively kept me away from him. I kept trying to get him to say why he hadn't tried harder, but he
didn't understand. It had always been about what he could get out of my mother. It had never been
about me.

I left without planning to see him again, that long-simmering anger effectively expunged. It wasn't
that I didn't blame him, but that it was no use blaming him. He wasn't capable of understanding all of
those small disappointments and betrayals, or that when he said he loved me that he didn't have the
actions to back up those words. He didn't know why he needed those actions for those words to
mean anything. And he never would.

Jess wasn't anything like my father. He had proven to me in word and deed how much he had cared
for me these past ten years, and he had taken a chance on me when no one else would. I didn't know
what the future held for our relationship, but I was absolutely certain of one thing.

No matter what else happened, I would not be raising our child without him.
"So how do you want to play this until tomorrow afternoon?" Jess asked me over the phone.

"Well, I figured we'd just pretend to act like normal when the parental units are around," I told him. "If we don't deviate from what we've already agreed on, we might come close to pulling it off. They're bound to be fairly distracted."

Jess audibly scoffed.

"What is it?" I asked him.

"I might have let something slip," he admitted.

"Jess. Do I need to remind you again that that keeping us a secret until all of this was over was what you suggested?"

"You didn't fight me on it," he chided me.

"I didn't say it was a bad idea," I replied. "But who else knows about our little secret now?"

"My mom," Jess said. "Well, maybe. I didn't confirm it outright. She just noticed I was talking about you a lot, and —" He trailed off, and I felt a familiar giddiness start to coat my insides.

It was nice to feel a tingling in my lower half that didn't involve morning sickness.

"You know as soon as TJ knows, this is all over," I told him.

"Well, we've still got about thirty minutes," he said as I heard a well-worn set of tires hit the gravel outside.

"You're here?!" I squealed.

Jess met me at the door, the grin plastered on his face an exact match to mine.

"Luke said to meet him here to approve of his suit in exactly half an hour," he said, running up to the doorway in three strides and silencing me in a blistering kiss.

I felt a tingling in my lower half of a completely different nature as he slammed the door and I pulled him towards my bedroom.

The honeymoon period was definitely not over yet.

"You do realize we've reverted back to our eighteen year old selves," I told Jess nearly half an hour later as he quickly slipped on his T-shirt and jeans. I realized that he was a lot more nervous about Luke accidentally walking in on us than I was.

"He'd kill me if I don't give him at least some sort of a warning first," Jess said as he put his boots on.

"It won't be that bad," I told him, languorously reclining on the unmade bed, in no hurry to shake off the afterglow long enough to get dressed.

"It's different for me than it is for you," Jess said. He turned to look me in the eye. "He always
wanted to protect you from me back in those days."


"Maybe once he thinks it through he'll get it," Jess countered. "It might be entirely different if he had walked in here fifteen minutes ago." He lay down on the bed next to me. "I just want to do this right."

"I'm not sure I want to tell them tomorrow," I confessed, fingerling the edge of the sheet.

Jess groaned.

"What exactly did your mom say?" I asked him.

"She asked if we were dating," he replied. "I denied it, but I'm not sure she believed me." He reached for my hand, stilling it and enclosing my fingers within his own. "I thought we agreed we were going to tell them at the reception."

"We never said exactly when," I said in a tentative voice. I had a very clear image in my head of how I wanted things to go. I would lead Jess away at a quiet moment during the reception and break the baby news to him. If everything went well – and I wasn't allowing myself to think too much about the possibility that it wouldn't – we'd tell my mom and Luke everything before they left for their honeymoon.

Luke and my mom weren't set to leave for the Adirondack mountains until the morning after their nuptials. I'd imagined that Jess and I would spend the rest of the evening celebrating and enjoying a probably empty household, as April planned to drive in early tomorrow morning and leave in the evening due to "imminent lab deadlines" (or at least that was her official excuse). We'd tell Luke and Mom in the morning, and they'd be so happy that we had a plan for the immediate future that any other emotion simply wouldn't occur to them.

I was suddenly realizing just how insanely, ridiculously idealistic this scenario was.

Damn pregnancy hormones. Damn new relationship glow. They were removing all possible logic from my brain.

I didn't even know if Jess would be happy about this – or would even believe me about the paternity issue – never mind my mother and new stepfather.

"When did you want to tell them?" Jess asked, knocking me out of my stupor. His brown eyes looked so earnest and trusting, and I felt another twinge of guilt for keeping such a huge secret from him.

I took a deep breath and squeezed his hand. "I was thinking that we'd get them alone right before they leave for New York and tell them then," I said.

"I don't know," Jess said. "That post wedding high might have worn off by that point. And if Luke is angry at me, I don't want to throw this on him right before he leaves for his honeymoon."

"But if we tell them during the reception that could cause a huge damper on their wedding reception," I countered.

"Luke is going to be too happy to think about killing me tomorrow," Jess said. "He's waited for this for a long time. I'm not sure he's even going to notice until he remembers why you're not at the house
when he comes back."

I reached up and smoothed his hair away from his forehead. "I don't think that part is going to be that bad," I told him gently.

Jess sighed. "How about we talk about it during the reception? I think it'll feel different to both of us then. If we agree we can find a good moment to break it to them, then we'll do it."

I nodded. "Sounds good." I leaned in for a kiss.

Just at that moment, we heard Luke open the front door and begin to climb the stairs, yelling for Jess. Jess and I reluctantly parted for breath. "The script's staying the same for this afternoon, right?" he asked me.

I nodded, nervously listening to Luke pace the upper level of the house.

Jess chuckled. "It'll be fine," he said as he kissed me briefly. "I'll keep him occupied for the next few minutes. As long as you're dressed by the time your mom shows up, they won't suspect a thing."

I let my gaze linger over Jess's backside as he left the room, hoping that he was right.

Maybe faking that you're not sleeping with your-soon-to-be-cousin would be easier than I thought. Well, as long as I quit looking at him like that.

Surprisingly, the acting performances Jess and I put on that afternoon seemed to be fairly convincing. At the very least, no one was openly complaining if they weren't.

Luke modeled his wedding suit for Jess like they had planned, and I acted like I had something extremely important occupying me in my own bedroom. My mom showed up right on schedule – just as I had predicted, she had quickly forgotten that she and Luke agreed that they shouldn't see each other in their wedding attire before the actual event – and I pretended that I wasn't aware that they had made this arrangement. Nobody seemed to pay any attention to the fact that Jess and I were completely ignoring each other's presence.

I met his eye as he continued to snark from his usual vantage point behind a book, and it was clear that his poker face was way better than mine. I followed my mom to the kitchen and told my nerves to calm themselves. We only had a little over twenty hours to go with this act. It couldn't be that difficult, could it?

Then my mom announced that she was giving me the blessing on the book, and it took every ounce of self-control I had not to run into the next room and tell Jess immediately. I might even have confessed everything to him right at that moment if I we hadn't already made the decision to pretend like nothing out of the usual was happening.

It could finally begin. Me and Jess, Philadelphia, the book, the baby. I wouldn't have to hide anything anymore.

I listened to Jess tell Luke and my mom that he didn't plan to sleep over at our house, but was instead heading to his mother's. This was all part of the script, of course, and his mom had already known that he was planning on staying at her house tonight. There was no way that we could sleep under the same roof and not find a way to slip into each other's bed.
I couldn't contain myself. I had to tell Jess something.

I ran out of the house and burst onto the porch, stopping right before I collided with Jess's chest.

"Jess, look!" I squealed. "The first three chapters!"

Both he and Luke looked at me with an amused expression as I let myself back into the house. I put my manuscript down and turned my attention to tucking Kirk underneath a blanket on the couch.

I wanted to jump up and down and scream for a good half hour. I wanted to run out to Jess, kiss him until long after the sun sunk below the horizon, and then present him with that sonogram I'd been keeping in my purse for the past three days.

I wanted to drag him to the nearest half-secluded location and screw him until it was time for us to be standing on opposite sides of that wedding chuppah.

I couldn't do any of those things, but I could distract myself with my sick friend while I tried to convince my heart to stop racing.

My phone buzzed just then, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

"What the hell was that?" Jess hissed at me as I walked back to the bedroom.

"Jess—" I began excitedly.

"Luke knows we're working together. He knows I'm your editor on this book. You've talked to him about it! What were you trying to do there?"

"I needed to sell it," I claimed unconvincingly. "I don't think Luke is going to put two and two together—"

"He will," Jess argued. "He's hasn't forgotten why you and Lorelai didn't speak for two months." He sighed. "I don't think it matters anyway. I think he knows."

"He didn't seem angry," I remarked.

"He wasn't," Jess said. "I think I was wrong about how he was going to react to this. Sometimes I have to remind myself that he isn't the same person he was when we were eighteen any more than we are. I actually think he might be rooting for us."

"What did he say?" I asked.

"He asked if it was over between us and I lied and told him that it was," Jess said. "It's almost exactly the same thing I said to my mom. I'm glad this charade is almost over, Rory. I'm sick of lying."


"Oh, wow," Jess replied. "Rory, that's awesome. It's everything you've been hoping for."

"I can't wait to really get started on the book, Jess," I told him. "It just feels right. All of it."

"It does," Jess said, and I heard a joy in his voice that was almost equal to my own.

A little over six hours later, I was awakened from my fitful sleep on the sofa.
"Hey, kid wake up."

I shook off the remnants of the pizza coma I'd succumbed to and took a second look at my mom and Luke, who shared identically gleeful expressions on their faces.

"Come on," my mom implored me.

"Where are we going?" I asked drowsily.

"We're going to get married," she told me jubilantly.

"Now?" I asked incredulously.

"Now," she confirmed.

"What about tomorrow?" I asked.

"We'll get married then, too," she said.

I could tell just from looking at her and Luke that they couldn't wait any longer to solidify their relationship. I understood that feeling more than they knew.

"What about him?" she asked, looking over at where Kirk was zonked out on the floor.

"Let the boy sleep," Luke said before a grin appeared on his face that was wider than any that I'd ever seen on him.

I quickly got off of the sofa and texted Jess. He didn't answer.

I called him on the phone. He still didn't answer.

I began to feel panicked. There was no way he would want to miss this, and it wouldn't feel right to me to experience it without him.

Mom and Luke were itching to go, having already secured Lane and Michel as witnesses. Luke said that he'd called both Jess and Liz, and neither of them were answering their phones. They hadn't been able to get in touch with Sookie, either.

"Both he and April will be here for the real deal tomorrow," Mom told me as we hurried out to Luke's truck. "We just want to make it official first, before all of the hoopla."

As soon as we made our way to the town square, I almost forgot how much I wanted Jess there. Kirk had done a wonderful job. My beloved town looked like a fairyland – twinkly lights, gossamer streamers, Patty's ballet dancers dancing around silently in the background. Mom led me and Luke through a maze to the center of the town, Luke graciously letting me in ahead of him as he grinned at her. She looked like she was about to cry out in happiness.

This was the fulfillment of her dream. The fulfillment of their dream. It was the culmination of everything they'd built for thirteen years, finally brought to glorious, sparkling life.

I was happier for her than I had ever imagined I would be.

Luke and I took turns waltzing with Mom around the gazebo, and I felt something strange and wonderful crystallizing in front of us: the family that Mom and I had built on our own was finally taking shape to include Luke as the third person in our dance, the person that he had wanted to be
long before Mom and I ever realized it. For so long he had hovered on the edges, waiting for her to be ready, reluctant to infringe on our bond, giving his time and his generosity and his silent affection. He and Mom had come together on their own and had their own dance, but I had been a missing part of it. Now we had come together as the three of us, ready to start the next chapter as a family. There were different parts to that dance: April had a place here, as did Jess, and even the baby I secretly carried. But for just one moment, it was the three of us in it, and that carried its own significance in my heart.

I knew that tomorrow would bring its own joyful moments, ones that were different from this one but also wouldn't mean any less to the people gathered under that gazebo. That was different from what I had witnessed tonight: this quiet, perfect moment from two people who had fought hard and long to finally treasure it.

It felt right that I was one of the only people who witnessed it.

I texted Jess off and on throughout the night, feeling slightly worried about the fact that neither Luke or I had been able to get in touch with him. I thought back to what we had talked about this afternoon: his paranoia about Luke finding out too soon, his anxiety at me wanting to hold things off another day, his annoyance at the unconvincing show about the book I put on in front of Luke . . .

I'm glad this charade is almost over. I'm sick of lying.

I wondered if he thought I had been distancing myself from him on purpose. If he doubted that it wasn't just the book, it was Philadelphia, it was him that I couldn't wait to get back to.

He finally called me back at about six AM.

"Doula stole my phone," he said contritely. "I'm so sorry I missed it."

There really wasn't a way to explain to him that I was almost glad that I was the only other person in our odd extended family to witness the first round of nuptials without seeming like a horrible person.

"I think the next wedding is going to be more your thing, anyway," I told him. "Lane and I mostly hung out with Patty and watched the ballet dancers. There should at least be some testosterone in the air four round two."

"If any part of that belongs to T.J, I'm not sure it's something I'm looking forward to," Jess replied. "Have you really been up all night?"

"I wasn't going to interrupt Mom and Luke during the consummation of their first wedding," I said. "Like you said, they've waited for this for a long time. Both of them. They deserved at least a few hours without the presence of offspring."

"Fair enough," Jess said. "So I guess I'll meet you in our finery in a few hours?"

"Can't wait," I told him.

I might drop of exhaustion by that point, but I really did mean it.

The caffeine withdrawal was beginning to take its toll by the time I sat down next to my mom in the gazebo.

I was barely awake, and my nerves were beginning to fray more and more. I still didn't know how
Jess would react to the news of him impending fatherhood, and I was beginning to piece together just exactly how much this was going to change everything about my life. I was just barely beginning to feel like myself again, and it had taken a long time to get to a point where I could see any kind of future. I still doubted if I was capable of being any of the things I was going to be required to be in the future: a mother, a partner, a writer. I was going to have to be all of the them at the same time and be good enough at it to teach someone wholly dependent on me how to be those things, too.

I had screwed up so much. How could I get even close to doing any of it right?

Could I rely on Jess to help me become that person, or would we end up destroying each other along the way?

I might be happy about the baby, but it didn't mean that I wasn't also terrified.

As Mom began to talk about my potential husbands, it occurred to me that I hadn't even considered what part marriage would play into any of this. Would Jess want that? Did I? Would it be irresponsible of us not to attempt it? Would it just make things worse?

Just at that point, Paul texted me to inform me he was breaking up with me. He clearly hadn't received any of the messages I'd conveyed to him earlier in my attempts to break up with him.

It was much easier to imagine a more innocent time in the past at that point before everything got so terribly complicated. I just wanted to freeze that image in my mind before I had to deal with all of the other questions I didn't have the answers to yet.

My secret slipped out before I even knew that it had happened.

"Mom?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm pregnant."

Okay, guys! We're finally to the post AYITL version of this story, and we'll finally get to see how Jess reacts to this bombshell in the next chapter. Feel free to drop me a review or comment.
Chapter 13

So we return to the beginning of this story!

A note before we continue on: I've gotten a little bit of flack for conforming my story to the AYITL timeline, and it may not make sense to some hardcore Lit fans, but I basically had to write things this way to have us circle back to the first chapter of the story. This isn't a true AU, but more of a "secret history" interpretation of what we saw in the show, and the intent is to make things turn out a lot more positively than was implied to us in that last scene.

So with that in mind, we proceed onto the next part of the story, and I hope that you enjoy it.

"What do you mean, what if he wasn't?" my mom asked me incredulously, looking at me in shock. "If Logan isn't the father, who is?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Look, do we really have to do this now?"

I had really screwed things up. Jess was supposed to know about the baby before anyone else did. How had I managed to let this slip out? And on my mother's wedding day. I thought I was done with making terrible spur-of-the-moment decisions.

Mom put her hand on my shoulder, the corners of her mouth turned down in an expression of concern. "Rory, do you not –"

"I know who the father is," I told her sharply. She put her hand down gently.

"Well, did you – "she began. She let out a weary sigh. "Did you see the Wookiee again?"

I chuckled grimly. "His name was Lionel," I told her. "And no, I haven't seen him again."

"What about Paul?" she asked softly.

"It's not Paul," I said, turning to look her in the eye. "I haven't seen him since January. I tried to break up with him weeks ago, actually. I guess he never got the messages I tried to send him. I was too chickenshit to meet him in person. And his other girlfriend –"

Mom raised her eyebrows. "You never told me that part," she said.

"I guess it slipped to the back of my mind like everything else concerning him," I said. "I'm thinking she pushed him to end things. But I handled it wrong. I should have gone to see him in person."

"I wouldn't worry too much about it if he wouldn't do the same for you," Mom said. "But if it's not Logan, or Paul or the Wookiee, who –"

I looked at her guiltily as I saw the realization dawning on her face.

"Rory, tell me it's not who I think it is," she said.

I remained silent.

"Jess?"

I drained the last vestiges of orange juice from my glass, wishing that I still had the ability to consume alcohol. This confession was too taxing for me to handle alone.
"You're related now," Mom said, a hint of revulsion in her voice. I was beginning to hate being constantly reminded of that fact.

"When did it happen?" she asked, seemingly half-stunned by this revelation. Well, this next part wasn't going to make things any better.

"It was at Grandma's," I said in a small voice.

"My mother's house?" she whispered in shock.

"We didn't plan it," I told her. "We had been spending a lot of time working on the book together, and he came by when I was there by myself, and – "I shrugged. "It just happened."

"She is never going to forgive either of us for this," Mom said as she took another long sip of champagne.

"She knows," I admitted.

Mom nearly spit out her drink. "She knows?"

"Not that I'm pregnant," I clarified. "She came by the next morning while he was still there, and she didn't freak out about it. She just told me that he wasn't allowed to sleep over there in the future. I've been visiting him since then."

Mom put down her glass. "So, it's not just a one-time thing," she said.

"No," I admitted. "Look, Mom, Jess and I were going to tell you and Luke at the reception. We didn't want anything that was going on with us to interrupt this wedding when both of you have waited for so long. But Jess and I – we're in a relationship. We have been ever since that night."

The silence lingered between us as she processed this.

"I had a feeling you were seeing somebody," Mom said softly. "You kept disappearing for a couple of days at a time, and when you told me that Paris was pregnant and had gotten back together with her husband, I figured that you weren't staying with her anymore." She took a deep breath. "I had just hoped it wasn't Logan again."

I scoffed. "I'm done with Logan," I said forcefully. "I wasn't expecting this thing with Jess to develop like it has, but he's been really good for me. Even before we were together, working with him really helped me to be focused and passionate about something again. And I needed that. And being with him, these last couple of weeks – "I paused, unable to keep from telling you guys everything once you told me you were okay with the book. I was so happy, Mom. I know Jess was, too."

Mom reached out for my hand. "I guess I'll have to get used to this, then," she said. "I'm glad you're
happy, Rory. I really am."

"I'm moving to Philadelphia," I said, unable to keep the rest of my news from spilling out. "I'm going
to work at the book press a little and finish the book." I chuckled. "I guess there wasn't an easy way
to break that part of it to you, is there?"

"Wow, Rory, that's -- "Mom sighed. "That's three and a half hours away from here."

"It's closer than London," I pointed out.

"It is," Mom conceded. "And everything else aside, even I have to admit that Jess is much better
boyfriend material than someone who's engaged to someone else is. But don't you think you're
moving a little too fast?"

"I can't stay with you and Luke forever," I told her. "Queens was a good idea when it was just me
writing this book in solitude. But I don't have a life planned there. I've got a job in Philadelphia and a
relationship and something that could become an actual career. It's right, Mom. I need to move on. I
know it's early, but I wasn't planning to live with Jess right away. I was going to get an apartment of
my own and see how things went." I sighed. "I don't know practical that is going to be given this
latest development, though."

"Jess doesn't know about the baby yet, does he?" Mom asked.

"No," I admitted, trying to push my fears back down to a place where they wouldn't overwhelm me.
"He doesn't. I don't know what he's going to think."

"What do you think, Rory?" Mom asked me gently.

"I want to keep the baby," I told her.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Yes," I said with conviction. "I know it's crazy, and impractical, and I'm not completely ready to be
a mother. I even sat down and wrote down a list of all the ways it's not a good idea. But as soon as I
found out I just knew. I knew I wanted this baby right away and that I was going to find a way to
make this work."

Mom gave me a small smile of encouragement, and I let myself continue. "I don't think it would have
been the same if it wasn't with Jess. If I hadn't been with him like I have and I didn't feel confident
that I could do this with him, I'd probably be feeling a lot differently about it. I feel sure of him,
Mom. I know he's going to be good at this. I just don't know if he's going to be happy about it."

"Is that the main thing that's scaring you?" Mom asked. "You seemed so torn up about it when you
first told me."

I nodded. "I don't know if he's going to be happy. I don't know how this is going to affect our
relationship. It doesn't scare me away from wanting it or doubting him, but I really don't know what
he's going to say. And I really, really don't want to have that conversation where he asks me if it's
his."

Mom cringed. "Are you – are you absolutely certain about that part of it, Rory?"

Oh, wow. If she didn't even believe me, how would anyone else? I felt my insecurities start to bubble
up again.
"I'm sure," I said, and I could feel my voice cracking. "I went to the doctor and had that really uncomfortable ultrasound done so they could tell me exactly how far along I was. They said it was seven weeks. It lines up right when Jess and I first got together, at the end of September. The last time I was with Logan was at the beginning of August."

I looked up at her, and I only saw trust and understanding in her eyes. "I don't know if Jess is going to believe me on that part," I confessed.

"Did Jess ever give you any indication he wouldn't take this well? Or that he didn't trust you?"

"No," I admitted. "But I just don't know what's going to happen." I stopped and turned to her, hesitant to poke at this particular wound, but needing to know anyway. "Was it the same for you? How did Dad react when you told him?"

Mom looked off into the distance. "I think he reacted the same way any 15-year-old boy would when he learns he's going to become a father," she said after a moment. She took another long sip of champagne.

"Was it — was it what you were expecting from him?"

"No," Mom said softly, with a touch of bitterness in her voice. "I expected a lot more than what I got from him."

We were both in agreement on that topic.

Mom put her glass down and turned to me. "I was never sure about your father after that," she told me. "But I was sure about you. I knew from the first minute, exactly like you did. It didn't make sense, but I knew, too."

"I'm not really scared that Jess isn't going to support the two of us," I explained. "In a lot of ways, I think he's probably more prepared for this than I am."

"And that's something I can't really relate to," Mom said, and I could see that long-buried sadness in her eyes. "I think you might be right, though. But even if you're not, or if it doesn't work out later, I want you to know that you can always come back home to us. Luke and I are never going to make you feel that you did any of this wrong. You understand that, right?"

"I do," I said. I wrapped my arms around myself again. "I'm going to tell him at the reception. I had this set plan in my mind that I'd tell him this afternoon and we'd tell you and Luke tomorrow. Which screws with the plan that Jess and I originally had, and he doesn't know why I wanted to change it, and I didn't mean — "I turned to look at her, once again unable to keep the words from spilling out. "I'm sorry, Mom. Jess and I should have dealt with this first ourselves. I wanted to tell him first. I didn't intend to unload all of this on you today. I haven't done any of this right."

"It's okay," Mom said, stroking my arm, and again I felt hopelessly inadequate for rising up to the role that had been thrust on me overnight. How was I going to live up to such an impossible standard?

"I think you needed to tell somebody," Mom continued. "You've been carrying a lot of secrets around with you, kid. But you can't predict what's going to come next, and you've just got to deal with it one step at a time. That's the only way you're going to get through it."

"I ruined your wedding day, though," I protested.

"You didn't," Mom assured me. "My day isn't ruined, Rory. It's just getting started, and I fully intend
for my next wedding to be just as glorious as the first one. We're going to focus on getting me through the next couple of hours, and then you can focus on telling Jess the truth about what's been going on. And I'm really going to need you for the first part."

"So I guess we both need to put this topic on ice, then?" I suggested.

"We do," Mom told me. "Possible morning sickness aside, I intend for the next couple of hours to revolve entirely around me. We've got the afternoon and the rest of your life for you. Agreed?"

"Agreed," I replied, chuckling to myself. I could already feel my nervousness start to ebb away.

It would do me a lot of good to be focused on something else for the next few hours, anyway.

Mom and Luke's second wedding turned out to be just as beautiful as the first one was.

Kirk's fairy tale decorations looked entirely different in the light of day. Instead of just being a secret shared between Luke, Mom, and me, it ushered in a different kind of magic in the town square. This magic was something better seen in the light of day, under the glare of glittering sunlight and the whisperings of fall. It seemed to speak of the culmination of the relationship that the entire town had cherished, celebrated, fought over, and encouraged at every turn.

And now the happily ever after had come true, and we were all there to celebrate.

Sookie and I had been enlisted as dual maids of honor in olive green dresses, while Lulu and Lane served as bridesmaids in gorgeous seafoam dresses of their own You wouldn't have thought they would match with the pink decorations plastered over every available surface and the nearby trees exploding in yellows and browns and reds, but they did. Doula served as flower girl and spread a trail of dahlia leaves on the path leading to the chuppah, where Jess and I stood on opposite sides as we waited for Mom and Luke to meet under that archway crafted by a lovesick Luke so long ago.

I knew that it probably wasn't appropriate for the maid of honor and the best man to be having the amount of eye sex that were engaged in, but I couldn't help it. We were definitely looking at each other in that way again.

Sookie cried throughout the ceremony, creating a cascading effect. Both Luke and Mom were blubbering by the time they finished their vows.

And then it was done. They were married. Finally.

I'd never seen two people look as ecstatic as they did.

I could only hope my future echoed theirs in its own way.

Hours later, after the toasts had been given and the dance floor had been opened to the entirety of Stars Hollow, Jess took my hand and graciously spun me around the dance floor. It was just him and me, him staring at me with that limpid brown gaze, intoxicating me through every pore in a way that the Founders Day Punch I wasn't allowed to drink anymore had never been able to.

I couldn't look away. I didn't want to. And I didn't care who else knew this part of our secret at this point.

"I know it's a little too late, but I kind of hope this makes up for prom," Jess drawled sulkily, and I took in a deep intake of breath.
"You could never have been this charming at prom," I told him as he leaned in for a kiss.

It felt good to be drowned in him in that way, his hand on the small of my back, his lips and tongue almost swallowing mine as I clutched him closer to me.

When we parted, I saw Mom leading Luke away out of the corner of my eye, and I knew I had to stop delaying the inevitable.

"Jess, we have to talk," I told him softly. I saw those eyes start to cloud over, and I immediately felt chagrined. He nodded and ran his fingers through his hair.

I walked over to retrieve my purse, the well-worn envelope with my sonogram stashed safely in the outside pocket. We walked over to a stone bench tucked away from where the rest of the town was congregated, and he sat down next to me, tremulously running his fingers over his pants leg.

I wondered what he thought I was going to tell him.

"This isn't about telling Luke and Lorelai, is it?" he asked, and I could sense a raw hurt emanating from him.

I bit my lip and gathered what remained of my courage.

"No, it isn't, Jess," I told him. "There's been something on my mind the past couple of days, and I've delayed telling you about it. I've run it through my head dozens of times, but the harder I think about it, the more – "I let out a deep breath, and forced my eyes to meet his. "There's no way to say this other than just to say it. I'm pregnant, Jess."

He was silent for about half a minute, and I felt that sense of hope that I'd allowed to balloon this afternoon start to deflate.

Maybe I really had ruined everything.

"Oh, wow," Jess said. "Wow. Rory, wow. That is not what I thought you were going to tell me."

"Jess, what did you – "I began.

"I thought you were going to break up with me," he said, turning his gaze to me. I could see the shock start to disappear from his face, and I felt that sense of hope start to bubble up again.

"I thought you had changed your mind about me, about us, about everything," he said. "I thought that's why you were stalling about letting the parental units know. Now it all – it all makes sense."

"I definitely haven't changed my mind about us," I reassured him. "Quite the opposite."

"How long have you known?" he asked me.

"About a week," I replied. "I got – I got a sonogram three days ago. The baby's healthy."

"Is that why you didn't want to spend the night with me earlier this week?" Jess asked, and I could sense a note of caution begin to creep into his voice.

"It is," I admitted, feeling immensely guilty for everything I had kept hidden from him. "Jess, I wanted – I wanted to be sure."

"You wanted to be sure," he repeated. "Rory, is it – "He stopped and started again. "Rory, I don't know how to – "
There it was. The question I had been terrified of. The conversation I hadn't wanted to have for a week.

"It's yours," I told him. "The thing is, Jess, I did this all wrong. I should have told you when I first found out. But I knew you'd have questions, and we haven't been involved that long, and I wanted to assure you – "I sighed. "I knew it was yours right away. But I wanted proof. So I went to the doctor, and had them do the sonogram they usually don't do that early, so they could tell me exactly when it happened, and they said I was seven weeks along."

"Seven weeks," Jess repeated. He nodded in acknowledgement. "You got – you got your period the week before we got together?"

"That's right," I said, wondering how he knew so much about this sort of thing.

"You didn't have to put yourself through that, Rory," Jess said. He reached for my hand. "I trust you. And we didn't really protect ourselves that night. That was all the information I really needed to have about it."

I felt a rush of love for him start to rise inside of me, and I wondered what it was I had done to earn that kind of trust from him. And yet I hadn't trusted him enough not to expect worse from him.

Why hadn't I expected more? After all, this was Jess. He had always believed in me, even when I hadn't come close to believing in myself.

"I should have told you earlier," I said to him, squeezing his hand. "I'm sorry, Jess."

"Does anyone else know?" he asked softly.

"I told my mom this morning," I admitted. "I didn't mean to, Jess. I wanted to tell you first. I was just afraid, and I'd been keeping so many secrets from her – it just spilled out."

"Okay," Jess said, nodding. "I guess I can understand that, though, Rory." He ran his thumb over my finger. "I'm not mad about that part of it. Or that you waited a couple of days. Really."

I smiled back at him and reached with my other hand for the outside of my purse.

"That's the sonogram?" Jess asked.

I nodded as I continued to unzip my purse.

Jess let go of my hand.

"Look, Rory, before you – "he started. He took a deep breath and then began again. "Before I see it, I just – "He ran his hands through his hair. "I'm not saying this right."

His brown gaze bored into mine, seemingly pleading for mercy. "I don't really want to see that picture until I know how you feel about this," he said.

Oh.

"I want the baby," I told him, and I could see the fear and worry start to retreat from his expression.

This was the opposite of what I had expected from him. Once again, I internally cursed myself.

How could I have anticipated so little from him?
"I want to keep this baby," I continued. "I want to keep it and raise it with you. I didn't expect that I would want this so much, but I do. I knew it right away, Jess. As soon as I found out."

Jess's eyes lit up with joy, and his grin easily spread from one corner of his face to the other.

"Show me the picture, Rory," he said, his voice taking on a hint of devilish glee.

I finished unzipping my purse, and opened the well-worn envelope with the first picture of our baby inside of it. I handed it to Jess as he reverently held onto it for the first time.

"So that's – "he began, pointing to the tiny white blob in the center of the picture.

"Wow, Rory," he said, his voice struck with wonder. "Wow."

"You're happy then?" I asked him.

He reluctantly tore his eyes away from the sonogram to meet mine. "Ecstatic," he confirmed.

"Our life together is going to be a lot different now," I said, reluctantly reaching for the sonogram and carefully placing it back inside of the envelope as I returned it to its nesting place inside of my purse. I reached for his hand again.

"Do you still want to get a place of your own?" Jess asked softly.

"I don't," I confirmed. "You might have to sacrifice that home gym of yours, though."

"It's a welcome sacrifice," Jess told me. "Does this mean that you're willing to call me your boyfriend now? That we can stop wallowing around in relationship limbo?"

"I think we've sailed way past that point," I told him. "And yes."

Jess bent his head to mine and met me for a kiss, the last rays of the setting sun warming our bodies.

I was more than content to let myself drown in it.
Okay, for starters, I think this is the longest chapter I've ever contributed to this story. So apologies in advance.

There's a lot of ground to be covered here, and this part of the story has evolved quite a bit since I first outlined it. I didn't intend to get into Rory's issues with Christopher again, but it's become an important part of the story, and it isn't going away anytime soon.

Jess's ex girlfriend (and some of the things that happened during their relationship) becomes an issue during this chapter, and we'll hear a bit more about her in the next couple of updates. I only mention this because I think we've gone a long time without her being referenced, and it might be a little confusing. There is no love triangle situation or conflict of affection on this front - this is a fluffy Literati story, and I intend to keep it that way. But some stuff is going to come up that was definitely not an element of the canon storyline.

Lane's backstory is also something that kind of crept up on me. There are some delicate issues referenced there, and I probably have zero chance of doing them justice, but that rarely stops me from trying.

It's my intention to try to finish two more chapters after this before the end of 2018, but we'll see how it goes.

As for now, read, enjoy (or don't), and drop me a review if you feel like it.

"Pregnant?"

Luke slumped into the chair at the table nearest to him in a daze, seemingly overcome with shock.

He didn't say anything for the next couple of seconds.

Jess and I exchanged a worried glance, and pulled out the other chairs at the table before sitting down. Luke didn't even seem aware of us at this point.

I lifted my eyes to my mother. I was at a complete loss on how to proceed next.

"Hon, why don't I fix you some tea?" Mom suggested. She trotted off to the kitchen, picking up the train of her gown as you went.


"I'll be fine," Mom called from behind us as I heard her rummaging around in the cabinets.


I wondered if he had reacted this way when he found out about April. If I ever got close enough to her to be able to ask about these kinds of things, that question would be at the top of my list of things to ask her. We hadn't had any opportunities to bond at the wedding, and I wondered if we would find any in the next couple of months. She had arrived about an hour before the wedding, performed her best (wo)man duties alongside Jess, and then had absconded shortly after the toasts were made, claiming she had work waiting for her back at school.

I hoped that she had been distracted enough to avoid observing the slight inappropriate looks her
cousin and I had been engaged in during the ceremony. That was going to be a tangled web to
unweave when the time came for it.

Luke finally turned his head to look at the two of us. I heard Jess's feet start to jitter underneath the
table, and I reached for his hand.


"When – "

"How long has it – "

"Here's your tea, babe," Mom announced as she returned to the table with a cup of tea for Luke and
cups of coffee for herself and for Jess. She handed me a glass of water and pulled out the chair next
to Luke before sitting down.

"Rory, I didn't know if you'd given up the good stuff or just decided to embrace the concept of
moderation – "

"It's fine," I reassured her. "I've been weaning myself off of caffeine for a week."

Jess turned to me. "That's got to come with some heady withdrawal symptoms," he remarked.

I grimaced as I took a sip of water. "It's not as bad as the morning sickness was. I think I'm past most
of both of those things, though."

Luke fingered the flannel shirt my mom had put on over her wedding dress. "I like this," he told her.
His face seemed to be returning to a normal color.

Mom smiled and leaned in for a kiss.

Luke sighed once they parted for breath and downed a sip of tea. He turned to face Jess and me, and
I could feel both of us wince at the same time.

"How long has this been going on?" Luke asked softly.

He didn't seem angry with either of us. Just concerned.

"About seven weeks," Jess said.

"And you are – " Luke gestured in the direction of my midsection.

I let my gaze meet Jess's, and he nodded. "About seven weeks," I confirmed.

"Jess."

"This wasn't a one-time thing," Jess said, his voice rising a little. "We're in a relationship. It's not a
casual thing for either of us."

"I already knew that," Luke replied, sounding slightly exasperated. "The performance the two of you
put on yesterday – "He sighed and took another sip of tea. "Not convincing."

"I bought it," Mom protested.

"Jess was a lot more obvious when I got him alone," Luke said. "I knew that you two were together,
but I didn't know exactly what that meant at this point. Is the baby the entire reason that this
"It's not," Jess insisted. "We were making plans long before we knew about it. Rory decided to move to Philadelphia a couple of weeks ago. We just put off telling you about it until the wedding. And then, well, this happened – "

Jess gestured in the direction of my minuscule midsection. I felt awkward that nothing physically was beginning to show at this point and that this wouldn't change until many weeks from now.

I flashed back to that scene from the Twilight movies that I pretended I had been too old to see.

Wait, why was my life resembling a scene from a bad vampire romance?


He shot Jess a look that I couldn't quite decipher.

Mom cleared her throat. "So," she said. "Philadelphia. It's a big change. Have you guys decided if you are going to live together yet?"


Mom shrugged. "I only found out this morning," she told him. "I didn't want to tell you until I knew Rory had been given a chance to tell Jess."

"It just slipped out," I confirmed. "Jess and I have talked, though – we've decided that we're going to live together. I was going to get my own place, but I hadn't decided on anything. But given recent circumstances – it just makes more sense to move in together."

"And you're sure about this?" Luke asked, seemingly directing his question towards Jess.

"I am," Jess affirmed, and squeezed my hand underneath the table. I looked at him appreciatively. "I want to do this with Rory. It's going to be different – but not a bad kind of different. I'm looking forward to it."

"Celeste is all over that apartment," Luke remarked. "Did you throw any of her stuff away?"

Jess grunted. "I got a new bed," he said defensively. "Her wardrobe, her desk – she took that with her. The rest of the office stuff, the bookshelves, the sound system – that's all mine."

"And the furniture?" Luke asked. "The stuff on the walls? That studio of hers?"

I turned to look at Jess mockingly. "That's all stuff you guys got together?"

"We can get new stuff," Jess told me. He knew I was teasing him.

"Get new stuff," Luke said forcefully. "Take it from someone who's been there. You'll appreciate it sooner than you think."

Mom reached out for his hand and stroked it encouragingly. I couldn't help but notice how right it looked to finally see their rings next to each other, as if they had belonged there all along.

"Luke's right," Mom said. "You want to get everything the way you want it before the kid comes, because after that happens – it's going to be the last thing on your mind."

"We'll talk about it," I affirmed. "We've already decided we're probably going to put the baby in the
studio."

"Have you told anyone else yet?" Luke asked.

"We want to wait to tell April ourselves," I told him. "The rest of the family – well, we haven't
gotten that far, but definitely with April – "

"– It's because of all the moving parts with her," Jess said, completing my sentence in a more concise
manner than had even occurred to me. "Because we're related to her in so many different ways, we
thought it might get awkward. So we'd like to do that on our own."

"What about your mom?" Mom asked.

"We told her and TJ that we were together at the reception," I said, meeting Jess's eyes for a moment
and suppressing the urge to giggle. "As far as the pregnancy goes – we'd like to give it some time,
but we haven't mapped it out yet."

"How'd they take that news?" Luke asked.

Jess sighed. "There were a lot of banjo jokes."

"Yeah, it's wise to wait on that one," Luke remarked. He finished his tea and sat the cup back down
on the table. "Honestly, Jess, I don't know whether to strangle you for all of this or congratulate
you."

"Which impulse is winning at this moment?" Jess asked.

"I'm not sure," Luke said. "You'll have to give me some time on that one. But I want both of you to
know that if either of you need anything from Lorelai or me, don't ever hesitate to ask. You
understand me?"

"I won't," I assured him as Jess and I simultaneously breathed a sigh of relief.

I could only hope that everyone else who needed to know would end up taking the news as well as he did.

Later that night, I lay curled up against Jess's chest in my childhood bed, luxuriating in a post-coital
afterglow. We had the house to ourselves while the newlyweds consummated their marriage for a
second time across town at the Dragonfly. The moonlight drifted in from the window to drape itself
across the sliver of our faces, giving us just enough light to wrap us up in an otherworldly haze. I
wanted to enjoy as much of this feeling as I could.

My bed was just wide enough to have sex in, but unfortunately wasn't adept enough for much of
anything else for anyone other than myself. For the moment, I didn't mind. Post baby revelation sex
possessed a majesty of its own. It somehow felt right to celebrate it with Jess amongst the remnants
of the youth that no longer belonged to me.

I wanted to share this moment with him here before we officially ushered ourselves into adulthood. I
had been frozen in time, in immaturity, for a long time. Now I was finally facing the next stage of my
life, and I had been given the chance to face it with someone instead of just relying on myself. I
should have been terrified of this, after living a solitary and uncommitted life for so long. But I wasn't
terrified. I was becoming astounded on a daily basis on how much of the future didn't terrify me.

"When should we tell her?" Jess asked me, running his fingers through my hair and gently jolting me
"April?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know. She seems really busy, maybe we could get her for a day down to Philadelphia once everything is settled – "

Jess chuckled warmly, and I felt his laugh reverberate underneath me. "She's not busy. She's seeing someone. It's probably serious."

I shifted my head to look up at him, and Jess continued. "She gets like this whenever she knows something isn't casual anymore. She knows she's getting close to having to introduce him to Luke, and she's afraid he'll scare yet another one of her boyfriends away."

I was amused to discover this insight into Luke's paternal side. After all, it was almost a direct reflection of the many ways in which he had sought to shelter me over the years. "He gets pretty bad, huh?"

"Remember how tough he was on me when we were dating back in high school? Imagine that, only multiplied by a gargantuan amount," Jess said. "April's kind of the relationship type though, so she can't avoid it that much longer. It's going to be rough on the poor guy."

I giggled and settled back against his chest. "He was like that with all of my boyfriends. Dean, you, even Logan, and Logan never really hung around Stars Hollow. I had the tremendously horrible idea of inviting Mom and him for a couples' weekend back in the day. It was awful."

"Seriously?" Jess asked, clearly amused. "A couple's weekend?"

"I was twenty-one," I said defensively. "It seemed like a good idea at the time. Plus, it was a few months after April showed up and Mom was unhappy about a lot of things. I thought it would at least make her feel better."

Jess removed his hand from my hair. "Luke thinks of you as his daughter. He's never going to warm up to the idea of anything resembling a double date," he said, his voice rasping a little.

"Oh, Jess, I know," I said, burying my head in his chest. I sighed and looked back up at him. "We tried it with Dean once, too, after we were together for a little while after high school. It pretty much went the same way. I don't know why I ever thought any of that was a good idea."

"He took things well today," Jess pointed out. "I'm guessing part of him still really wants to kill me, but maybe Lorelai can work that off of him in the next few days."

"They were so happy," I said. "I'm glad we told them now, Jess. Even if I wasn't pregnant – whatever other feelings they had, I'm glad it helped."

"You know, despite everything, Rory, I'm glad it worked out for them," Jess said. "I had a lot of doubts along the way, but – there wasn't anything else for them but to be with each other."

I shifted to lay on my stomach against his chest, reaching out to run my fingers through his hair. "April told you about some of the bad stuff, didn't she?"

"Not quite like you're thinking," Jess replied. "She doesn't know what went on between your parents the night Luke and your mom broke up. At least, I don't think she does. I kind of put that together
after she told me about Lorelai agreeing to cut ties with your dad. She didn't really understand it, but I thought about it and the stuff you told me, especially about what happened at Lane's wedding and the situation with your little sister and all – "He shrugged. "It made sense. And Luke confirmed it."

"Are you still angry with her?" I asked.

"I wondered for a long time how Luke could forgive her," Jess said. "And I remembered how judgmental she had been of me when we were younger. But the more time I spent around them, I realized that he was never as happy as when he was with her. She was it for him, and that was all there was to it. I envied that. I wanted to understand it, and I got close, but – "He shrugged. "I haven't changed my mind about how I felt about what she did, but I began to understand Luke's part of it, too."

I felt an insidious strain of fear and guilt snake its way into my insides, taking root inside my gut.

I wasn't any different than my mom had been the night she ran to my father. In some ways, I was even worse.

"I've done the same thing that she did," I told him, my voice shaking a little. "I tried to cheat on Logan with you purely to piss him off. I spent a year and a half sleeping with him while he was engaged to someone else. Any kind of high moral standard – I can't even come close to passing it, Jess."

"That's not what I meant, Rory," Jess insisted. "I care about Luke, so I can look at the outside of that relationship and maybe be a little harsh, but I want him to be happy. I know that Lorelai is the only person who can do that for him. I know you've done stuff you haven't been proud of, but so have I. So has everyone. It doesn't make me not trust you, Rory, or judge you for what happened before we were together. I love you, Rory. The other stuff doesn't matter."

I felt that strain of fear start to withdraw from my insides and I let myself breathe again.

I was tempted to throw myself on him for another round of lovemaking, but I was still half exhausted from the whirlwind of emotion I'd put myself through already today. Not to mention the two strenuous rounds we'd already completed tonight.

Besides, if I jumped on him from this angle, he'd probably fall off the bed, anyway.

"That's the first time you've said that," I told him. "This time around, anyway."

Jess lowered his forehead to mine. "I meant it," he whispered before kissing me gently.

"I love you, too," I told him. He smiled and wiped my hair away from my face in a silent gesture of acknowledgement.

I curled up against his chest again while he resumed playing with my hair.

"I still have mixed feelings about what happened between Mom and Luke back then," I confessed.

"I wouldn't expect you to come from the same perspective that I do," Jess said. "I had one person to consider in that equation and you had two. It wasn't going to be the same."

"He really hurt her, Jess," I told him. "I know he didn't do it on purpose, but she was really looking forward to being married. She wanted to be with him so much, and he kept pushing her away and doing everything he could to keep her away from April. She just got unhappier and unhappier, and I hated seeing her that way. I still hated what she did, but after it was all over, I just thought – maybe
my dad would be better for her. Because I had always held onto that dream of my parents getting back together, and it seemed like we could trust him, and – "

I felt my tears begin to fall, and I silently cursed myself.

"We couldn't trust him," I continued, my voice cracking. "I knew when they got married that it was all a reaction to her losing Luke, that she didn't love my dad like that. And he hated Stars Hollow, it was all a big mistake. But before any of that happened, he was paying attention to me for the first time and it didn't have anything to do with my mother. So I thought it would continue after they split up, but it didn't. He sensed that she was weak and unhappy and he used me to get to her. But in the beginning, I thought it might have worked out. I wanted it to. I feel guilty for that now."

"There's no reason to feel guilty about any of that," Jess said softly. "Rory, I know it was messed up. I know Luke caused a lot of harm by the things that he did. But they found their way back to each other, and they're happy now. That's what matters, right?"

I turned around to face him again. "It doesn't make my dad any better for his part in it," I told him. "Or for everything else that he didn't do. That's why I feel guilty. I know Luke was there for me in all the ways that my dad wasn't. Looking back on all of that, though – I still take my mom's side for a lot of it. I probably always will."

"And I get that," Jess said, brushing a strand of hair away from my face. "And trust me, Rory, I really get what it's like having a shitty father who was never there and knowing that Luke was always there to do the things he should have. I know it makes our situation really strange, but he was the same person to both of us that our dads weren't. That doesn't mean that there's any shame in also wanting our dads to be there for us in the first place."

"I don't want to tell my dad about the baby," I blurted out. "I know we eventually have to tell him, but I kind of want him to be last on the list. After your mom, my grandmother, Lane, Paris, the entire town of Stars Hollow – "

Jess chuckled. "Maybe we ought to hold off on that last part for a few months."

"We could tell your mom at Thanksgiving," I suggested. "Once T.J. finds out, that should take care of the rest of the town."

Jess sighed. "You won't be out of the first trimester until December," he said. "Do you want to tell everyone before then?"

"I kind of want to tell everyone about it now," I said. "I know it's bad luck, but I've already had a healthy scan for this baby. I feel good about it, Jess. I think Thanksgiving is a good time."

Jess's brow furrowed slightly, but he nodded in acquiescence. "Your grandmother?" he asked.

"I'm thinking Christmas," I said. "I want to tell Lane before we go back to Philadelphia, though. She wants to meet up tomorrow morning before she leaves town again. I'm not sure I'll have a lot of time to spend with her since she's gone back to touring life."

"I lay my chin on his chest and looked up at him. "What about your dad? Do you want to tell him?"

"I have no idea where my dad is," Jess said.

He didn't seem the slightest bit emotional about this.

"I thought you kept in touch with him," I said. "I mean, you traveled all the way out to California to see him – "
I suddenly remembered that other than a cursory visit of the topic soon after we reconnected on a pit stop to Philadelphia during the Obama campaign, Jess had never spoken about his father again to me. The reasons for our breakup and his abrupt departure from Stars Hollow were also a subject we usually sought to avoid at all costs.

"I stayed with him about three weeks," Jess clarified, his voice taking on a slightly bitter undertone. "He didn't really want me around. I think he was only interested in me in the way someone who gives a kid up for adoption would be – you know, nice to meet you, glad you're alive, I don't want anything else to do with you. And of course, he didn't give me up for adoption, he abandoned my mom and me, but he didn't really want to hear that part of it. So I left. I tried to send him a copy of my book and an invite to the open house for the press, but it came back as undeliverable. I tried to look him up later on, but I couldn't find him. I'm not sure he's worthy of being told even if I knew where he was."

"I'm sorry," I said.

Jess's hurt might not be exactly the same as mine, but it apparently still existed for him. I wondered why his hurt didn't seem to keep creeping up on him like mine did for me.

Jess shrugged. "I think the people who need to know will find out soon enough. I'm not concerned about him."

"I need to tell Paul," I said softly.

"Paul? Why? I thought you broke up with him weeks ago."

"I tried, Jess," I protested. "I called him, I texted him, I tried to reach out to him on Messenger – nothing worked. He didn't respond to any of it. What was I going to do, turn up on his doorstep to demand that we break up when we ignored each other most of the time anyway? It didn't seem right to me."

"Then why do you need to tell him?" Jess asked, hurt creeping around the edges of his voice.

"He broke up with me by text message early this morning," I confessed. "What I was trying to communicate to him – it didn't get through. I think his other girlfriend pushed him to contact me, but I kind of need to have a conversation with him to make things clear. Especially before we become permanently attached."

Jess frowned. "Permanently attached? You mean – "

"I mean the flesh and blood person who is going to link us forever," I clarified.

I still wasn't at all prepared to talk about marriage.

Jess focused his gaze on mine. "Do you want to tell Logan?" he asked softly.

*That* thought hadn't even occurred to me.

"I don't see any reason for him to know," I told him.

"He might come to the same conclusion that you thought I would about who this baby belongs to," Jess pointed out.

"There's no reason for him even to be aware of me," I said. "I know I'll know when he actually gets married, but I'm – removed from any sort of public circle by this point. I don't want to screw up his
life. It wasn't the same between us as it is for you and me but I respect him enough not to make things difficult for him."

"I get that," Jess said, lowering his head to rest his forehead on mine. He pressed a kiss against my temple and I settled back against him once more. "Sometimes it's good to let the past remain the past."

I yawned. It had been a long day, and the two-and-a-half-hour nap I had taken earlier that morning had barely been enough to sustain me. I'd been propelled by anxiety and then romantic euphoria, and now all I wanted was to drift back into the haze of contentment I'd had coiled around me before all of this heavy talk.

Jess sighed, and I felt his chest rise and fall underneath my ear. I could tell that he was almost as exhausted as I was.

"It wouldn't be fair anyway," I said drowsily, feeling sleep about to overtake me. "I mean, to just contact Logan and told him that I got together with this great guy right after we broke up and now we're having a baby – "

I heard Jess stiffen underneath me, and I cringed.

I hadn't even considered if he would want to let his ex know about what had happened.

"I don't want to tell Celeste," Jess said roughly, sounding overcome with either pain or tiredness. "You're right. There's no need for our exes to know about this. If she finds out, she finds out. I don't have a reason to talk to her – and what we're doing together isn't a reason."

"The past is the past, right?" I asked.

Jess picked up my hand and gave it a kiss. "That's what I think."

I slowly succumbed to sleep, confident in the knowledge that our worst mistakes were being put behind us for good.

"Seattle?" I asked as Lane and I walked to the gazebo the following morning, clutching identical thermoses from the diner. Lane hadn't noticed that I had put tea in mine this morning instead of my usual incentive to start moving.

"Seattle," Lane confirmed as we settled down on the steps.

"That's not what I was expecting you to tell me," I said honestly.

Lane shrugged. "We're finishing up the tour at the end of December," she said. "The boys are having a little more trouble adjusting than they did the last time we went out for good. I think they still enjoy it, but they're already nine and I figure they might tire of this completely by the time they're in high school. So it's probably a good idea to strike a balance between being completely enmeshed in suburbia and being on the road constantly. At least for a while."

"So how long is the residency?" I asked.

"Four months," Lane said. "It's going to be really good for us, Rory. We'll finally get to earn a living at music again. It's three nights a week at the club, and Zach is going to work at the recording studio. We'll hopefully get the album out in May and then go on the road during the summer."
"Are they going to let Zach produce it for you guys like he did with all your other stuff?" I asked.

"They're going to pull in a co-producer, but I think it's going to work out," Lane said, her voice tinged with wonder. "It's a real label, Rory. I know it might not work out or be permanent, but I've never released anything on a label that's just me. Zach had that soundtrack song that blew up a while back and he did two albums on that label back in Queens and I was so proud of him, but it's different to know I was signed for all these songs that I worked on myself. It's just – it's a whole new world."

"You sound really excited," I remarked.

"I am," Lane said. "My mom isn't too happy about it, but she'll adjust to it – she's adjusted to a lot over the years." She shook her head and turned to me. "So anyway – you said that you had something to tell me, too."

"I do," I said. I took a deep breath, and let myself plunge forth. No matter how many times I delivered this news, I never was quite prepared for the reaction of pure shock that greeted me immediately afterwards. "I'm pregnant."

Lane was silent for about half a minute. She took a sip of coffee and set the thermos back down gingerly.

"Jess?" she asked softly.

I nodded, and I could feel my face start to break out in an undeniable grin. "And before you say anything, I had an ultrasound done early and I know the exact date that the conception happened, so I know it's Jess's."

"I guess you've been getting that kind of reaction a lot," Lane observed aloud. "You're really . . . happy about this, aren't you?"

"I am," I said. "God, Lane, if you had told me three months ago that I would be in a relationship with Jess Mariano, that I'd be settling down in his city, that I'd be pregnant with his baby and that I'd want it, I would have thought that you were insane. But it's true. It's all true."

"Did you tell your parents?" Lane asked. "Well, you know what I mean. Your mom and Luke."

I nodded. "We told both of them yesterday," I said. "I think Jess was worried Luke was going to murder him, but they've been really supportive. We're holding off on letting everyone else know for a few more weeks.

"Are you getting married?" Lane asked.

"We haven't talked about that yet," I replied. "I haven't even really thought about it. It's been a lot of life changes to ponder over the past couple of days. The only thing we've really decided is that I'm going to move in with him instead of getting my own apartment."

"I know we don't think about these things in the same way, Rory, but I think you guys need to talk about it," Lane said. "Promise me you'll at least broach the subject with him, okay?"

I nodded. "We'll get to that," I promised her.

Lane let loose an incredulous chuckle. "And all along I thought you guys were already moving too fast," she remarked. "Though I can kind of relate to it sneaking up on you."

"I think I might be a little more prepared than you were by this point," I replied, taking a sip of my
"You've been sleeping on my couch for the past couple of months," Lane pointed out. "You've been living the life of a twenty-three-year-old for a long time now. And maybe I was married first when I was that age and this happened to me, but it comes at you fast, Rory. You're never really prepared."

"I know, Lane," I said. "I've been kind of stuck for a while. I admit that. But I've made a lot of steps towards getting better over the past couple of weeks, and I like to think the learning curve isn't going to be as steep as it was for you."

"It's just really different once that baby gets here," Lane said. "I think it's the same no matter how old you are, or how prepared you think that you're going to be. It isn't just the stuff people want to scare you with, and there will be plenty of that – but how much you're going to love that kid. That's what really sneaks up on you."

"Is it weird that I feel connected already?" I asked her. "I think it's more to the idea of it right now, but – it's kind of scared me how happy I am about it."

"It's not weird at all," Lane said. She put her cup down and looked down at her hands. "You know, I lost a baby once."

"Oh, Lane," I said. "You don't have to –"

"No, I want to," Lane continued, her voice shaking slightly. "It was that year after Mama went on tour with the band on me so she could help out with the boys. Gil wanted to spend time with his family, so we figured we'd take a little bit of a rest until we went back out again. We got this cozy little apartment in Hartford – I don't think you ever saw it, but it was really nice – and we both got day jobs. I worked at the public gardens and took the boys with me to work. Zach took over managing this really tasteful record shop. We had this nice little life, and we thought we'd add to it."

I rubbed her shoulder, silently imploring her to go on.

"We wanted to have another baby while the boys were old enough for them not to be underfoot while we had an infant but also so there wouldn't be a wide enough gap for them not to feel like they had a real sibling," Lane said. "So we started trying, and I got pregnant after a few months. I started bleeding really early, so they thought they'd keep an eye on me so I'd make it through the first trimester."

Lane stopped, letting a few sobs escape before she continued.

"I got really close, Rory," she said in a whisper. "Eleven weeks, four days. They did some tests afterwards, to find out what had gone wrong – it was a little girl."

"I would have come home if I knew," I told her. How long ago had Lane lived in Hartford? Five years, six? I felt incredibly guilty that I hadn't been here to help her while she was suffering through this. What had I been doing that was so incredibly important back then? I couldn't even remember.

"I think you were still in DC," Lane said. "And anyway, I didn't tell anyone. I didn't want to tell anyone. I think my mom is the only one who knows. I just went into this fugue. I quit my job, I wasn't taking care of the boys – I just couldn't feel anything. I think Luke and your mom suspected something was going on with me, but I didn't want to let anyone know what had happened."

She took a deep breath, and I reached out to squeeze her hand.

"The only thing that got me out of it was that I started writing songs by myself," Lane continued. "I
never did that before – songwriting was Dave and Zach's thing, then it was Zach and Gil's thing, and I contributed to it a little but I didn't do much of it myself. This was me – all me. I put all that EP that you said was so dark." Lane guffawed bitterly. "Well, almost everyone said that."

"Oh, Lane," I said. How could I have been so callous and insensitive? Why hadn't I asked her why it was so dark?

"I made it worse for you," I whispered. "I didn't even ask you about it."

"That's the thing, Rory," Lane said, wiping her eyes. I let go of her hand reluctantly. "You didn't make it worse for me. I had this terrible thing happen to my family, this huge loss, something I had wanted really badly, and writing those songs was the only thing that let me deal with it. I wasn't carrying that darkness around with me anymore."

She sighed and turned to me. "You're a writer," she said. "You understand this. This is how stuff gets expunged."

"I wish I had just – been a little more careful about what I said to you back then," I told her. "I feel awful about it."

"There's no way you could have known," Lane said. "The thing is, Rory – I could have had more kids. Zach wanted to. I just couldn't handle it. I didn't have anything left to give to another baby. I was a songwriter and a mom and a wife and I – " She stopped, looking more emotionally wrought out than I had ever seen her. "There wasn't anything left to go around," she continued. "I didn't want another baby. I wanted the one I didn't have anymore. So Zach had a vasectomy, and that was that."

"I wish I would have known," I told her. "I feel like I should have known, Lane. I wasn't there to help you raise your kids like I said I would be and I wasn't here for you when this happened to you."

"I'm not angry with you or with anyone else for what happened back then," Lane said. "That isn't why I'm telling you this now. I'm not telling it to you to scare you about all of the things that could happen to your baby, either. Being a creative person in a relationship comes with its own set of difficulties. Especially when you're raising a child. You have to know how to take that dark stuff and put it in a place where it won't harm whatever kind of peace you've managed to create for your family. You've got to know when to push and when not to push once you see the other person has put something out there that you don't understand. It's hard, Rory. You've got to know what you can handle and what you can't."

"I haven't really dealt with that before," I told Lane. "I've mostly been writing about other people, not myself. Jess has been doing this for a while, though. I think it will be better knowing he's not a novice at this kind of thing."

"You can't just rely on him," Lane said. "Sometimes when Zach puts something out there that makes me think that he's unhappy, I have to consider whether he's really thinking about his issues with his dad or something that happened before he was involved with me or whether he's pissed that I didn't tell him about picking the kids up early for soccer. Sometimes I want to ask and I know that I can't. You've got to figure out how to walk that line with Jess and he's got to do the same thing for you."

"Does it make a difference if I tell you that I'm planning to get the book out of the way before the kid comes?" I asked her.

"I think that might help," Lane said. "But the other stuff – it's still going to be a struggle. I want you to know that even though I'm going to be far away that you can still come to me if you're struggling. I know marriage and parenthood came at me all at once, and there were a lot of things that no one
ever explained to me. I just want you to know that I'm here for you, no matter what."

"I do know that," I told her. "And even though maybe it wasn't always that way in the past – that it always works the other way around, too, Lane. You can always call me if you need me."

"I know that," Lane said. "And I'm grateful for it. Really."

We sipped our respective beverages as the leaves drifted around our feet, almost as if they were saying goodbye to this town at the same time that we were.
Chapter 15

Okay, remember when I said I was going to have three chapters of this story out in December? Yeah, that was exceedingly ambitious. I'm sorry, guys.

Fair warning: there is a fair bit of both Paul and Dean talk here, but I think those subjects needed to be discussed. We'll mostly exhaust those subjects by the end of this (probably too long) chapter.

I'm aware that my subject matter is getting a tiny bit repetitive with the multiple scenes of Jess and Rory breaking the news. We've gotten through most of them so I hope to vary it a little more in the next couple of updates. I'm also aware I'm kind of going out into left field with a lot of this April stuff, but there's really so much we don't know about that dynamic, and I wasn't entirely satisfied with what we got in AYITL. So I'm adding some stuff.

So read, enjoy (or don't), and drop me a review if you feel like it.

"It's weird, right?" April asked as she sat across the table from us. "I mean, it seems like the most conventional story in the world, but it's not. It's just strange to me." She shook her head. "I'm trying not to judge. Really."

"Try harder," Jess replied as he refreshed her glass of wine from the bottle we had brought from home.

"I'm sorry," April said as she poked at her salad. "I wouldn't have insisted that you guys run all the way out to Fairmount if I thought this was what you were going to tell me."

"You like this place," Jess remarked as he swirled the chicken around on his fork.

"I do," April said. "But –"

"What did you think we were going to tell you?" I asked as I took a sip of tea.

"I'm not sure," April said. "I thought it might be about skipping out on the wedding so early, but –" she shrugged. "I guess it's not that big of a deal."

"Okay, now that's the opposite of what you just said," Jess replied. "You're not getting out of it that easy. This is why we invited you out here, to sit down and talk about it. Do you have a problem with us?"

"With you two hooking up, or the fact that you're moving in together and having a baby basically as soon as you started your relationship?" she asked.

"Both," I said.

I really didn't think any of this would end up stunning her to this degree. Then again, Jess knew April a lot better than I did.

"Well, I always figured it might happen eventually," April said. "I mean, all these family events, two young people who used to sleep together under the same roof –"

I giggled slightly as I peeked at Jess out of the corner of my eye. His eyes lit up as he coughed audibly.

"-But I didn't think it would go anywhere," April prattled on, oblivious to both of us. "And I figured
both of you would know how to prevent a situation like this, unless you did it on purpose." She put down her fork. "Wait. It wasn't on purpose, was it?"

"It didn't happen on purpose," I clarified as I looked at Jess again. He tried to hide his grin underneath his napkin. "The relationship or the baby. But we're happy about it."

"You're happy about it?" April echoed.

"We are," Jess said as he squeezed my hand underneath the table. "I doubt Luke wants you to repeat our example, but we are looking forward to this. Maybe we didn't plan on it, but it happened at the right time for us."

"So, what are you going to do now?" April asked, lifting her eyebrows in my direction.

"You mean um, career wise?" I asked.

"Yeah, we'll start there," April said, steeling her gaze in my direction.

I swallowed hard before I continued. "I'm writing a book about my mom and me," I told her. "My childhood, growing up in Stars Hollow, all of it. That's how this all happened – Jess is my editor, he's been working on it with me for a couple of months. I'm going to finish it before this little gumball gets here and work with Jess at the press."

"Gumball?" April asked "Oh – you saw that baby chart that converts the size of the fetus to junk food instead of fruit."

Maybe she and I had more in common than I thought.

"Are you going to put our parents in there?" April asked, her voice dropping slightly. "You know – how I came into the picture and all?"

"It's going to be part of it," I said, noticing how her face had taken on that more vulnerable look that it had months ago when she had started to have a mini meltdown in my bedroom. "I'm still thinking that part through. I'm going to be really careful about not putting anything in here that makes either of them look bad, though. That goes for your mother, too."

"I don't really care about that," April said. "I just know – there's a lot of stuff that went on when things were bad between Lorelai and my dad that they're sensitive about."

"I'm not going to put anything out there that's going to hurt or embarrass them," I told her. "I promise."

Truthfully, I hadn't even thought about it that much. My writing had only progressed to the point where I was describing my vegetable-themed kindergarten pageant.

"So, I'm going to be an aunt now," April said, clearly wanting to change the subject. "Though since you two are now first cousins by marriage –"

Jess groaned and let go of my hand.

"That means that this kid is also going to be my first cousin once removed. Or is it second cousin? I forget." She picked up her phone and jabbed at some icons. "Nope, first cousin once removed. Though if I had a kid, does that mean they would be second cousins once removed or – wait, that doesn't make sense."
"That's enough," Jess said, grabbing her phone before she had time to react.

"Jess, that's not fair. That has all my research on it, the codes for the combination locks at the lab – "

"I'll give it back if you'll stop with all of this almost incest talk," Jess replied sharply. "We're going to get enough of that from Mom and TJ."

"They don't know?" April asked.

"Not about the baby," I explained. "We're going to officially make an announcement at Thanksgiving."

"Well, that takes the pressure off of me," April said. "I was going to make an announcement, too."

"What kind of announcement?" Jess asked, his eyes suddenly narrowing. "Wait. You're not – "He gestured at her midsection.

"No, cousin, at least one of us at this table currently understands how to use contraception," April retorted.

"Then what – "

"Give me my phone back and I'll tell you."

"Fine," Jess said, sliding her phone across of the table. "What's your big news?"

April cleared her throat. "Well, you know, how I ducked out of the wedding early? And couldn't make it back home until that morning? Because I was too busy?"

"Yeah?" Jess asked.

"I'm seeing someone. Seriously. In fact, we're – we're moving in together. In January."

Jess shot me a knowing look as he raised his eyebrows and reached for a sip of wine from his own glass. "Really."

"Dad's going to freak out, isn't he?" April said, her voice shaking a little. Suddenly she sounded just like the little girl she had been when I first met her.

"I don't think it's going to be that bad," I reassured her. "Were you going to bring him to Thanksgiving?"

"I was," April said. "He isn't someone Dad knows. His name's James. He's at MIT, he's in the biological engineering program – "

"A biologist and a chemist. A mixed relationship," Jess teased as he shot me another look.

"Anyway, we started seeing each other back in the summer and it's really been great so far," April continued. "Dad's still paying for school, but we've both got jobs at the lab and we can afford our own place now and I think it's time. I just – I wanted to wait until it was really serious before I gave Dad his chance to do his damage."

I laughed. "I've had my share of that," I told her. "Just don't ever let Mom talk you into doing a double date."

"I don't think we're going to get anywhere near that level of comfort," April said, shaking her head.
"My main goal is that all of us survive the evening. If I can accomplish that, I don't see the need to ask for anything else."

"I think Luke needs a heads up that you're bringing him," Jess told her. "James, too. Just so that he has some sort of a warning of what Luke can be like. We'll run interference if you need to."

"Really?" April asked. "I mean, I know Dad is just looking out for me, and I kind of understand why after what happened in high school. I really screwed up there. More than once. But he can kind of lay it on thick."

"I think he'd be that way no matter what happened or didn't happen," I told her. "I went through it with him myself. We have your back. Both of us."

"We do," Jess concurred. "Besides, worst case scenario I can always get Doula to fake a crisis."

"Corrupting the next generation is going to be pretty easy for you guys, isn't it?" April asked.

"I think so," Jess said as he reached out for my hand underneath the table again. "I really do."

"Okay, what exactly happened when she was in high school?" I asked Jess later on that evening. "Mom has never spilled anything like that, even over all of these years."

"Shhh," Jess said as he gestured to our joint office upstairs. I plopped down on the sofa.

"I think she's going to take a shower and go right to bed," I told him. "She seemed pretty wiped."

"She can be an easy drunk," Jess said as he walked into the kitchen and poured each of us a glass of water. "Plus, she cleaned out most of that last bottle. I don't want her thinking I'm betraying any confidences."

"What would you be betraying?" I asked as Jess returned to the living room and placed our glasses on the coffee table before sitting down next to me. "My mom isn't exactly known for keeping secrets. Wouldn't she just assume that I knew already?"

"You don't know this already," Jess pointed out.

"Jess, I don't – " I stopped and reeled myself back in. "I want us to be honest with each other. Maybe we don't have to tell each other everything, but – I think it's a good starting point from this point on."

"I agree," Jess said. "I just don't want you to get the wrong impression about who any of this is meant for. I am a little surprised Lorelai hasn't mentioned any of this to you, though."

"I'm not going to spread anything around," I told him. "Jess, it's just weird to me – that you know her better than I do, that there's whole side of my family that involves Mom and Luke and not me at all. That they lived this whole life in the house I grew up in when I wasn't paying attention. I'd just like to get a clearer picture of it."

Jess sighed. "Okay," he agreed. "Do you remember, Rory, when you told me a long time ago that you didn't really start rebelling until you were in college?"

"Unlike you," I said.

"Unlike me," Jess conceded. "April was . . . a lot more like me in high school than she was like you."
"She doesn't seem like that," I told him. "She's still so afraid of what Luke is going to think. She was worried about him knowing about her smoking pot."

"I don't mean that kind of trouble," Jess clarified. "Although I doubt Luke would care at this point. April was always – she found it hard to fit in with people. So maybe she got talked into doing things she ordinarily wouldn't if she were hanging out with people who were better influences on her. Also, Anna was really controlling and April fought against that."

"What kind of influences are we talking about?" I asked him.

"She had a couple of older boyfriends," Jess said. "I'm talking – the potential for legal consequences kind of older. She thought she was pregnant at least once. Luke scared away most of the scarier ones, but – "

"I'm guessing this pattern didn't stop when they stopped being quite as scary," I inferred.

"It didn't," Jess said. "Look, she's his youngest kid – technically his only kid, but he still thinks of both of us that way - and he still sees her as this little girl and wants to protect her. I get it, I do, but – I also know why she came to us tonight."

"How come you know so much about this?" I asked.

"Luke started being more open to talking to me about these things once April started acting out," Jess said. "We became more like you and your mom are to each other. We could talk to each other as adults. Plus, your mom kind of held back on a lot of these things – she didn't want to cross any lines that couldn't be un-crossed. At least that's the way Luke explained it to me."

"April's okay now, though?" I asked.

Jess turned to me. "She's great," he confirmed. "And who knows? Maybe this grown-up relationship thing is going to be a lot easier for her than it is for the rest of us."

"That would be a new development for this family," I remarked as I took a sip of water and placed the glass back down on the table.

Jess reached for my hand and clasped it within his own. "I think we're doing pretty well, the two of us," he told me. "Don't you?"

"I do," I told him as he reached around to play with a tendril of my hair. "I guess I'm just used to expecting the opposite."

Jess leaned in to whisper in my ear. "Don't expect the opposite," he said in a rasp as he leaned in for a kiss.

We parted as we heard the office door swing upstairs and listened to the echo of April settling down on the couch cushions.

I cuddled up against him on the sofa, unwilling to part from him just yet but also not wanting to pursue things between us any further when I knew April was still awake.

"I guess I should understand now why she thought we slept together in high school," I mused.

I felt Jess's chuckle reverberate next to me, and I felt blissfully content. "We got pretty close," he reminded me.
"Remember that night of the Distillers concert?" I reminded him, luxuriating in a flashback to our long-ago teenage lust.

"That was a pretty great night," Jess said as he turned to me. "Also the night when the pipes burst in the town meeting and everyone else was in the town square but us."

He tilted my chin to meet his for another kiss before I settled back against him again.

I also remembered another night when things went a little farther than I wanted them to, but it was best not to think about that right now.

"I'm glad we didn't," I told Jess softly, perhaps wanting to shift that memory further down in the recesses of my mind. "It's nice to save some things for adulthood."

Jess chuckled. "I think we would have been okay back then," he said, clearly not wanting his pride to suffer.

"I hadn't been with anyone when we were together," I reminded him. "It wasn't the same for you."

"There weren't that many girls before you," Jess said. "How many?" I asked.

Jess stiffened, and I turned around to face him. "That's a dangerous game, Rory," he said. "Just start with the first one," I told him.

Jess groaned. "This is embarrassing," he said. "But okay, as long as you want to play – "

"I do want to play," I said, feeling mischievous.

"Her name was Brandy," Jess said. "I was 15, she was 17 or 18 – she lived in my building. She had a boyfriend and was only using me to make me jealous. I didn't mind much, but it only lasted a couple of weeks. She went back to him, and then – "

I raised my eyebrows in mock seriousness. "And then – "

"I hooked up with her best friend Gretchen to make her jealous," Jess continued. "Gretchen was game for it. At least I think she was."

"Did it work?"

"Sort of," Jess said sheepishly. "We kept hooking up, even though she was still with her boyfriend. It was fun at first, but – "Jess shrugged. "Eventually I ended up feeling really used up. Then Gretchen wanted to strike things up again and – "

"And did you?" I asked.

"Once or twice," Jess admitted. "I was getting sick of the situation. It was just messy, and even at that age I didn't feel right about it. We moved, and I had an excuse to get myself out of all of that. Then there was Shane in Stars Hollow, and then there was you. That's it."

"I knew about Shane," I told him.

"That one was kind of obvious," Jess admitted.
"That whole love triangle stuff doesn't sound like you," I told him, looking up to meet his gaze. "Even when we were younger, you were always the one to draw that line."

Jess scoffed. "I never pretended to be a saint, Rory," he replied. "I spent an entire year trying to lure you away from Dean, after all. And since then, yeah, there have been girlfriends, but there's also been one-night stands and relationships I wasn't exactly invested in. If you place the two of us side by side, I really doubt the scales are going to tip in my favor on that one."

"That's not what I mean," I argued. "Even if you weren't invested in Shane, you still broke up with her when you wanted to be with me once you knew it was over with Dean. And after I came back from that summer away after I had kissed you, you didn't want to pursue anything because I was still with him. You were a lot better than me on insisting on those boundaries."

"Maybe you're right on that one," Jess conceded. "But I did a lot of really awful, cowardly things when we were together, too. But that situation with those girls in New York kind of taught me that I wanted to avoid all of that mess later on. It wasn't so much that I knew it was wrong that I just didn't want the hassle of trying to keep up with hiding one from the other."

"Did you ever think that maybe the way we learn the difference between right and wrong is because of how complicated it got when we tried the other things?" I asked him. "I know I've found that out the hard way."

Jess grinned. "Morality as Occam's Razor," he agreed. "But now it's your turn."

I shifted a little to allow some space between us and reached for another sip of water. "Okay," I said. "What do you want to know?"

"Who was your first?"

I sighed and settled back down on the couch cushions, looking at my hands. "Dean," I said, trying to keep my tone even.

"Dean," Jess repeated in a confused tone, and I turned back to look at him. "When you guys were together later – after high school?"

"Sophomore year of college," I confirmed. "For a couple of months, anyway."

Jess's brow furrowed. "After he broke up with the first wife?"

I was silent.

Jess guffawed and reached for a sip of water. "Okay, you have definitely left that part of the story out before."

"It was a long time ago," I said softly.

And it had been – I hadn't thought about it for a very long time. Dean had remarried almost ten years ago and he seemed happy with with wife and kids that he had now. Every time I ran into him in Stars Hollow, he greeted me warmly. Any lingering bitterness or shame about what we had done to bring about the demise of his first marriage had long ago been obliterated to the ravages of memory.

Despite all of that, it still wasn't something I wanted to become common knowledge. And in those first couple of years after college when Jess and I had become friends again, I didn't want to linger on the topic around him. Maybe it was because I didn't want to run the risk of bringing up any old wounds for him when he seemed to be doing so well, but I also know that part of it was because I
didn't want to allow myself to think about what I might have still felt for him, either.

I knew only too well now how easy it would have been to allow myself to fall under that spell again.

"Wait," Jess said. "When I went to see you, after your first year of Yale, and asked you to come to New York with me – he was walking you home. Did you not come with me because of him?"

"Jess," I said gently.

"I'm not mad, Rory," he insisted. He turned to me, and although I saw a tiny bit of shock and dismay in his eyes, I also saw the trust that hovered behind them, too. "I know that it's not really any of my business, but now that it's started – "

"You want to know what happened," I finished.

"I kind of do," Jess said.

"It didn't happen then," I told him. "He was still married at that point, but I wasn't involved with him in that way. It was a one-time thing – okay, really a two-time thing - but it happened after that."

"How long after that?" Jess asked.

"A week later," I said.

Jess rested back against the sofa cushions and stared up at the ceiling, blinking. "This is a lot to take in," he said after a few moments.

"Look, Jess, maybe we shouldn't – "

"No, I – " Jess started, and then stopped himself. "I know it was a long time ago, Rory, and it's behind you, but I still want to know." He turned to me again. "What happened with him – is it because I showed up like that?"

"It is," I told him honestly. "But it's more complicated than that. I can try to explain it to you, but you've got to understand – what made sense to my nineteen-year-old brain isn't going to make sense now."

"I'm starting to get that," Jess said. "I'm listening."

I took a deep breath, and reached for his hand as I let my gaze meet his own once again. "You had left," I began. "I told myself I was over it, and that I was moving on, and that I couldn't worry about what you were doing. I wanted to believe that, but I was still upset over the way things had ended. It still hurt that you hadn't told me what was going on. I didn't understand why you left town without saying goodbye or trying to explain anything to me. That if I hadn't met you accidentally on that bus, you wouldn't have even allowed anything to pass between us."

"I'm sorry," Jess said. "I was really screwed up back then, Rory. I didn't know how to face you. I thought it would be easier on you if I didn't force that moment on you." He sighed. "You're not the only one whose teenage brain wasn't making sense."

"I understand that, Jess," I told him. "And I'm not angry now, but I was then. Then you showed up suddenly in Stars Hollow, do everything possible you can to avoid me, tell me that you love me, and then you ran again."

"You didn't say anything, Rory," Jess said. "I knew right away you rejected it, and I figured it wasn't
He sighed. "I was such an idiot."

"You didn't give me the chance to say anything," I reminded him.

"And if I had?"

I let out another sigh of my own. "I would have given you the same answer you expected," I told him. "I wanted to reject you like I felt you had rejected me. I couldn't even think of you without getting angry all over again."

"Okay," Jess said evenly. "But what does any of this have to do with Dean?"

"I wasn't involved with anyone else at school," I said. "It was the first time in three years that I hadn't had a boyfriend, and it seemed like everyone else was moving on and had someone besides me. I was lonely. Dean was unhappy – I'm not using this as an excuse, but he was – and we were spending a lot of time together because he was part of the construction crew at my mom's inn."

Jess remained silent, and I continued.

"It was easy to convince myself that he wasn't married," I said. "Or that the last three years hadn't happened, and to forget why we had grown apart. In my stupid nineteen year old girl brain, he was this sweet, kind guy who was genuinely interested in me, and I wasn't thinking about why he was spending so much time with me or what it meant. Then you showed up, and it kind of threw me. Because somewhere deep in that mess of a brain I still loved you, and I did want to go with you. I just didn't trust you. I didn't trust myself. I wanted to feel safe again."

"So you chose Dean," Jess mused.

"I did choose Dean," I affirmed. "I believed I could trust him instead. He wasn't in it for the same reasons I was. In his stupid nineteen year old brain, I was a way to forget that he was married. Because Dean wanted that, Jess. He wanted to get married and have kids and settle down. He just jumped into it with the first person who bought into that dream along with him, and it didn't work out. I was with him later on, after she found out what had happened and broke up with him, but it didn't last long. We didn't have anything in common. We hadn't had anything in common for years. And even though I can look back on it and understand why he acted the way he did, he wasn't that sweet, kind boyfriend that I remembered."

Jess nodded. "It was stupid, you know," he said. "Showing up out of the blue, expecting you to live with me in New York. I didn't even ask you what you wanted or what your plans were. I didn't know anything about what your life was like. I just wanted you. I figured the other stuff would work itself out."

"I've thought about it, you know," I told him. "Not so much for these past couple of years, because I knew you had Celeste and you seemed happy. But before then, it was at the back of my brain sometimes – what if we found some way to slow down our lives enough to the point where we could find a space to be together and have that kind of life that you wanted. But at that point, at that moment in time – I'm not sure it was possible."

Jess threaded my fingers through his. "If we had, I'm not sure we'd have have now," he said softly. "But I think you're right. And I learned something, too, that I didn't know back then."

"What's that?" I asked him.

"That you have to actually put the work in when you want that 'I love you' to mean something," Jess said. "You can't just show up and run. You have to make sure you've been enough of a man to make
the other person believe it." His eyes looked up at mine, those deep chestnut pools once again inviting me to drown in them. "I hope I've done enough to make you believe it this time."

"You have," I told him. "More than enough."

Jess smiled, his chestnut pools brimming over with relief and warmth. He settled back against the sofa as I lay back.

"So, is this little game over?" I asked him.

Jess chuckled. "It is," he said. "And the victory's yours. Though I may point out that you started it."

"You're not really still . . . upset about all of this, are you?" I asked him. "Maybe we should have talked about it at some point."

"I guess maybe my pride's a little wounded, but that will heal," Jess said as he looked down at me. "Rory, it's good to know – at least to understand where you're coming from as we're going into this. I don't think I would have been able to do it right after it happened, but now –" He shrugged. "I'm glad I have a little more insight into why things happened the way they did between us back then."

"I'm not sure I could have explained it to you that way before now," I said.

"But now you can, and –"

"I still haven't gotten in touch with Paul," I blurted out.

Jess turned to look at me quizzically. "Paul? Rory, what exactly does Paul have to do with all of this?"

"It's because of that line that you drew back then and I didn't," I said. "There have been so many times when I didn't draw that line, Jess. I wasn't good at it before, with Logan and with Dean and with you, but I want to do it this time. Just so that I know that I've changed, and I can do the right thing by all of us."

"And you don't need to do that with Logan?" Jess asked, still sounding confused.

I sighed. "Maybe it doesn't make sense," I told him. "But I broke up with Logan. I made the decision to end it. Even if I didn't do it as soon as I should have, there's no confusion about where things stand right now. Trying to interfere in his life again is crossing that line. It feels just as wrong to me as what I've allowed to happen before."

"I understand all of that, Rory," Jess said. "But can I just suggest something?"

I nodded. "Sure."

"Paul broke up with you," Jess said. "You think it's because his other girlfriend pushed him to do it. He wants to let it go. You want to let it go. Why not just leave things as they are?"

"That isn't what you said when we first started this relationship," I pointed out.

"I know," Jess said. "But maybe I kind of understand how he feels right now. I'm tired of all these specters of past relationships haunting us at every corner. Maybe the best way to get rid of them is to stop acknowledging them."

"Maybe," I conceded. "But I need to do this before we get further into this, Jess. I won't feel right about it if I don't."
I turned my gaze on him, choosing my words very carefully. "I don't want to commit myself to you and this baby without knowing I was too chickenshit to break up with someone who wasn't even my real boyfriend first. I need to draw that same line with him as I did with Logan."

"And if he won't talk to you this time like he did before?"

I shrugged. "Then I'll have to accept that," I said. "But I need to at least try."

Jess nodded and reached out to run his fingers through my hair as a silent gesture of understanding.

Somehow, I doubted that I would get the same reception from the last person who had called himself my boyfriend.

Fate decided to have mercy on me and have Paul answer on the first ring the next day.

The first thing he assumed was that I was trying to collect the pieces of our pathetic excuse for a relationship and put them back together.

"You spent half your time in London, and I'm busy here, and we never even talked about not seeing other people. I just don't see any reason to keep pretending – "

Blah blah blah. Of course, he was right. He would have been right a year ago. Or two years ago. He would have been right a couple of weeks after we struck up this "arrangement" almost by osmosis. I didn't even feel guilty about letting it drag on so long anymore. Just weary with delaying the inevitable.

"I don't want to get back together," I told him blankly.

"Oh," Paul said, sounding a little hurt. I pushed my frustration with the situation back down and got to the point.

"I'm pregnant," I said.

"Oh," Paul said.

He didn't say anything for a couple of minutes.

Maybe Jess had been right. Maybe this hadn't been necessary after all.

"Congratulations?" Paul said without enthusiasm. "Look, Rory, if you're calling to ask me to hold your hand throughout this – "

Wow, a semblance of a backbone. I wasn't expecting that.

"I'm not," I told him. "It wasn't planned, but I'm looking forward to it."

"Is it someone I know?" Paul asked. "Someone here in New York? I don't – "

"It's my friend Jess Mariano," I said. 'He runs that publishing house in Philadelphia. We're in a relationship now. I tried to let you know about it weeks ago, but you didn't return any of my messages. I just wanted to let you know what was going on, Paul. I didn't want you to hear about it from someone else and think that I wasn't going to reach out to let you know."

"I got your messages," Paul said. "I just thought – well, we haven't seen each other in almost a year, Rory. I kind of accepted that as its own kind of break-up." He sighed. "Abigail didn't see it that
"I figured," I said. "I'm sorry, Paul. I owed more to you and to her than to let things go on this way. I should have tried harder to get in touch with you a couple of weeks ago, and I should have – " I sighed. "I should have broken things off earlier. I'm not sure why we kept pretending that we had something significant to preserve. I always figured that you'd be the one to break it off first."

Paul hummed in a sign of agreement. "I kind of thought you'd get sick of the whole concept of having a boyfriend in the first place," he admitted. "I honestly – I didn't think you'd be the first one of us to settle down."

"I don't think anyone expected that," I said, grinning to myself about the unexpected yet deliriously joyful shock of it all. "Least of all me. Paul, does this mean that you and Abigail – "

"So you're staying in Philadelphia?" Paul said hurriedly, sounding slightly panicked.

"Y-yes," I said uncertainly. "That looks to be the plan for the foreseeable future."

"So you're not moving back to New York? You're not coming back to Brooklyn? Even if things don't work out?"

"I'm not committing to this relationship with the expectation that things aren't going to work out," I explained calmly. "Besides, I like Philadelphia. Paul, what is this about?"

I could hear him let out a deep huff of breath. "I don't want Abigail to find out about this," he said. "I don't want her to believe that we were still involved."

"Well, we weren't," I reminded him, unable to keep the annoyance from creeping into my voice. "We haven't seen each other in almost a year, Paul. The last time we slept together was October of last year. This is very obviously not your baby, Paul. Why don't you just tell her the truth?"

"Because she thought we had already broken up when she moved in with me back in April!" Paul exclaimed.

"So why didn't you call me back then and end things?" I asked him, feeling suddenly angry. "Why didn't you call me back last August and end things when I tried to reach out to you?"

"Because I didn't want to let it go!" Paul shouted. "I didn't want commit to Abigail until I was sure that she was doing the same thing, too. Because then it's just me, and her – and nothing else. There's nowhere else to run to if things turn sour! It's absolutely terrifying, Rory."

This was not going at all the way I expected.

And yet part of me wanted to collapse in laughter at the sheer absurdity of it all.

Paul, my nice guy boyfriend, the one I had always thought was too sweet and wholesome for my flighty, nomadic ways, the guy I had agonized over wounding, was coming up with every excuse in the world to avoid having a monogamous relationship with his live-in girlfriend. Meanwhile, I was the one settling down into a sensible, stable relationship with the loyal, thoughtful, patient person who had known almost every awful mistake I had made for the past fifteen years. It didn't change one iota of what he felt for me.

I knew that I felt the same way about him, despite all of the mistakes that he had made that had wounded me, even if they were different from my own This time, there was no conflict of affection and no more lines blurring over into what I knew our relationship to be. It was just him and me, with
all of the flaws and failures that had ceased to be a threat anymore. And it wasn't half as scary as I thought it was going to be.

"Paul, why are we fighting?" I asked him, unable to keep myself from giggling.

"I don't know," Paul said. He started to laugh himself.

"I think you've already made a commitment to Abigail," I told him. "That part of you that's been holding back – I think you need to let it go. We've both been holding onto this thing that was between us because we didn't want to embrace the alternative – but the alternative is better, Paul. Trust me on this as your friend."

"Friends, huh?" Paul asked, still sounding a bit uncertain.

"Friends," I told him firmly. "And exes. Tell her that I'm as glad to be out of this relationship as you are. That I'm committed, and happy, and that I want the same for you. I think she'll understand."

I hung up the phone feeling confident that I had put all the fake nice guys behind me for good.

I had the real thing at home, and that was turning out to be much better.
Chapter 16

I deeply apologize for how long I've been away, guys! February was crazy for me and I didn't get much time to write.

This is mostly a transitional chapter since the one coming up is probably the most pivotal chapter in the entire story. I'm hoping that I'll be able to get it out before the end of the month, but promises shpromises. We'll see what happens.

As always, read, enjoy (or refuse to, either way), and leave me a review if you desire.

Returning to a regular working schedule turned out to be a lot more complicated than I had anticipated.

I hadn't had anything resembling a conventional job for a very long time. My last regular office job had been the staff job I held at the Washington Post for three years after I left the Obama campaign. Then I was laid off, and I struggled to survive on freelance work after that. I kept busy for the first couple of months, and after that it was a mad scramble to avoid the inevitable that I kept going for entirely too long. My work ethic gradually eroded to something that was almost nonexistent because I didn't have to maintain it. I had my own source of money as well as Logan's generosity to rely on, and it became easier and easier to shuck any adult responsibility as I continued to spin in a maelstrom of denial.

Jess's daily reality was very, very different. I didn't really understand how different it was until I started to work with him.

Much like its predecessor, Dodger Press was partially a bookstore/creative space and partially a cramped but flourishing publishing house. Jess was very hands on with every aspect of the business – he had learned the hard way what could happen if he didn't pay attention to the details. He knew every bookstore owner in Philadelphia by name, as well as most of the ones in New York, Boston, and Pittsburgh. He personally edited about two-thirds of the books that were printed and maintained a close relationship with all of the illustrators. Almost all of the financial matters dealing with printers and the pay scale for the authors he handled personally. He didn't work alone – he had two male partners named Lyle and Eric, who he cheerfully referred to as the Menendez brothers. Lyle was in charge of handling the special press editions and the graphic novels, while Eric edited the conventional books that Jess didn't handle himself. Even with the help of his partners, it was still a lot of work for one person. Half of the time I spent observing him in the office I had absolutely no idea how he had managed to do it by himself for so long and not be overwhelmed by the pressure it took to keep the whole operation running.

Jess's biggest concern at this point was expanding the press's reach. They sold very well in the Northeast and South and on a few cities on the West Coast, but he wanted to expand more into the Midwest and overseas. He also struggled with maintaining relationships with reviewers, and both the website and the press's e-book division needed some work. That's where I came in. I may not have been able to get the editors at other papers interested in my own work, but I still had a lot of friends in various places, and most of those friends loved for me to recommend good books. Within the first few weeks of working at the press, I had helped score reviews in the Irish Independent and the Minneapolis Star Tribune, and was in conversations with bookstores in St. Paul, Milwaukee, and Indianapolis to start selling our books there. I had also overhauled half of the website to give more of a focus to the e-book editions that Jess had the tendency to ignore.

"You're really good at this," he remarked to me one day about a week and a half after I had started
accompanying him to work.

"I'm okay at it," I told him. I still couldn't really believe it had been so easy. I had spent most of my life engaged in a singular line of work and had spent the last few years utterly failing at it until I more or less stopped trying. It was something of a revelation to dive immediately into this new line of work and not only enjoy it, but actually experience success. "It's mostly you, Jess. I don't understand how you manage to accomplish half of what you do here."

"Well, not to dwell too much on the mutual admiration society we've got going here, but it's been a lot better since you joined us," Jess insisted. "I think it's going to be really great, us working together."

I blushed at his compliment, but I couldn't help focusing on the things that had made this working experience somewhat unpleasant for the both of us. The other reason we had fallen so quickly into this committed existence was quickly making his or her presence known. It had been much more of a struggle than I had expected.

My pregnancy symptoms had returned with a vengeance almost as soon as we had started working together. I was only working with Jess about four days a week and had intended to spend the rest of the time working on the book and tentatively preparing for the baby. I hadn't progressed very far with either of those plans. Jess seemed reluctant to put any concrete work towards baby-related stuff until after my twelve-week appointment, and I wasn't fighting him on it. I could barely muster enough energy to work on the book when I wasn't at work. I was too busy being sick.

The morning sickness was the worst. I'd had a respite from it for about a week and a half as Jess and I reveled in the surprise and joy of this new aspect of our relationship. Then it came at me at once – I couldn't keep hardly anything down. Coffee, cinnamon, and chicken were the usual triggers, but there were days when it seemed that almost anything would set me off. I had constant headaches because of the dehydration, and I was tired all of the time.

Jess seemed to accept all of this without complaint. He cooked me new meals after I threw the first ones up. He discovered that crackers and ginger tea keep the worst of the vomiting at bay and lovingly prepared them for me on the days that I stayed home from work. He held my hair when I threw up and didn't seem to mind if I preferred to go to bed early or spend the evening in our darkened bedroom trying to force another headache to go away instead of spending time with him. He seemed to almost always know the right thing to do to pacify me, and I kept wondering how I could make it up to him when I did return to feeling better.

I didn't end up expressing this to him often enough. I was irritable and exhausted almost all of the time, and Jess got the brunt of the worst of my mood swings. This should have been our honeymoon period, the part of our relationship where we enjoyed each other before learning the worst of our flaws and idiosyncrasies. At least in theory – I wasn't sure if that completely applied to a situation where you end up dating your ex-boyfriend after a decade of being almost related to him. Still, Jess was seeing the absolute worst of my personality far too often, and I hoped my hormones would settle down before too long.

Fortunately, I had weathered the worst of my first-trimester symptoms by the week of Thanksgiving. Jess and I still prepared to inform the rest of the family about the baby at that point, and I didn't want to deliver the news – and the possible negative reaction we would get from Liz and TJ – if I was still so miserable. However, I was confronted with yet another physical reminder of my current predicament a few days before the event was set to occur.

Paris went into labor three weeks early, and I ventured up to New York City to meet her new son.
There was something so eerily radiant about Paris in the first few days after she gave birth. I'd noticed it after her first two children were born, and was always deeply puzzled about it. In most scenarios, Paris was a terrifying force of nature – I imagined it was even more the case during childbirth, but I fortunately wasn't present for that part of the process – but for a few days she seemed to be momentarily content. It didn't last long, but I was always mystified by it.

How did Paris Gellar – perhaps the most un-maternal of all the people I knew – transform into this person, this mother? Was it pregnancy? Childbirth? Was it something specific to only Paris? I was a third of the way through the process, and it didn't feel any more natural to me now than it did when I first saw that plus sign and knew for certain that it had started. Wanting this baby and feeling capable of bringing it into the world seemed to be two instincts constantly in conflict within my own brain. I still didn't know how I'd manage to merge them by the time I was in Paris's position.

Eustace Francis Gellar-McMaster – don't blame me, I didn't name him – had a head full of dark curls and piercing brown eyes. Paris seemed to radiate a curious mixture of elation and exhaustion as I sat across from her and watched her expertly nurse her third baby as she prattled on and on about the incompetency of the doctors and nurses.

I couldn't even fathom breastfeeding at this point. How had Paris done this not once, not twice, but three times? How did she instantly know what to do?

"So, anyway," Paris said - jolting me out of my thoughts before my impending sense of terror could escalate into a full-blown panic attack – "you were going to come see me last week, before this little urchin decided to descend on us almost a month ahead of time. What happened?"

"I was sick," I told her.

Technically, it wasn't a lie.

"Uh huh," Paris replied, a knowing glint in her eye. "I know you'd know better than to come in here and infect the two of us if you were contagious."

"I'm not contagious," I affirmed. I wondered how I was going to get out of this conversation without telling Paris what was actually going on. Jess and I hadn't specifically discussed her as one of the people we wanted to tell before the next sonogram, but he hadn't said that he was opposed to it, either.

Still, at this moment I felt like if she pushed any farther, I just might crack. I didn't want to have a nervous breakdown in front of a woman who had given birth less than twelve hours ago.

"How far along are you?" Paris asked.

It would be just like her to solve this dilemma for me before I could get around to my pro-con list of informing her of my current condition.

"Nearly eleven weeks," I said softly.

"Does Jess know?" Paris asked gently.

I nodded. "He knows," I said, feeling myself start to tremble. "He's – he's really happy about it. I'm happy about it, too. Isn't that insane, Paris? I mean, does that sound like me? A mother?"

"I didn't think it sounded like me, either, but that didn't stop me," Paris said, trailing her finger through her baby's hair. "No more, though. I'm getting my tubes tied tomorrow."
"You remembered that story I told you, about my mom's friend," I remarked.

"It's more common than you think," Paris told me. "I'm glad for this one, though. I'm going to try to do better this time. Smaller apartment, phasing out the live-in nanny after a couple of weeks, going to try to take twelve weeks of maternity leave – "She sighed and looked me in the eye. "I love what I do, but I'm becoming as distant from my kids as my mother was to me. I don't want them to remember me like that. It's always a process. You think you know what you're doing, and then you backslide and you're not anywhere close to where you wanted to be. You've just got to keep trying."

"I have to admit it, seeing you with him, right now – I'm terrified," I told her. "You always seemed like you knew you were doing, Paris. It's six months away and I have no idea how I'm going to get any closer to where you are right now."

"I went through medical school and residency and became a fertility specialist guru, Rory," Paris pointed out. "I still didn't know what I thought I did. The minute you're alone with that baby it's like they look up at you and they can see right through you. Then the days turn into weeks, and then months, and eventually you realize – this person has been depending the whole time on you, that this whole amorphous entity all along that they trust is you. You're the mother. It happened when you weren't looking."

"Didn't it ever feel strange to you?" I asked her. "That Gabby or Tim or this new one – "

"Eustace," Paris said, shooting me a look of derision.

"Eustace," I said, trying out the name on my tongue. "That they look to you, that you're this person, this mother – and it can't, possibly be you?"

"Ever since the first moment I knew I was pregnant with the first one," Paris said. "What you're feeling, Rory – we've all been there. You think you're the most incapable person in the world to be doing it, but you're not. And I knew you'd be here, with Jess. An accidentally on purpose baby."

"That isn't how it happened," I assured her.

Paris rolled her eyes. "Sure, it wasn't," she replied as she held the baby against her shoulder for a burp. "Do you want to hold him?"

"Sure," I said uncertainly as I walked over to the hospital bed and took him from her arms.

"You need the practice," Paris reminded me as she settled back against the pillows and I sat back down in the chair, supporting his head with my palm.

Eustace looked around cautiously, seemingly leery of this strange new person who had no business cuddling him. I tentatively placed my other finger in the whorl of his hand, half expecting him to start screaming.

He half heartedly attempted to grasp my finger before spitting up a string of bubbles. I reached for the drop cloth on the bedside table, and wiped his face.

"See? Some of it's easier than you think," Paris said as she watched us from across the room.

I nodded in silent agreement, feeling the fear in my chest start to dissipate.

Thanksgiving came around a few days later, and I once again was reduced to spending the early morning hours becoming acquainted with the patterns on the wallpaper above the toilet. It passed
after half an hour, but the pounding in my head started again on the car ride there. Jess offered to drive back, but I refused. I'd set this plan in motion and I was going to follow through on it.

The pounding seemed to have disappeared on its own by the time we stopped at a diner in Stamford. I let Jess order me some toast and a cup of black tea. It was the first time I'd caved on the caffeine front since I made myself stop drinking it.

"This isn't the same as relapsing," Jess insisted while he wolfed down a bowl of chili and sipped from his own gargantuan cup of tea with a glint of teasing in his eye.

Evil, evil boyfriend. I let him order me a second one before we left.

The headache made its triumphant return once we arrive at Liz and TJ's house, so I spent the latter part of the afternoon attempting to nap in Doula's darkened bedroom. April was bringing her boyfriend over to Mom and Luke's house to informally meet him (again) before they ventured over here, so the house was mostly quiet. I was still having a hard time convincing my body to rest long enough for me to get some sleep.

I pulled up my shirt and wondered how a baby that hadn't even shown itself physically on my body could be causing so much trouble. The worst of the symptoms had ebbed and flowed within the next couple of weeks, only to make a sudden reappearance at the exact moment Jess and I planned to make this news public. I wondered if this would be the beginning of a pattern: I'd only experience the worst of this phenomenon at the exact moment when I had to appear happiest about it.

I thought about my mom going through this when she was fifteen, scared and alone and facing zero support from anyone around her. She had been dealing with all of these physical changes when she was far too young to even fathom them, all while hiding them from her parents and friends and pretending to be a normal teenage girl. I had a supportive partner who did almost everything for me and was a fully-grown woman, yet I was finding it almost impossible to hold down a part-time job and write at the same time. Why was it so difficult for me?

I emerged out of my self-induced pity party to discover I wasn't alone in the room. Doula was sitting on the edge of the bed, eyeing me disapprovingly.

I quickly pulled my shirt down and struggled to sit up.

"How long have you been sitting there?" I asked her, trying to sound as stern as possible. And probably failing.

"Just a few minutes," Doula said. "Uncle Luke got here about an hour ago. The rest of them just called and said they're on their way."

"Do they need me to help get ready?" I asked.

Doula shook her head. "Mom told me to go wake you up. Then Jess started arguing with her. I figured I might as well get started before the turkey gets cold."

"I wasn't asleep," I told her as I turned on the lamp on the end table.


"Do you?" I asked her, starting to feel amused.

She nodded at my midsection. "You're not fat yet," she said nonchalantly. "You must not be that pregnant."
Oh, wow. I hadn't been prepared for this discussion.

"Did Jess say something to you?" I asked her gingerly.

Doula reached from behind her and plopped a book in front of her.

*The Dude's Guide To Pregnancy.*

It looked weathered. And used. And it was bookmarked. In several places.

How was Jess more prepared than I was for this? I had barely thumbed through my own pregnancy book.

"I found it in Jess's bookbag," Doula proclaimed proudly, her brown eyes dancing mischievously.

"This isn't how you were supposed to find out," I told her.

"I was curious," Doula replied. "Especially when Mom asked why you were sick so often and Jess wouldn't tell her." She stopped and bit her lip. "Are you guys getting married?"

Jess and I still hadn't discussed that topic, of course. Truthfully, until someone brought it up, I completely forgot that it was even a possibility that we should be considering.

"Maybe we should wait until we talk about this with your parents," I told her.

Doula rolled her eyes. "So, the answer is no," she said. "Does that mean that you're another example of the things I'm not supposed to do when I grow up?"

I narrowed my eyes. "What does that mean?"

"Aunt Lorelai got pregnant when she was a teenager. She didn't get married. Mom got pregnant when she was a teenager. She got married, but Jess's dad ran off. You and Jess aren't married. Just because you're grown up doesn't mean that it's a good idea for you to get pregnant."

"It isn't like that," Jess said as he appeared in the doorway. He nodded his head towards the book on the bed. "Doula, I've told you a thousand times not to go snooping through my stuff."

"You also told me that it's not a good idea to keep secrets just because you're afraid you're going to get in trouble," Doula contended as she turned around to face him. "Is that why no one else knows? Because you're afraid Mom and Uncle Luke are going to get mad?"

"We were planning on telling everyone else in about half an hour," I told Doula. "We just wanted to make sure the baby was healthy first."

"Is it?" Doula asked.

Jess's face looked momentarily frozen in fear, and I sensed it was my turn to answer this question.

"The baby's healthy," I told her. "We've been planning to announce this at Thanksgiving for a few weeks."

"So, are you getting married?" Doula asked, turning towards Jess.

Jess crossed over to the bed and sat down besides me. "We're not getting married in the next five minutes," he told his sister. "Rory and I are living together and we're getting ready for a baby. That's all we're focusing on right now. This isn't like what you've been told about Mom and Aunt Lorelai,
"Why not?" Doula asked, her brow furrowed in confusion.

Jess sighed. "It's different because Rory and I are adults," he explained. "We know how to prepare for a baby. We're old enough to provide for it and take care of it. We've done the things that we wanted to do in life. This is a good thing for us, Doula. We're excited."

"I still don't really understand it," Doula said baldly.

"Well, you've got six more months to get used to the idea," Jess told her as the sound of the door opening downstairs could be heard below us.

"And about ten more minutes before everyone else knows," I added, gesturing towards the door. "Why don't you go downstairs and say hi to Lorelai and April? We'll be down in a few minutes."

Doula looked at Jess.

"Rory's right," Jess told her. "We'll be down in a few minutes. It's going to be okay, kid. I promise."

Doula nodded in acquiescence, hauling herself off of the bed and scuttering out the door.

I let out a deep breath and collapsed into a fit of laughter.

"It's not funny," Jess insisted. The expression on his face said otherwise.

"I wasn't expecting to have that conversation for another twelve years, Jess!" I exclaimed. "No ten-year-old girl needs to be that well informed."

"My mom's got a pretty open mind on the sex topic," Jess said. "Besides, Doula grew up touring the Renaissance fair circuit when Mom and T.J. weren't embroiled in some sort of cult or another. There's no hope in hiding much of anything from her." He cocked his head towards me. "Did any of that kind of talk bother you?"

"It's mild compared to what we're going to get from my grandmother," I replied. I turned to him and steeled my gaze on his. "There's still a lot of things we haven't talked about, Jess," I said softly.

"I know," Jess said, trailing his fingers lightly over my arm. "I'm not avoiding it, Rory, but – it's been really crazy the past couple of weeks. We've had a lot to deal with before we even get to that topic."

"I'm not ready," I told him blankly. "Just in case you were planning some sort of elaborate proposal or something. Just dealing with this pregnancy is more than enough for right now."

"I wouldn't do that without talking to you about it," Jess insisted. "And I certainly wouldn't foist that on you now, given how sick you've been."

"I haven't even worked on the book recently," I admitted.

"Maybe we can slow down on you working at the book press," Jess suggested. "I've really appreciated having you there, but it wasn't ever part of the original plan. I don't want to put too much pressure on you or distract you from your writing." He sighed. "Believe me, I know how hard it can be to find time to write on top of everything else that's going on."

"When do you do it?" I asked him. "Find time to write?"

Jess shrugged. "I haven't done much lately," he said. "Between editing other people's stuff, and
running the business, and everything melting down with Celeste, and then you – "he turned to look me in the eye. "It's definitely gone on the back burner. I've got some stuff started, but nothing that's gone very far."

I let out a sigh of exasperation. "I'm guessing our little Reese's cup isn't going to help," I said. I reached for his hand. "Jess, I don't want anything that's happening with the baby or the book to slow down your writing, either."

"We'll make time," Jess told me with a sense of confidence I couldn't even begin to fathom. "It's going to be a huge adjustment, Rory, but I know we'll carve out a routine that gives both of us time to write. I'm not worried about me right now, anyway. We need to focus on what we can do to make things easier on you."

My heart fluttered in tune with the distant pounding in my head, but I made myself concentrate on the point. "I still want to work at the book press," I told him. "I don't know if I want to do it permanently once the book is finished, or how that's going to fit in with raising a kid. But for right now, I still want to continue."

"You've been so wiped out, though," Jess remarked. "Almost every single day. I've seen what it's taken out of you."

"Normal women manage to handle pregnancy and go to work every single day," I retorted. "It won't last much longer, Jess. I thought I was over the worst of until this morning. I'll muddle through it."

"Nothing about our situation is normal, Rory," Jess replied. "And I don't want you to have to muddle through it if you don't have to. And you don't have to. You're sleeping with the boss, remember?"

His eyes were shining with such love and concern, and I couldn't help but give in.

"I'll cut back to three days a week," I said. "And I'll start coming home earlier in the afternoon."

"That's my girl," Jess said, leaning down for a kiss.

"Hey, lovebirds!" Doula shrieked as she ran back in the room, interrupting our semi-private moment. "It's time to eat! Come on!" She dashed back out again, a whirling blend of blonde hair and inexhaustible energy.

"It's showtime," Jess announced as he helped me off the bed and we trotted downstairs.

Somehow with him beside me it didn't seem quite so scary anymore.

This pregnancy announcement turned out to be the most anticlimactic one so far. Mostly because my new stepsister beat me to the punch.

"James and I are moving in together!" April announced as soon as we sat down. Nobody had even had the chance to pick up their fork.

Luke tried to look shocked, but it sounded like he'd been thoroughly warned for this revelation. I wondered how much my mom had had to do with that. I'm guessing the fact that April had brought James over to the house three separate times before tonight had also helped him to accept the inevitable.

"Are you moving in with him or is he moving in with you?" Luke asked.
"Neither," James said, the color starting to return to his face. He adjusted his glasses. "We put in a deposit on an apartment in the complex across the street from the lab."

"It's a safe building?" Luke asked.

"Yes," April affirmed. "It's even gated, Dad. Perfectly safe."

"How long's your lease?" Luke asked.

"Thirteen months," James said.

Luke sighed. "So I guess you're serious about this," he said, steeling his gaze on James. Mom put her hand on his arm.

"I am," James said. "I wouldn't be ready to do this if I wasn't."

A flash of anger seemed to briefly cross Luke's face, but it faded. He sighed wearily.

"Sometimes I think it was easier having teenage daughters then it was having adult ones," he remarked. His gaze shifted to me. "At least I only had to deal with one at a time then."

Jess looked at him questionably, and I could feel the frustration starting to bubble up in his face.

Luke wouldn't make this announcement before we could, would he?

He turned his gaze towards April and James. "I'll be there to help you when you move," he told them. "I'm not letting any discount moving company wreck my daughter's stuff if I can avoid it. Tell me the dates and I'll be there."

Relief crossed April's face. "I will," she assured him.

Jess coughed audibly. "On that note – "he began.

"Jess and Rory are having a baby!" Doula shouted.

Jess and I steeled our gazes on Doula at the same time.

"Doula," Jess admonished her.

"And they're not getting married!" Doula yelled again.

Liz turned to Jess and I. "Is this true?" she asked.

"It's true," I said and grinned at Jess, aware of the identical expression on my own face. "That's why we moved in together. So yes, in six months the Gilmore and Mariano clans will be joined in yet another way."

The table erupted in laughter, congratulations, and TJ's inappropriate comments on the quality of Jess's "boys."

It was by far the most enthusiastic reaction that we had gotten so far to the news.
Chapter 17

Apologies, y'all!

Unfortunately, this chapter isn't really the one I wanted to write. The chapter after this one is fairly pivotal and involves a lot of heavy discussion between Rory and Jess. I wanted to put all that heavy talk here, but there wasn't room and the scene with Emily quickly got away from me as she said a lot of things I wasn't expecting her to say. I hope I've done her justice as the grandparents typically don't have a large role in my stories.

As always, read, enjoy (or don't) and drop me a review if you desire. I'm not always great at responding to them, but I still appreciate each and every one.

My pregnancy symptoms ebbed away to almost nothing the week after Thanksgiving.

The fatigue, the headaches, the food sensitivity – most of it was gone by the time Jess and I drove back to Philadelphia. The nausea and the vomiting stayed with me for a few more days, but it wasn't happening nearly as often. I took advantage of the respite to concentrate on working on the book. As I entered the home stretch of the first semester, I was feeling a lot more in the zone than since before I found out I was pregnant, and I was immensely grateful for it. I only hoped that it would last long enough for me to get close to finishing the book before the baby came.

It was a crazy, illogical goal given all of these recent life changes and my new job at the book press, but I was still sticking to it. I'd gotten to the point in my writing process where I was describing moving out of the potting shed and meeting Luke. My main goal at this point was to get through the thorny details of my teenage love triangle before the third trimester hit and I was too mentally and physically exhausted to weave through those issues with Jess.

Unfortunately, my nascent baby daddy wasn't giving me a lot of confidence that we'd be able to handle that challenge with the minimal pain and suffering that I had expected. As my pregnancy symptoms tapered off, his overprotectiveness seemed to get worse and worse. He was moody and irritable most of the time, and spent most of his time watching me like a hawk and fretting over the most insignificant of details. I knew that he was only acting this way because he was concerned about me, but it was driving me crazy. At this rate, I wondered how we'd ever make it to the delivery room.

The weirdest part about all of it is that he really didn't need to worry about my health anymore. Much to my displeasure, Jess's healthy hipster urban lifestyle had unexpectedly begun to grow on me over the past three months. I started eating avocados, kale, and quinoa regularly. The foods I craved were fruit dipped in chocolate and honey on bran muffins. I didn't quite get around to exercising, but after a few weeks of living with him I had found that I didn't mind spending half of my off days in the park. I was even starting to like hanging around those stupid doomsday cult caves.

In the meantime, I was steadfastly working on enlarging his Netflix streaming library and forcing him to actually use the apps on his phone. Two could play this game.

Jess still refused to do any practical work towards preparing for the baby. For the time being, I wasn't going to push him on it, but I did wonder how long he was going to put it off. We had done some minimal redecorating after I had officially moved into the apartment, but I hadn't really had much to contribute towards making my mark on it. The upstairs office was now outfitted for two working writers with dual desks, and I had moved my clothes and books in. I otherwise didn't even possess anything to put in the place. I had been nomadic for so long that I didn't really remember anything
about furnishing or setting up my own place, and I was even more at odds for how I wanted my baby's room to look like.

Celeste's studio remained much of the same as it had when I first started spending with Jess in Philadelphia. He had removed his exercise equipment and placed it in outside storage, but the mirrors still remained on the walls, a silent echo of the room's former purpose in his life. It bothered me a little, but I didn't want to push any harder on the topic considering how tense he already was.

All of his bad temper and concern wasn't because of his fear of this pregnancy, but his fear for it. I may have been more sanguine about the subject, but I still very much understood why he was acting this way. He wasn't going to make any steps forward until I was completely in the clear.

I thumbed through Jess's pregnancy book a few times when he wasn't around, and mused at the fact that even though he was almost badgering me about my health and my diet on a daily basis, I almost never saw him actually pick his pregnancy book up and look at it. The first trimester section had been heavily bookmarked and true to Jess Mariano fashion, there were lots of notes in the margins. So why didn't I ever see him reading it?

The book didn't seem to be a new purchase. It had been published in 2015. I knew there were a lot other hipster-themed dad guides that had been published since then, so why had Jess opted for this particular book? I wondered about that. I still barely looked at my own pregnancy book, but mostly because I preferred the more scientifically accurate apps on my phone. The digital versus hard copy debate in the Gilmore/Mariano household looked set to continue for the foreseeable future until the day that Jess came home and plopped an improved model on the coffee table in the den.


"I'm throwing away that old hipster book for dads," he told me. "It's patronizing. I think we're better off with something that's actually been verified."

I nodded in agreement.

"How far did you get on the book today?" he asked.

Talk turned to chapter edits and business at the press, and all pregnancy discussion went on the back burner for the next few days. Jess's mood seemed to lift, and he was no longer quite so zealously overprotective. I was relieved to see that we had returned to a more balanced state of being.

Hopefully, the rest of it had just been a phase.

The day of the twelve-week sonogram rolled around and I could visibly see Jess start to internally crumble as we sat in the waiting room.

I was determined not to replicate his terror and worry for myself, so I tried to ignore it. The scan had been healthy five weeks ago. We had done everything we were supposed to do. I was not going to think about the worst possibilities that could come out of this. My baby was healthy and growing, and it would continue to be that way.

I refused to let myself think about what had happened to Lane.

I still returned Jess's grip as I settled back in the stirrups and waited for the ultrasound results.

Jess had been wrong, of course. The baby was not only perfectly healthy with a strong heartbeat, but it actually was starting to resemble a human by this point instead of an amorphous blob. I felt my
heart start to skip as I looked at it on the monitor, feeling a calm and a glee that had only intensfied from the first time I had seen the picture on the screen.

I would like to say it was some new revelation, seeing her with Jess by my side for the first time. It wasn't. I had already seen her and known her, and as scared as I had been, that spark of joy and love that had come to life in my knowledge of it couldn't be born a second time in the same way.

It was different for Jess.

I saw it come alive on his face, that spark of joy and love being born, extinguishing the foreboding sense of doom that had shadowed our relationship for the past few weeks.

"It's really . . . indescribable, isn't it?" he asked me as he turned to me, almost seemingly on the verge of (manly) tears.

I gripped his hand harder in mine. "It is," I affirmed.

Four days later, the test results came back. Our baby was 100% healthy and had shown no questionable genetic markers.

Jess took the mirrors down in its future bedroom the same day.

Despite all of the outwards signs of a successful pregnancy, our offspring still declined to make his or her physical presence known on my waistline. Any weight gain I had accomplished during the first semester had been countered by the constant vomiting and my unexpected desire to eat healthier. Now that my body wasn't rebelling against me, I expected my stomach to start ballooning up. It didn't happen, but I shrugged it off. Paris assured me that it was different for every woman, and that she hadn't started showing during her first pregnancy until she was almost five months along. Life went on as usual until the morning that we were scheduled to depart for Christmas at Nantucket with my grandmother.

I noticed it as soon as I put on my blue-and-white striped dress that morning. It was there. The bump.

I ran my finger over the slight outward protrusion. This wasn't bloating, or my imagination. The bump had arrived. How had this happened seemingly overnight?

"What are you – " Jess asked as he entered the bathroom. "Oh."

"Look," I said as I turned to him, feeling fear and excitement starting to creep into my voice. "It hasn't been there all this time, has it? Be honest."

Jess reached out to touch the skin of my stomach. "That – that definitely hasn't been there."

"It's hard," I told him as he lightly traced the outline of the bump with the pads of his fingers, transfixed.

"It is," Jess said in a voice struck with wonder as he slowly lowered himself to his knees and ran his palm lightly over my stomach. "Rory, it's – "He looked up and met my gaze solemnly. "I'm amazed by this."

"Do you think my grandmother will notice?" I asked him.

"I don't think so," Jess said in a subdued voice. He let my dress drift down and stood back up. "Rory, I know I've been kind of a dick over the past couple of weeks. It's just – I was afraid we'd
never get this far."

"I understand, Jess," I said, clasping his hand in mine. "I mean, I was being half driven crazy, but I know you were only doing it because you were worried about us."

"I never meant for you to think that I didn't trust you," Jess said. "I did. It's just – my mind was spinning in a million different directions about everything that could go wrong."

"Do you feel better about it? "I asked him. "Since we saw the sonogram and we know that everything's okay?"


"I'm not sure how I feel about that last one," I told him. "And for some of the other things – I want to know whether it's a boy or a girl before we make any major decisions."

"You don't want it to be a surprise?" Jess asked.

"Do you?" I asked him.

Jess shrugged. "Eric's girlfriend got twice as many gifts by claiming that they had waited to find out," he reminded me.

"That doesn't count," I chided him. "I asked her! She knew all along. And we don't need more stuff to pack in here that we're not going to use."

Jess grinned. "I was teasing," he said. "I'd like to know ahead of time, too."

"So, we're agreed," I said. "Six weeks from now, when we know whether it's a boy or a girl, we talk names and paint colors?"

"Agreed," Jess said. "We can maybe place some furniture in the room before we know. I think Luke is already working on a few things."

"Does that mean we can skip the assembling IKEA furniture phase of a budding relationship?" I asked Jess coyly, placing a hand back on my stomach. "I think pregnancy should be able to get us out of that one."

"You say the word and I'll do it myself," Jess told me slyly. "I've been known to be pretty adept at building things," he whispered in my ear.

I quickly pondered how my mom would react to us arriving a few minutes late for the ferry as Jess silenced any possible retort with his kiss.

My grandmother had been surprisingly neutral when I suggested that Jess join us for Christmas in Nantucket.

"I'd be delighted to see him again," she had told me over the phone. "The house you'll be staying in with your mother and Luke has three bedrooms. There's plenty of room."

My thoughts lingered on that for a few minutes, but I let it go. Jess said that he would be fine with staying in the guest bedroom if my grandmother wasn't comfortable with the two of us sharing a bedroom in our unmarried state, but I suspected that she was just exercising caution before she found out the details of our relationship. After all, she had known about it practically within hours of it
coming into existence and had taken the news rather calmly. I figured that the worst-case scenario would end in me having to sneak into his bed when she wasn't aware of it.

Of course, Jess and I weren't merely cohabiting: we were expecting a baby conceived shortly after the beginning of our relationship and had no current plans to get married. On top of all of that, we were also planning to publish a book that spilled all of my childhood secrets in explicit detail. My mother still fretted about us having to abscond from Nantucket as soon as my grandmother found out about both of those things, but I wasn't half as worried as she was. Grandma had spent the majority of my mother's life chastising her for not getting married, but she had eventually found out that she had been wrong to push my parents to do it. She hadn't liked that Luke and Mom held off on taking that step for a decade, but she had still accepted Luke and welcomed him at family gatherings along with his relatives.

She knew Jess. She accepted Jess. She had wanted to me to seek a new direction in my life. Now that I had chosen to take it, why shouldn't she be accepting?

As I saw Mom, Luke, and Jess's faces tighten in almost identical grimaces as the ferry neared the shore, I began to suspect that I was alone in my opinion. What was it about this pregnancy that unleashed this optimism in me on almost all possible subjects? Surely Jess and I couldn't overcome decades of rigid expectations and remembered disappointments overnight.

Maybe all of it was just a hormones-induced delusion, and it would be exactly as bad as everyone else feared.

"A book," Grandma said as we sat around the living room. I clutched a glass of ginger ale while the rest of my family imbibed small glasses of Scotch. "A memoir?"

"It's more of an autobiographical novel," I told her. "I thought of making it sort of a narrative nonfiction, but there's a lot of legal standards I'd have to be careful about, especially when it came to Chilton."

"So, nothing in the tradition of Truman Capote, then," she remarked, taking another sip of her glass.

"No one's getting murdered in this book, Grandma," I assured her.

Well, my mother's dignity might take a hit. I glanced in her direction, but both she and Luke seemed remarkably impassive at the moment.

"Do you have a legal department at your business?" she asked Jess. "Fact checkers? Anything of that sort?"

"We're a small press," Jess stated baldly. "That's part of the reason why Rory decided to tell this book as fiction. I'm editing it myself, and I've got a couple of other people ready to oversee it when it's finished. We're taking every possible precaution to avoid any legal action that could affect Rory or you."

"It's not the legal action I'm concerned about at the moment," my grandmother retorted. "It's the possibility of any punitive action from someone who might feel embarrassed about anything that's described." She sighed. "Especially the Huntzbergers."

My eyes lit up in alarm as I met Jess's stare. He took another sip from his glass before putting it down, but I could see the trepidation in his gaze.

My grandmother couldn't know about my affair with Logan. Could she?
"I'm not going to put anything in there in explicit detail that could identify Logan Huntzberger or his family," I maintained. "The arrest, back when we were in college – I'm going to take care to avoid telling the exact truth about that particular incident. The book's primarily about growing up with Mom in Stars Hollow, reconnecting with you and Grandpa, and a little bit about Chilton and Yale. I'm not going to write anything to alienate anyone who you know, Grandma. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, it's fiction."

"I'm not concerned about my social circle," Grandma stated. "I don't really have one anymore to the extent that I used to. What's past is past – "she waved her hand. "That was a different life. My only concern is any legal ramifications for you and your mother."

"I don't anticipate anything of that sort," I told her. "Both Jess and I are going out of our way to make sure it isn't a problem."

"That's good," Grandma said. She looked directly at my mother. "What's your opinion of this project?"

Mom wrapped her arms around herself as Luke put his arm over the back of her chair. "I was concerned at first, but I think Jess and Rory have a good handle on it," she said.

"So do I," my grandmother retorted as she turned her attention back to Jess and I. "When does your company anticipate this book being published?"

Wait. That was it? My mother freezes me out for months over the mere possibility of this book project because she's afraid of what my grandmother is going to think and all Emily Gilmore has to say is make sure you don't get sued and when is it coming out?

I was practically shell-shocked into silence. My mother seemed to have the same reaction.

"My company was thinking either next December or the first quarter of 2018," Jess answered for me. "It depends on Rory's writing process and if we'll have to do any extra editorial work for the reasons that you mentioned."

"And you plan to stay on her editor?" Grandma asked. "Have you given any thought as to how that will affect your relationship, given that Jess will likely be a character in this novel?"

I shook myself out of my stupor and stared at her blankly. I turned to look at my mother.

She was trying not to laugh from behind her glass. Luke, clearly sensing a potential outburst, quickly got up and refilled both of their drinks.


Jess maintained his poker face.

"Don't look so shocked, Rory," Grandma said sharply. "I know that you two have been involved since last September. I know that you haven't been at your mother's house in weeks. You've moved in together, haven't you? Isn't that what you really came here to tell me?"

"Not exactly," I warbled out.

"You are living together, though, aren't you?" Grandma asked.

"We are," Jess said, reaching to take my hand. "I don't think our personal relationship is going to affect our professional one, though. We've been doing very well so far."
"Look, it's not exactly the ideal relationship I might have planned for Rory years ago," my grandmother said. "I've learned many, many years ago that it was futile to fight the relationship choices of Lorelai and Rory. So what if the tree doesn't exactly fork? It's not the most momentous obstacle that it seems to be at first."

Mom buried her head in her hands. Luke looked like he wanted to do the same thing.

It appeared to be Jess's turn to be shell-shocked into silence.

"Jess, when you came here years ago you were rude and insolent," Grandma continued. "You clearly did not take the care to act appropriately in this environment or show the proper respect to your girlfriend's grandmother. Frankly, I did not care for you at all and was relieved when I learned that you and Rory had broken up. I've since learned that you were on the losing end of a battle with a swan that night, but that is no excuse for your behavior."

"You're right, Mrs. Gilmore," Jess said contritely, seeming to have slowly regained the power of speech. "There was no excuse for it."

"You've apologized, though," Grandma said. "Many times."

"I have," Jess replied. "I've been grateful that you have accepted my apologies."

"I've gotten the chance to know you again at various holiday functions over the years," Grandma said. "Whatever possessed you to behave that way as a teenager is clearly something that you have grown out of. You're a capable, successful young man who owns his own business. You've been settled in the same community for many years. You have put down roots and stayed out of trouble. The fact that your family is intermingled with Rory's doesn't cancel out those other things."

I glanced over at my mother. She looked slack-jawed at her mother's eruption of compliments.

I couldn't blame her. She had fought the good fight on Luke's behalf with my grandparents for years and years, and had only barely won the battle very recently. My relationship with Jess had been uncovered when I sleep with him under her roof and she puts her seal of approval on it immediately? That had to hurt.

"Well, I'm happy to hear to hear that from you, Mrs. Gilmore," Jess said, steadfastly polite. "It means a lot."

"I've wanted Rory to be in a steady, settled relationship for years," my grandmother said. "I've wanted her to be settled in a career and a home, not roaming the globe endlessly looking for work." She steeled her gaze away from Jess and focused on me. "After this book is finished, what do you plan to do for work, Rory? Are you focused on writing novels as a permanent career?"

"I've been working at the book press," I told her. "I'm not sure I want to continue long-term after the book is finished, but I'm open to the possibility."

"And that isn't affecting your relationship either?" she asked Jess.

"Not at all," Jess replied. "She's been a great asset to us with her journalism connections. We're lucky to have her."

"I'm glad to hear that," Grandma said. "Adaptability is a necessary attribute in today's job market, I believe. If one career isn't what you hoped it would be, then it's possible to find success in another one."
Well, that remark hurt a little, but I chose not to focus on it.

Besides, I had spent more than enough time weeping over the vestiges of my lost career. The truth of the matter is that she wasn't wrong about what had happened.

I decided to take advantage of her good attitude and proceed forth.

"Our relationship isn't why I asked if Jess could join us here for Christmas," I said. "The real reason we came here tonight is because – "

I took a deep breath as Jess put his arm around my back and started rubbing it consolingly.

"– I'm pregnant," I finished.

Grandma put her drink down on her coaster. "Really," she said in a drawl. "Pregnant." She took another drink from her glass. "I guess that tree really isn't forking," she remarked.

"Mom!" my mother exclaimed.

"Let me have this moment, Lorelai," Grandma replied. She cocked her head at Jess and I. "How far along?" she asked.

"Fourteen weeks," Jess said.

Grandma sighed. "So since last September, then," she stated.

"Yes, Grandma, but it's not what you think," I told her.

"Please explain it to me, then," she retorted.

"We were already working on the book project," I said. "The romantic relationship between Jess and I sort of snuck up on us."

"It snuck up under my roof, Rory," Grandma replied, a shade of anger surfacing in her voice.

"The details aren't important, Mom," my mother interjected.

Grandma waved a hand. "Go on," she said.

"We made a conscious decision to be a couple," Jess said. "Rory was already planning to move to Philadelphia and start working at the book press since we found out. The only thing that changed about her plans was that she chose to move into my apartment instead of waiting a few months while she got one of her own."

"Our relationship didn't come into existence solely because of the pregnancy," I explained. "It just happened to start at the same time that it did. Jess and I are moving forth, making plans – we're excited about this baby. It might have been a surprise, but we're ready. I just hope you can be happy for us, too."

"Are you getting married?" Grandma asked.

"We don't plan to get married before the baby comes," Jess said.

I squeezed his hand sharply, half expecting my grandmother to pounce on him.

Her expression remained neutral.
"That's a decision that Rory came to on her own, and I respect it," Jess continued. "We may revisit the topic after the baby is born, so it's not retired completely. Right now we're just focusing on becoming parents."

The truth was that our agreement hadn't been anywhere near that detailed. I looked at Jess questionably. We'd have to address that subject on our own very soon.

"Getting married – it is an eventual topic for discussion?" Grandma asked. "And when I say eventual, I don't mean nine years from now."

I didn't even have to look at my mother to know that she was rolling her eyes right now.

"That's correct," I told my grandmother. "We're focusing on our relationship as it is and how the baby is going to fit into it."

Grandma took another long sip of her drink and placed it back on the coaster. "I don't approve of this," she told Jess and me directly. "If you two are going to have a baby, you should be married. Frankly, I'm not sure what's stopping you at this point."

I glanced at Jess. He seemed as much of a loss to respond to that as I was.

However this subject might evolve between us in the future, I knew that we weren't anything close to being ready now. I didn't really know to explain that to my grandmother without getting into a two-hour argument about the difference in generational mores.

"I know it's not up to me at this point," Grandma continued. "I know that things have changed, and that being an unmarried mother is not the same thing as being a single mother. I also know that you're an adult in a stable relationship, and all I can hope for is that you keep marriage open as an option instead of stubbornly refusing to consider it. Can the two of you promise me that?"

"We can," I said as I looked at Jess solemnly.

"We will," he told my grandmother.

I squeezed his hand in gratitude, grateful to have someone by my side who was willing to weather this particular storm with me.

Mom and Grandma prattled on in the background about the proper terms of endearment for grandmothers in this day and age, but I was barely aware of them.
Chapter 18

Okay, guys. This chapter has been in the works for a very long time. Unfortunately, I had to split it in two.

There's a fair amount of talk here about Jess and Rory's exes, and I'm thinking some of you are going to want to kill me once you get to the end. I'm going to try to get the next chapter out of the way as soon as possible because it's this particular part of the story that I've been agonizing over since I began it.

I'd like to mention that when I started to outline this story a year and a half ago it was long before ksjd89's Turn Right showed up. I'm a big fan of that story, so what happens there had next to zero impact on the long route down the "what ifs" Jess and Rory take here regarding certain events in late season 4. Also, that story is awesome and you should go read it right after you finish this chapter.

That said, on to the chapter. Read, enjoy (or don't), and drop me a review if you feel like it.

It turned out that my grandmother was utterly indifferent to the bedroom arrangements that Jess and I had for that night.

Even after her placid acceptance of my pregnancy bombshell, part of me still expected that she would insist that Jess and I sleep in separate bedrooms. After all, she had banned any sleepovers with him under her roof after she found out of the existence of the first one. Why wouldn't she want us to keep adhering to that policy? The guest house was still technically her property. She might have begrudgingly accepted our relationship status because she knew it was out of her control, but that didn't mean she wouldn't still cling to that control when it was a few hundred feet away from her door.

Of course, I was being completely paranoid about this. When the four of us left for the guest house that evening, her only parting remarks were that Mom and Luke were to wake Jess and I up by eight so that we could eat breakfast and open presents at the main house. Oh, and that the guest bedroom that had tentatively been set aside for Jess might make a fitting nursery next year.

Maybe it was the pure delight over not being flayed alive. Maybe it was the second-trimester hormones that made the mere proximity of my boyfriend seem amorous by default. Maybe it was because he did look awfully dapper in the tight sweater and slacks he had donned for that occasion.

All I can tell you is that we made excellent use of our private quarters for the next hour.

Afterwards, we lay curled up in the bed together, his bare hand on my leg, the two of us nestled in a cocoon of skin, rumpled sheets, and the strains of acoustic music flowing from the IPod speakers on the end table.

Nantucket had been expected to be the scene of tears and recriminations, a repetition of the argument that my mother and grandmother had been embroiled in for decades as I began my own journey into unexpected motherhood. It hadn't ended up like that at all. Instead of condemnation and disapproval, I had been met with acceptance and joy. I had broken the pattern because I hadn't had to do it alone.

Once again, I luxuriated in the afterglow of having faced yet another obstacle with Jess by my side. I turned my head to look at the blanket of stars spread just outside our bay window, bathing us with their somnolent glow as the sound of the waves crashed beneath us. Jess pulled me closer to him, his
silent breath tickling the hairs on my neck and moving his hand higher up on my thigh.

It wasn't just the unexpected blessing that we had received tonight. Nantucket was romantic.

"What are you thinking about?" he whispered, gently rousing me from my daze.

"About how beautiful it is here," I said, my eyes still focused on the view outside. "I mean, my grandmother described it to me over and over, but it just didn't become real to me here until we were here."

"That view's pretty spectacular," Jess commented. "I could get used to these rich people vacations every once in a while," he drawled.

I shifted my head on the pillow to look at him as Jess grinned at me, his eyes dancing with mischief. "Grandma says she wants Luke to fish with her while we're here," I reminded him. "My grandmother! Fishing! It's a whole new world. She's becoming more like us than the other way around."

"I really wasn't expecting being on fish gut duty this week," Jess said. "But it's good to know that I'm capable of living up to expectation in that area."

"Well, me and the McNugget are staying on shore this year," I retorted.

Jess laughed. "The closest you've ever gotten on any of these fishing excursions is the dinner table after everything is sanitized, wiped down, and ready for consumption," he pointed out.

"I intend to keep it that way," I told him. "If this kid wants anything to do with fishing, I'm confident that the rest of this family has it handled. Mom and I will stay behind and watch old movies until all of you return."

Jess reached out and smoothed a tendril of hair away from my forehead. "You know, the chances that we'll actually catch any fish this week are fairly low," he said softly.

"I know," I said. "I'm just warning you about how it's going to be in the future."

"Duly noted," Jess replied.

"We can take her here next year," I said, my brain taking alight with the thought. "We can show all of this to her. She'll be about six months old. That's old enough to take her over on the ferry, right?"

"I think six months is old enough to bring her or him over on the boat," Jess remarked.


We lapsed into contented silence for a few minutes as the sounds of gentle melodies from the Ipod drifted over to the air around us.

I mused on how much of our conversations, even the happiest ones, revolved around the baby. It wasn't that we didn't talk about other things – the book, our business, our friends, the world that we had half lived in literary creations much that had first cemented our bond to each other – but that everything always went back to the baby. She (or he) was a constant refrain to anything else we might focus on, always drawing out our attention from anything else in our lives.

I wasn't ungrateful or unhappy about it. In a sense, we were already attuned to the reality of being parents. I knew that was probably the way that it should be. But the life I had imagined for just the
two of us at the start of our relationship would never fit the shape that I had first dreamed of. It couldn't. There was always going to be a third person attached to it.

That pattern that I had been so focused on breaking earlier that evening wasn't one that I had anticipated for Jess and I. It had been foisted on us by accident. Even as unexpectedly happy as it had made both of us, I still knew that it wasn't what I had imagined when we first resumed our relationship.

"We missed our chance," I said, unwittingly broadcasting my thoughts.

"What does that mean?" Jess asked, distractedly running his fingers through my hair.

"Jess, I'm really grateful for how everything's working out for us," I told him. "Every time I've been scared, or sick, or uncertain, you've been there for me. And I really appreciate that. But I just keep thinking that the life that we planned when we started all of this isn't ours anymore. It's always going to come back to us being parents. We never really had a chance to be just us. That ideal life, just you and me in the city, only occasionally venturing out of our cavern of books – we'll never have that. I guess I'm a little sad about it."

"We'll have that life," Jess assured me. "We'll just have a baby crawling over those books occasionally. And we'll make time for just us, Rory. We're not losing anything."

"It's not going to be the same, though," I protested. "And I keep thinking it's my fault."

"How is that your fault?" Jess asked.

"Because I distanced myself from you," I told him. "I was too attached to living my unattached life, and I was in denial for so long that it was ending. I could have made my way back to your orbit. I could have tried instead of barely being in contact with you for years. I could have been there for you when you had to rebuild your business. We could have had that life then, and then been ready to have a family life now. Now we're having to figure everything out at once, and that time we could have had together – I squandered it doing a lot of things I regret. We're not going to get that time back."

Jess sighed. "That isn't your fault, Rory," he told me. "I wasn't available to you during a lot of that time. Including the year I was in Stars Hollow. I still don't think we'd be together now if you had seen me back then."

"I don't think that's true, Jess," I countered. "And as for the rest of it – I know you might not regret your experiences, but I regret a lot of mine. If I had faced reality and come home sooner, we could have carved out a time to be together. Maybe."

"I don't think you regret as many of your experiences as you think," Jess said.

"Well, Logan –"

"I'm not talking about Logan," Jess clarified. "What went on between you and him – that's the past, and that's your business. But Rory, you wanted to be a journalist. You wanted to travel the world and write stories and have those experiences. You lived in DC. You worked at the Washington Post. You spent the last four years traveling all over Europe. You wanted to have that life, Rory. And you had it. Do you regret all of those things?"

"No," I admitted. "I don't. Not all of them. I just wish I would have realized that things weren't working in Europe until I started completely depending on other people. And I wish we hadn't grown apart."
"I regret that, too," Jess said. "And I wish I could have been there for you these past of couple of years as well. But romantically, Rory –"

"It wasn't an option," I finished for him. "Not at that point."

Jess reached for my hand. "I hate to admit it, but it wasn't," he said softly.

I clutched his hand, still running over the alternate timelines in my mind. "Maybe it couldn't have happened then, but there were other opportunities," I said. "I could have gone with you to New York when you asked me to. We could have had a chance to be together then. Maybe all of this other stuff wouldn't have happened."

"We were so young," Jess said, his eyes glazing over. "I would have screwed it up, Rory. It would be like us having sex in high school. It would have tainted everything for us both. You probably would have never wanted to speak to me again."

"That's not what you said a few weeks ago," I reminded him, slightly disturbed to see that sign of the wounded, broken Jess I had known as a teenager resurface. "About us having sex in high school, at least."

"The experience would have been good," Jess said. "Well, at least I'd like to think so. But it probably would have ended up with me leaving town and breaking your heart like I did, and then it would have been worse for you. I wouldn't have wanted to taint your first experience like that."

"And breaking up someone else's marriage wouldn't have tainted it?" I asked, incredulous. "I don't think it would have been that way for us, Jess. If I had gone with you to New York, it wouldn't have tainted it. We wouldn't have even had to go there! If I had said to you that I just wanted to drive until we ran out of gas, would you have said no? We could have had that summer together, Jess. At least a few months of us being on our own. It would have been a lot better than what I ended up doing."

"Of course I wouldn't have said no," Jess said, seeming to break out of his self-pitying stupor. "I still think you would have regretted it, though. The money, the class barriers between us, though – it would have been a big deal. Much bigger than it is thirteen years later. You were a Yale girl and I was a broke kid sleeping on a mattress in the city. I'm not sure we could have handled it."

"Maybe it would have been better for us both to break those barriers down," I argued. "You know how I really spent that summer, Jess? I let my grandmother escort me around Europe. I got sucked into that upper-class world, and I'm not sure I ever got out of it. At least not until this year. I came back from Europe, flirted with putting things back together with Dean, and then I met Logan. I became part of that Huntzberger fold, that bubble of people who are so tied to money that they don't know any other way to operate. And I found I could get addicted to it. It's led me to make some really bad decisions. If I had spent that summer with you, maybe none of that would have happened."

"I don't think any of that is true," Jess said. "You've always been tied to that world and been able to exist outside of it, Rory. It was your dream to graduate from an Ivy League school. I didn't want to keep you from that. If you spent the summer with me, Rory –"

He bit his lip, seemingly wanting to bite back the rest of his sentence.

"- I wouldn't have wanted to send you back," he whispered. "You had to go back, Rory. I wouldn't have wanted to take that dream away from you."

I let go of his hand and rested it on the mattress. "You've thought about this a lot," I said softly.
"I have," Jess admitted. "I was really screwed up that year. I wanted you more than anything, but I didn't know how to be with you. I didn't figure that out until later. I was ready, then, but –"

" – I was with Logan," I finished for him.

"Right," Jess agreed. "Our timing's always been wretched, Rory. I'm not sure another time would have been possible for us."

"We could have just had a great summer," I suggested. "Maybe it wouldn't have affected anything else."

"Maybe," Jess said. He shifted closer to me, laying his hand next to mine on the mattress. "How do you think things would have gone for your mom and Luke?"

I laughed. "We probably would have really screwed things up for them," I mused.

"I'm not so sure," Jess said. "I think they would have made their way to each other. It was time for them. It was right."

"It was destiny," I said, my mouth falling open in mocking dismay.

"Oh, geez," Jess said, sounding like a direct replica of his uncle.

I giggled and scooted closer to him. Jess put his arm around my waist and started stroking the small of my back.

"We are too, you know," he told me. "All this second-guessing – it's meaningless. We were always going to find our way back to each other."

I gazed up into his brown stare. "And that person who's going to be accompanying us?" I asked.

"Maybe he or she were supposed to bring us together," Jess said. "It wouldn't have been right until it happened this way."

"Maybe you're right," I conceded. "I'm still nervous about how things are going to work when we actually meet that person."

"We'll make time for our relationship as well as for the moppet," Jess assured me. "We've managed to figure things out so far, Rory. I'm not saying it's going to be easy, but it's not going to be impossible, either."

"I don't know how good I'm going to be at any of that, Jess," I confessed. "There's so much I don't know about babies."

"You've spent time with Paris's kids," Jess reminded me. "Lane's, too."

"That didn't really happen until I started staying with her last year," I told him. "I was supposed to be this second mother to Lane's kids, like my mother was to her, and it didn't happen. I just wasn't around." I looked up at him. "I think it's going to be easier for you," I continued. "More of your friends have babies, you've actually spent time with them, and you've watched Doula grow up. You've got this whole frame of reference that I don't."

Jess's eyes clouded over slightly, as if he were fighting some unseen demon that he barely had control over.

Her recovered quickly, but I immediately felt my stomach start to flip-flop. I recognized that look too
Something was definitely going on with him tonight.

"It's not what you think," he told me. "It's one thing to hang out with your friend's babies, and it's something completely different to parent them. I may be old enough to be Doula's dad, but I've never lived with her. I've lived in a different state for most of the time that she's known me. We've bonded, but she's not my kid. I don't know that much more than you do."

"You've changed diapers, though," I prodded him. "You've rocked some of those kids to sleep. You read to Doula. I've seen you back up her parents more than once when she gets out of control. I've barely done any of those things."

"You have a sister, too," Jess reminded me. "Didn't she live at your house when your parents were married? You visited her, right?"

I nodded, feeling an ancient stab of guilt. "I only visited once," I revealed to him. "I still had mixed feelings about her being around. I certainly didn't do anything sisterly when I was around. I've barely seen her since then – she's lived with her mother in Paris since she was about five or six. I'm not sure my father even has much of anything to do with her."

Jess's brow furrowed. "When you say mixed feelings you mean –"

I sighed. "I'm not proud of it," I admitted. "When she was born, I was upset that she got in the way of my parents getting back together. I was eighteen, I should have handled it better – but I didn't. I tried to pretend she didn't exist. And then a few years later, when I saw her living in my house with my parents – I just saw her as a sign of everything that was wrong. She was one more person who didn't belong in that house, just like my dad was, this stupid overcompensation for the fact that they didn't belong together. So I ignored her."

"Do you still feel that way?" Jess asked.

"No," I told him. "She was just a little girl who couldn't help who her parents were. She couldn't help that her existence caused pain for other people around her, just like mine did. I wish I could have seen that back then and at least made more of an effort. But I didn't."

Jess removed his hand from the small of my back. "She's still our kid's aunt," he said softly.

"I know," I said. "I mean, if she wants to be involved with him or her, if we both want to make more of an effort to actually have a relationship – I want that. I didn't really have that relationship with April before any of this happened. I'm starting to have one now. I cut myself off from most of this family for a long time and I think I'm just now starting to realize how it's going to affect how I'm going to handle having my own. You haven't really had that problem."

"Maybe," Jess conceded. "Maybe not." He laughed, and I could hear a hard bitterness in his voice. "I might turn out to be a lot more clueless than you think."

I reached out to run my hand through his hair, wondering about this melancholy attitude that had resurfaced tonight.

Jess had been my strength, my encouragement, my protector in all of this. He was the person who directed me towards this strange, wonderful new life that we were living, the person that knew what it was to have a home, a purpose, an ability to sustain a serious relationship. I had lost sense of all of that, and he hadn't.
I had assumed he had known how to guide us into the next phase of our lives. That he would instantly know how to become a parent. That he wouldn't be stymied by all the fears and trepidations and inadequacies that I suspected that I would be.

But maybe Jess was just as scared about all of this as I was.

"Jess," I began softly as he turned his face towards mine. "Do you want to get married?"

"You said that you weren't ready," he replied.

"We already know how I feel about the topic," I said. "We never talked about you."

Jess sighed, and I could see a slight sadness start to take over his features. "I don't want to get married," he said.

A hard, bitter pain took root inside of me once I heard him say the actual words. I hadn't been expecting that.

"I don't mean ever, Rory," Jess said immediately, rushing to reassure me. "I don't want to get married now."

Somehow, that didn't make me feel any better.

"Okay," I said tremulously. "Look, Jess, maybe we need to talk about this."

"I think we do," Jess said. He rolled over and turned on the lamp on the end table, and positioned himself back against the pillows. I shifted to give him room.

"I'm not ready," I clarified. "That part is still true. I don't want a surprise proposal. But hearing that, from you, right now –" I struggled to get the words out. "It wasn't what I was expecting."

"You thought I was waiting," Jess guessed.

I nodded. "I think I did." I let out a bitter laugh of my own. "I mean, it's crazy, Jess. We've been together three and a half months. And if you asked me right here, right now, I would say no. But this whole time, you've always seemed to know where we were heading and how to get there. You've always seemed so much more ready than me."

"But I'm not," Jess said. "On this particular matter, I'm not."

"You were going to get married before," I said in a small voice. "To Celeste. You said you wanted to."

"I thought I would get married," Jess corrected me. "And yes, at some point, I wanted to. We were never formally engaged, Rory. That's not what the situation was between her and I."

"What was the situation, then?" I prodded him.

Jess sighed. "It was the kind of the situation you get into when you're in a long-term relationship," he explained. "You know, the four stages of engagement. Most of which preclude an actual engagement."

I looked at him blankly. "I don't know about any of that, Jess," I told him. "I haven't ever been in a relationship that got that far."
Except I had been in one once, a long time ago. There hadn't been four stages of engagement. There had been one very public proposal that I hadn't been prepared for, and a bitter break-up when I said no.

"I didn't come up with this theory myself," Jess said. "I actually heard it from Luke, of all people. He said that your mom came up with it."

My mother had never discussed anything like this with me.

"Go on," I told Jess.

"You talk about getting married," Jess said. "That's step one. This can take years. Step two is actually deciding to get married. Step three is making plans to get married. Step four is actually getting married." He took a deep breath as his gaze met mine. "We never got beyond step one."

"Does this have anything to do with why you're not ready when it comes to us?" I asked.

Jess sighed. "Yes and no," he stated. "I've seen relationships fall apart without it ever being a factor. Including my own. I also grew up watching my mother latch onto loser husband after loser husband, hoping that getting married was going to solve all of our problems and make whatever one she was currently stuck with make us a family. It never worked. At least while I was growing up." He focused his eyes on me. "I think you know something about that, too," he said softly.

I nodded, thinking of my own parents and their last futile attempt to convince each other that their relationship could somehow survive in the real world. "Marriage by itself can't force a relationship that's already deteriorating to work," I told him. "Sometimes it can make it worse."

"That's what my situation would have been with Celeste," Jess said. "I believed that marriage was in our future, that it was going to happen. Then our relationship went to hell, and everything that we once shared became just another means for us to torture each other. Going through all that, I know --" he let out a deep breath. "It's not a straight path. Not always. Sometimes it circles and caves in on itself."

"Like a snake eating its own tail," I suggested.


I shifted closer to him. "Do you expect our relationship to end up like that, Jess?" I asked.

Jess turned to me and placed his hand on top of mine. "God, Rory, no," he said in a softer voice. "That's the last thing I expect. But that doesn't mean I don't fear it."

"You've always been so much more optimistic about every aspect of our relationship than I've been," I told him. "I'm not sure where this fear is coming from."

"I want to do everything possible for us to avoid ending up in a place where we hate each other," Jess said. "I just think that forcing marriage on us before we're ready could lead us to that place. I couldn't bear that, Rory. But the truth is that I don't know how this baby is going to affect our relationship. We're going to be under a lot of pressure, and we're going to really need to help each other."

I nodded, starting to understand. "But you do want to get married eventually?" I asked.

"I do," Jess said. "When we're both ready. When we're sure."
I took a deep breath and threaded my fingers through his. "I'm not sure if I want to get married," I told him.

"Ever?" he asked, seeming half shocked. I could see that sadness start to creep back into his eyes, and I felt a more purely insidious sense of guilt than I had a few minutes ago.

"I'm still working it out in my head, Jess," I told him honestly. "I'm not saying never. I'm saying I don't know."

Jess ran his thumb over the inside of my palm, remaining silent. I took that as my cue to continue.

"Every time someone brings up the topic, it kind of disappears from my head until the next time someone brings it up," I said. "I've been thinking about that, Jess, and I don't have an answer for it. You've been through this before, and you know that marriage is something that you want. I just don't know if I do."

"Is there something specific that's holding you back on this?" Jess asked. "That you know of, I mean."

I nodded. "I was asked once," I told him. "Logan asked me to marry him right as I was getting ready to graduate from college. He wanted me to move with him to California. He had this whole setup planned. Where we'd live, where I could get a job. I didn't want to be tied down to anything specific – I wanted an open future. I didn't want to end our relationship over that, but Logan didn't agree. He said if I didn't want to marry him and move to California, then it would be over between us. And it was."

Jess looked confused. "Do you think I'm going to force anything like that on you, Rory?" he asked. "I wouldn't."

"I don't think it's that, Jess," I said. "I just keep thinking of that uncertainty when he asked me, and part of me still feels that uncertainty. It's not that I'm not committed to you, or that I don't want to raise this baby with you. I want all of those things. I just keep going back to what my mom said at the time, which is that someday I would be asked again and I'd look at that person and I'd know right away what my answer was."

I raised my eyes to his, and choked back a sob as I noticed how completely guileless they were. "If you asked me right now, I wouldn't know the answer," I said. "I love you, Jess, and I still wouldn't know."

"Oh, Rory," Jess said. "I don't think it's ever going to be that simple. It wasn't for your mom."

"The longest relationship she sustained until recently was one where she wasn't married," I reminded him. "I might be the same way."

"Our problems aren't necessarily going to be the problems that Luke and Lorelai had," Jess said. "I hope they aren't. I know your mom probably does, too. They had their own reasons for waiting to get married."

"Luke waited for my mom," I told him. "He was ready. She wasn't. I know we aren't in that situation right now. But we might come to the same point eventually."

"We might," Jess conceded. He reached up and brushed the hair away from my face. "But right now, I'm not ready, either. There might come a time when I know I want it and you don't, but we don't know that. We've got to let our relationship develop on its own."
I nodded, knowing he was right. I let him pull me closer to him.

"Does it make you feel a little better knowing that neither of us quite know where our heads are at on this topic?" Jess asked. "I mean, other than definitely not right now."

"I do," I told him. "I think I just need a little time to get used to the fact that you can be just as confused and screwed-up as I am."

"You're not screwed-up," Jess said forcefully.

"I think I still am, a little," I told him. We settled back against the pillows. "Jess, can we just promise that when we feel differently about moving things forward, that we agree to tell each other?"

"I think that's a good idea," Jess told me as his lips met mine in a kiss.

We parted and I settled back against him, content to have him run his fingers distractedly through my hair.

"Jess?" I asked after a few minutes.

"Hmm?"

"Did you ever talk about kids with Celeste?"

He stiffened against me, stilling the movement of his hand.

I looked back up at him and was stunned to see the traces of that same unseen demon start to resurface in his eyes.

Jess shifted away from me, and I could see his gaze start to harden. It frightened me in a disarmingly familiar way.

I had touched on something raw and desolate, and we both knew it. I felt myself start to panic.

Jess opened his mouth, and then closed it. He stared at the ceiling, refusing to look at me.

"She was pregnant," he said. "She was pregnant twice."
Well, you guys certainly had a rather um, interesting reaction to that last little tidbit! I'll put a longer note at the end of this chapter, but for now I'll let Rory and Jess take the floor.

Fair warning: this chapter has some sensitive subject matter, and I'm aware that some of the things my version of Jess has to say may not sit well with some people. I only ask that you give him a chance to explain before you judge him too harshly.

"Pregnant?" I repeated in a whisper.

Jess wearily turned his head towards mine, his eyes empty of anything except a sad resignation.

I let his admission hover in the silence between us. For once in my life, I was depleted of anything to say.

"Rory – "Jess began.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked him. "In all the conversations we've had about this woman, every single conversation we've had about our baby, why hasn't this come up, Jess?"

He remained silent.

He didn't have an answer. Why didn't he have an answer?

"Is there something else you haven't told me?" I asked, my mind immediately going into overdrive.

Had they broken up because she was pregnant? Jess had said was pregnant. That meant not anymore, right?

"She miscarried," Jess said quickly. "She miscarried both times. It's not what you're thinking, Rory."

"I honestly don't know what I'm thinking right now, Jess," I told him.

Suddenly it all came to me.

Jess had known to count back to my last period to determine how far along I was.

He had known exactly how to take care of me when I was sick.

He hadn't wanted to see the sonogram until he knew I wanted to keep the baby.

He had known where to find the baby on the sonogram. He had known what that white blob meant.

He had done it all before.

"That baby book you had," I whispered. "The old one. Those things you bookmarked, those notes you wrote in the margins – those were from when you were with her, weren't they?"

"They were," Jess confirmed.

"Jess, that crosses a line," I said. "That crosses a huge line."

"I know it does," Jess said.
He still had that almost empty look in his eyes. They were absent of bravado or excuses, only a blatant guilt and desperation that was utterly devoid of solutions.

He had looked like that that night at the Firelight Festival when he had told me he loved me and then ran away.

He had looked like that after I told him that I didn't want to go to New York with him.

This was him at his most raw and lonely, the Jess that was left after he didn't have enough fight left to continue lashing out.

I had been the one to take that fight out of him the last two times I had seen him this way. I didn't know where he went or what happened to him after it was extinguished.

I didn't know what he was like when someone else had created that crack in him.

The Jess I knew now didn't lash out. What was left of him after he was broken again like this?

I suddenly remembered what Luke had said when we had told him I was pregnant.

*You know better, Jess. Especially after everything that's happened.*

Luke had known about the miscarriages.

I remembered my mom asking me if Jess had given me any reason to believe that he wouldn't take the pregnancy news well. I remembered that she hadn't had any doubts that he would be supportive.

I remembered Doula chiding the both of us about the timing of our pregnancy.

Had my mom known? Had Doula known?

Who else knew about this? Liz? T.J? April?

Why was I the only one he didn't trust enough to tell?

"Everyone knows about this, don't they?" I asked.

"I don't know who Celeste told," Jess said softly.

That wasn't the answer I was looking for.

"Do your friends know?" I asked Jess. "Lyle? Eric?"

"Celeste and I stopped having the same friends a long time ago," Jess said. "I think she told her parents. Lyle and Eric don't know about it."

"Who did you tell?" I asked.


"And my mom?" I said in a small voice.


"Not even your mom?" I asked.
"She assumed that Celeste and I didn't want kids," Jess said. "I had to correct her on that point."

"What did you tell her?"

Jess stared at the ceiling again.

"I wanted kids. She didn't," he said. He wearily turned his head back towards mine. I knew without asking that he had told her the truth.

"What about those comments that Doula made?" I asked. "About it not being a good idea to have a baby?"

"She's being raised by two people with zero filter," Jess replied. "They tell her all these stories from their past, and they always follow up by telling her not to do the same thing. When she asks your mom questions, your mom tells her the truth. She's just repeating what she's been told. She doesn't know. April doesn't know about it, either. It's not common knowledge."

"I should know," I said. "Jess, you should have told me."

"I didn't know how to bring it up," Jess said.

"You had a thousand opportunities to tell me," I retorted. "Jess, I need more than that."

"If our relationship had developed a little more naturally, I would have told you by this point," Jess said. "But you were pregnant, and we were so happy. You were so happy. I was just focused on getting us past this point. You got so sick, Rory, and I was afraid – I was afraid it was going to happen again. I didn't want to cause you any more stress than you were already under. I just needed us to get through this. I needed for both of you to be okay."

"Is that why you didn't want to get anything ready before the genetic tests came back?" I asked.

Jess nodded. "I didn't know how to tell you about it afterward," he said. He laughed bitterly. "I didn't exactly have the most socially appropriate reaction when it happened. I guess I was afraid of what you were going to say."

What on earth did that mean?

I thought about Lane and how hard she had taken the loss of her baby. That gap between being a parent and not being one any longer hadn't been one she had been able to cross without giving up any hope of ever being able to love another one.

I didn't have anything left to give to another baby.

Jess had bridged that gap with enough left over to love me, to love our child. Yet even the reminder of this loss was enough to bring back the old Jess, that hurt, wounded kid who was bereft of anything except pure, rootless need.

I had left him behind before. I couldn't do it again this time. I didn't want to make that hurt any worse.

And yet despite everything else, I needed to know what had happened. I deserved to know.

I moved closer to him and reached for his hand.

"I want to know what happened," I told him. "If you're willing to tell me."
Jess clasped his fingers in mine and nodded.

"I'm not going to come off that well," he said, his eyes boring into mine, no longer empty.

They seemed to be imploring me for a forgiveness that he feared I wouldn't give. That he didn't expect me to give.

I took a deep breath.

"I think I can handle it," I told him.

Jess took another breath that echoed my own, his pain almost taking solid shape in front of me.

"The first time was about eight months after we got together," he said. "The press was just getting off of the ground, and we were talking about moving in together. We didn't know for sure that she was pregnant until it happened, and we agreed that it wasn't the right time. She wasn't ready to give up ballet, we didn't have enough money – we'd revisit the subject later on. But I wondered a little, what it would have been like and the more I thought about it – I kept warming up to the idea of kids."

"Did you talk about that with her?" I asked. "You know, after the first time?"

Jess shook his head. "Not right away," he said. "We were pretty secure in our life. Things were going well. Then a year goes by, and she decides to retire. The business was doing great, I had just published my second book, and I brought the subject up again. She said no."

"Was it a permanent no?" I asked.

"Looking back on it, I think so," Jess said. "She wanted to finish her finance degree. I could sense that we were going in different directions on the topic, but I figured there was time to figure these things out. We were still getting along. Things hadn't bottomed out yet."

I squeezed his hand, giving him the silent cue to continue.

"I thought we should have been getting closer towards marriage," Jess said. "But everything was up in the air with her, and things started changing between us. I held back, and she didn't push the topic. She got her degree, and she started getting more into this Wall Street world and she became so dissatisfied. We were fighting all of the time. She wasn't happy with me or this city or anything about our life anymore. She wanted us to move to New York and start over. And then in the middle of all of that, she turns up pregnant again."

Jess let loose a long sigh. "I didn't pressure her one way or the other, Rory. At least I tried not to. But I wanted the baby and she didn't. A week and a half go by and she hasn't made a decision either way. Then I wake up in the middle of the night and she's bleeding in the bed next to me, crying, asking me what's wrong and why is it so much worse this time – "

Jess stopped and released my hand. "She was eleven weeks along," he said. "That's why I got so crazy a few weeks ago, Rory. I started going out of my mind when you got to that point. I just kept seeing the same thing happening to you."

"You got rid of the bed," I whispered.

"I got rid of the mattress first," Jess clarified. "The bed came later." He sighed again. "She got her tubes tied about a week later. She said she had been through enough, and she knew she definitely didn't want kids. Then we came home and had a lot of new reasons to hate each other."
Jess looked me directly in the eye, the desolation slowly disappearing from his gaze. "I don't resent Celeste for any of this," he said. "I saw her go through a lot with these miscarriages. But the kids thing just became one more reason why we shouldn't be together."

Something was missing here.

Why would Jess think he needed to be forgiven for any of this? What exactly had he done wrong?

"The second miscarriage – when did it happen?" I asked.

"August," Jess said softly. "A few weeks before your grandfather died."

"That's why you really didn't come to the funeral," I surmised.

Jess nodded. "I didn't know what to do," he admitted. "I couldn't leave her in that state, Rory. I couldn't make her come with me. I wanted to be there for you. I really did. But I couldn't do it." He sighed. "I might as well have gone. That argument went on for weeks. I'm not sure staying made much of a difference."

"You should have stayed with her," I said gently. "Jess – is that what you mean by this being a story where you don't come off that well? I don't really see anything wrong in what you've done. Any of it."

"I had mixed feelings about not going to the funeral," Jess told me. "I still do."

"But when you say you didn't have a socially appropriate reaction – "

"I didn't know how to talk to anybody about it," Jess said. "It happened and then we returned to our old cycles, our old fights, and it still tore at me. I didn't know how to explain that to anyone. I still wanted that baby, I still grieved for it, and Celeste – well, maybe she grieved, too, but she didn't seem to. Not in the way I did. I couldn't talk about with her. I couldn't talk about it with anyone. How do you even say that out loud without making yourself out to be the world's most despicable boyfriend?"


"Luke understood why I was upset," Jess said. "He told me if I still loved her, if I was still committed to her then I should try to look beyond wanting children." He sighed. "I couldn't."

"Did you still love her?" I asked.

"No," Jess said. His gaze met mine. It wasn't depleted or wounded anymore. It was just tired. "I had stopped feeling that way even before she got pregnant."

"You stayed with her a long time after that, though," I pointed out. "You didn't break up until February, right?"

Jess nodded. "Right."

"Who initiated it?" I asked.

"She made plans to move to New York," Jess said. "She asked me to come along. I said no. I told her that we didn't have any reason to stay together anymore. She said that she agreed."

I took a deep breath and forced myself not to think about my current circumstances.
"Do you still have feelings for her, Jess?" I asked.

"I don't," Jess said. He looked me directly in the eye. "I don't have any feelings left for her, Rory. I love you."

"You're so wrapped up in knots about this, Jess," I said. "Not just about the miscarriages, but about how you acted. It's almost as if you expect me to judge you, and I don't see any reason why I should. I'm just trying to understand."

"Rory, I don't exactly grieve the loss of that relationship," Jess said. "Maybe that's wrong. We were together a long time. I think about everything that happened with those miscarriages, though – and I still grieve them. I know it's stupid. I know that even if Celeste had wanted to have the baby, our relationship wouldn't have survived. I know that we weren't in love with each other by that point. I know that if I had a baby with her, I wouldn't be here with you, having a baby that we both want. I still think about it, though. I'm not supposed to think about it, but I do."

"Is that what you feel guilty about?" I asked Jess. "That you're not supposed to think about these things?"

"It's not just that," Jess said. "I still don't think I handled any of this well. I've thought it over in my head so many times, Rory. Why didn't I push for marriage when she first said no to kids? Did I know then that I wouldn't ever want to really commit to her? Why didn't I prevent all of this? Why did I let it drag on so long when I knew we had nothing in common anymore?"

"If you broke up with her when she first said no, you wouldn't have known for sure that you wanted kids as much as you did," I suggested.

"Maybe," Jess conceded. "I could have saved us both a lot of pain. I think about that."

"You still wanted that baby, though," I whispered.

"I did," Jess said. He looked at me solemnly. "I didn't want her. The family I thought I wanted – it wasn't going to happen in that way."

"You would have supported her, Jess," I said. "You would have stayed with her. I wouldn't be here with you right now if you had that baby with her. And going through all of this with you, I just have to wonder. How do I fit into this? You, me, this pregnancy – how much of it is about me?"

Jess's looked at me in disbelief. "It's all about you, Rory. How could you think otherwise?"

"You wanted this before me," I said, my voice started to shake. "A family. You wanted it with her. Now you have it with me, and I'm wondering if I'm just a replacement for what you lost. I mean, do you really want me, Jess? How much of this is about what else I can give to you?"

"That isn't it at all," Jess said firmly. "I wanted you, Rory. Your passion, your strength, your intellect, everything about you that infuriates and excites me because I know you and you know me in a way that no else ever did. I wanted you in this city, in my life, in my bed. Before there was any thought of a baby, there was you." He reached for my hand and grasped it firmly, his eyes once again honest and warm. "I wanted that. I still do."

"It's just – "I paused, half afraid to ask him, half indignant that I hadn't asked him already. "It just seems a crazy coincidence that it happened this way, Jess. Paris called this an accidentally-on-purpose baby. You didn't – "

Jess's eyes widened in shock. "Of course not, Rory. I wouldn't do that to you. I wouldn't do that
"Three pregnancies in four years, Jess," I said softly. "I just have to wonder."

"I'm not sure how it happened with Celeste," Jess said. "I wasn't intending to get her pregnant either time. And as for you and I, we got caught up in the moment and weren't as careful as we should have been. But I wasn't planning it, Rory. Not at all. We weren't even a couple yet."

"Okay," I said, relieved that my paranoia on that particular topic had been proven false. "But eventually – "

"I would have wanted to talk about it," Jess said. "I wanted to give it time. I wanted us to be a little more settled in this relationship before we got to that point. But I would have wanted it if you did. I did want to get married and have a family with someone who I loved and who loved me back. Who wasn't ashamed of me, who wasn't always looking outside of me because our life wasn't enough by itself. I would never have gotten that with Celeste, Rory. But I have it with you."

"And if I didn't want it?" I asked. "A family?"

"I would still have wanted to be with you," Jess maintained.

"I don't know if I want any other kids after this one, Jess," I said. "It wasn't until I had that pregnancy test in my hand that I even knew for sure if I ever wanted to be a mother at all."

"I don't know if I want kids after this one, either," Jess replied. "I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know how this is going to affect our relationship." He ran his thumb over my fingers pensively. "All I know for sure right now is that I want this baby with you. I want it more than I did the others. Because it's yours."

I remembered that day in the bathroom, that plus sign on the pregnancy stick, that instant spark of knowledge.

Against all common sense, I had wanted this baby because it was his.

The love I felt for him was echoed in his own heart by virtue of what we had created together.

That still didn't mean that it was okay to him to keep this secret from me.

"I wish you would have told me about what you've gone through, Jess," I said. "I know that it was hard for you, that you didn't really have any sort of outlet for it, but still – " I sighed. "I'm your partner, Jess. I'm the mother of your child. I needed to know this."

"I know," Jess said. His chestnut gaze met mine once more, regret mixing with a measured sorrow. "I failed you. I've been trying so hard to do everything right, and I ended up getting the most basic thing wrong." He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it. "I'm sorry."

I felt myself melt a little, the small sense of anger I felt easily conflating into sadness for the loss and pain that he had suffered.

I knew I should be angry at him, but I just couldn't make it take root inside of me. We had suffered hurt and made mistakes while in the midst of relationships that we had held onto for far too long. Now we were getting a second chance with each other. If we kept holding onto that old hurt, we'd never be able to enjoy what we had right now.

I had to let it go. It wasn't even a question for me. I wanted to let it go.
There was, however, one point on which I still felt betrayed.

"That baby book," I told him. "You never should have done that, Jess. I know there isn't exactly a guide for this situation in modern relationship etiquette, but you shouldn't have been carrying that around. This is our baby, Jess. Ours. If we're going to have to start fresh, we have to start completely fresh."

"I know," Jess said. "I'm sorry about that, too, Rory."

"I never even saw you pick it up and look at it," I pointed out.

"I know," Jess groaned. "I couldn't do it, Rory. I kept it around because I kept thinking I could learn from what had happened before, but I didn't even want to get near it. I carried it around with me because I thought maybe one day, I'd be able to pick it up and not think about what happened last year, but I couldn't go through with it." He sighed. "Stupid book. I should have thrown it away a year ago."

"You did pretty well at taking care of us by yourself," I whispered to him.

Jess turned his head and ran his fingers through my hair. "At least I did some things right," he said softly.

"You've done a lot right," I affirmed.

"I'll get better on the rest," Jess promised.

"I just don't want any more secrets between us," I told him. "Jess, I know our relationship's moved really fast, and there have been a lot of revelations tonight that we weren't expecting, but . . . can you promise me that this is the last big one you're going to drop on me?"

"I'm not hiding anything else," Jess told me. "I promise."

He pulled me closer to him as we resumed our former comfort position before all this ponderous conversation: his hand heavy on my thigh, my leg draped over his, our heads resting on the same pillow. Jess placed a kiss to the side of my head and I felt the two of us be drawn back into our comfortable cocoon: slightly more emotionally ravaged, but somehow threaded together in a way that we hadn't been before tonight.

I remembered what Jess had said to me years ago, when I had drifted away from my mother and into my grandmother's orbit, lost and adrift and desperately unhappy, but having no idea of how to get myself out of it.

_I know you. I know you better than anyone._

He had splintered his world apart and had driven me away, and I hadn't been able to put it – or him – back together. He had cobbled together a life on his own and met me when I had drifted away from mine, the one person who was able to see how far outside of myself I was and was able to direct me to a place where I could put things back together.

Last fall, he had done the same thing for me a second time. I had clung tightly to the belief that Jess was the one person out of the two of us who knew what he was doing – in our work, our relationship, our future parenthood. I hadn't even been able to fathom him splintering apart without me in the years I hadn't known him, or the fact that those past failures still had the capability to trip him up even when I needed him most.
The truth was that Jess needed me, too. He didn't intuitively know how to handle our situation any more than I did. That other woman, those lost children, the things he still felt guilty about: they may have been part of him, but they weren't necessarily part of us. We were something different.

And maybe that was the way it was supposed to be.

I listened to the iPod skip over to the next song as it blended into the ambiance around us, and it seemed oddly cognizant of our new understanding of each other.

*People tell me it's a sin*

*To know and feel too much within*

*I still believe she was my twin*

*But I lost the ring*

*She was born in spring*

*But I was born too late*

*Blame it on a simple twist of fate*

We could have missed each other so many times. We had missed each other so many times. Yet somehow, we'd made it back to each other just at the time that we both needed it most.

I slyly looked into Jess's eyes as his grin slowly echoed mine.

"You were right," I told him. "You and me, being brought together the way that we were? Conceiving a baby on that first night? It was destiny."

"I don't think it was what either of us expected," Jess said.

"Maybe not," I told him. "Maybe fate knew better. Maybe it knew this was what we needed."

Jess reached out to stroke my cheek. "This brand new adventure was in the cards all along, then?"

"I think so," I told him. "It was time for us to experience new things. Better things."

The music drifted us around us as we were sung to sleep by a folk singer telling of tales of missed chances penned long before she was born, both of us grateful to have found our own thread somewhere within that vast web of human folly.

**Author's Note:** This story has undergone many twists and turns since I first envisioned it as a one-shot casting Jess instead of Logan as Rory's true baby daddy. However, I always intended for the story to center on Rory finding out about Jess's past experiences shortly after receiving her grandmother's blessing. She and Jess have suffered through a lot through their recent relationships with other people, but they've found a second chance in each other. As unlikely as it may seem, their unexpected (but not unwanted) pregnancy is exactly what was meant to happen. That sentiment is in the title itself.

There have been a lot of elements that introduced themselves to this story that weren't in that initial outline, including the fact that Jess's experiences with miscarriage echo Lane's. I did not intend that plot thread with Lane to be part of the story, but it crept in and introduced itself. Paris wasn't supposed to be part of this story. I also did not know until a few weeks ago that Emily may have known about Rory and Logan's affair. Jess isn't the only one keeping secrets here! So we'll see
where it goes from this point.

*The Celeste plot thread is mostly closed (she’ll pop up in person in a few chapters, but we won't spend much time with her) so I hope I've done justice to this part of the story. I know it's upset and shocked quite a few people, so I only hope you'll want to keep reading after this. As always, feel free to leave a comment or review letting me know what you think.*

*And for your edification, the version of Simple Twist Of Fate referenced here is by Sarah Jarosz and can be found on her album *Build Me Up From Bones.**
Chapter 20

And so this story returns, with a bit more angst than I intended. Sorry.

Fair warning: there is quite a bit of Logan talk in this chapter, but mostly in terms of stuff the show (and Rory) should have clarified a long time ago.

So, read, enjoy (or don't), and drop me a review if you wish.

Christmas morning got off to a much different start than it had the previous year.

I had spent the previous Christmas with Logan. It didn't even occur to me at that time to ponder how wrong it was, or think about how Logan really shouldn't have been spending the day with me. That hadn't ever been part of our life, our bubble, this semi-decadent little routine that we'd settle on: the dinner at the restaurant his family owned, the outings that were just secluded enough to place him out of the public eye but not secretive enough to make any of it seem unexpectedly sordid, the gifts that were suitably expensive but not expensive enough to rouse suspicion, the penthouse that we stayed cooped up in most of the time because after all, I wasn't supposed to be with him.

The mistress's life had become not quite an addiction, but a comfort, a reality, an easy seduction to embrace. Logan had a way of making such a life seem just enticing enough to feel normal. Luke and my mom were at home, missing me, while I was sitting on Logan's balcony on Christmas afternoon, enjoying the solitude this luxury had afforded me. Logan was off in Paris fulfilling family obligations with the future wife, the obligations that would never be expected of me. I didn't feel guilty or envious because I didn't want to spend that part of his life with him. A week later, when I spent New Year's Eve sleeping off the previous night's misadventures in as Prague hotel that no one in the media would think to check, those thoughts still weren't on my mind. I knew that Logan was in London with Odette, acting every part of the charming dynasty heir that he was while I was tucked away unseen. But I didn't care.

Now my life was writing and pregnancy symptoms, a mom and a stepdad I didn't feel distant from, a boyfriend who wasn't ashamed to be seen with me and who I liked accompanying in public. I had embraced normalcy, responsibility, stability, and it felt good. I knew what I had been missing for the past couple of years, and how stupid and selfish I had really been to live the life that what I was living.

Meanwhile, Jess had been undergoing this ferocious pain on his own and I hadn't known it. My entire family had known it, but I hadn't. I hadn't even guessed at it. Even after I had found a place in his bed, his life, even as we made these permanent, grown-up life plans, I hadn't known.

Meanwhile, my secret, the comparatively frivolous mistress's life I had been living, maybe wasn't as much of a secret as I thought. If my grandmother knew about my relationship with Logan, who else did? What about Odette, the woman whose existence I had more or less completely ignored? Did my book have the potential to mess up her life, even if I went out of my way to avoid identifying him?

My mind slowly went into overdrive as Jess and I slipped into a variation of our everyday routines. He got up and showered before I did, brought me tea from the downstairs kitchen to wake me up, patiently waiting in the bedroom while I showered and dressed. Familiar sounds drifted up from downstairs: bacon sizzling, the whine of an aging dog, Mom and Luke bickering incessantly.

Jess sat on the newly made bed, waiting me carefully as I brushed my hair and got dressed for the day.
"Are you okay?" he asked tentatively.

"I'm fine," I insisted.

"Rory – "

I sighed and turned to him. Those brown eyes imploring me still looked so regretful and wounded. Once again, I felt overwhelmed by the burden of what he had went through.

I wanted to move on, but knowing what I knew now I still was at a loss of how to do it. Everything felt heavier, weightier, scarier than it did before.

"I meant what I said last night," I told Jess. "I'm not happy that you waited to tell me, but – I'm not going to stay angry at you about this. I don't want to do that."

"I really didn't plan to have that conversation in the wee hours of Christmas morning," Jess said.

"Well, when did you plan to have it, Jess?" I asked him. "When we got back home? After she was born? When we got ready to talk about marriage again? When?"

Jess's stare guiltily met mine.

"I'm not mad," I insisted. I saw down on the bed next to him. "Well, I'm trying not to stay mad. It just – it feels like it puts a lot more pressure on me, you know?"

Jess reached for my hand. "It shouldn't," he said softly, rubbing his thumb over my palm. "I didn't really have a plan, Rory, I was just – waiting for a moment when we could take a little breath." He sighed. "I'm not sure it would have made a difference."

"Maybe not," I agreed just as we heard Mom and Luke howl in unison below us, accompanied by the sound of something heavy hitting the floor.

"I guess we should go see what that's about," Jess said, letting go of my hand. "Look, Rory, I know you probably want to talk to your mom about this at some point, but anyone else – "

"It stays between us, Jess," I assured him. "I promise."

We rose off of the bed and retreated to the cacophony downstairs, a little wearier and more uncertain than I hoped we would have been.

Christmas itself turned out to be a rather peaceful affair.

It turned out that the clamor from downstairs was due to Mom accidentally knocking over the pan with the first serving of bacon (which, as Luke angrily informed us all, was a violation of the agreement he had struck with her at the beginning of their relationship twelve years ago never to touch anything on the stove when he was cooking it). Luke cooked us a second round of bacon along with eggs and pancakes before we walked over to the main house to celebrate Christmas with my grandmother.

I had never celebrated the holidays with her in such a domestic setting: almost everything I knew of her traditions centered around the formalities of our annual holiday parties. She was so relaxed and comfortable, almost as if she had embraced the aesthetic that was a feature of the Christmases I had grown up celebrating with Mom. As with almost everything else that had happened recently, it was a new normal that somehow seemed natural when it should have been alarming.
Our Christmas booty wasn't much. Books, clothes, some light electronics. I had taken advantage of those funds I pretended I didn't have to finally obtain my techno-phobic boyfriend an IPad, but he one-upped me by showing me the photo of the antique bookshelf that he had hidden in the outside storage with his exercise equipment, knowing that there was next to zero chance I'd go looking for anything there. Mom and Luke didn't overload us on baby stuff because Luke was not-so-secretly making most of it, but we got a few toys and blankets to stock away for the summer.

After lunch, Jess and Luke disappeared with Grandma for a walk down the coast and I was left alone with Mom.

Mom lightly stirred her peppermint-flavored coffee while I sipped my tea, biting down on my instinct to send a volley straight into the calm that she was outwardly emitting.

She had known. She had known about Jess's past all along and she didn't tell me. Why?

"Well, that was certainly an unexpected reaction from your grandmother last night," Mom said, oblivious to the storm raging in my head. "Thirty-three years, Rory. She's been haranguing me about not getting married for thirty-three years. I finally do it and you waltz in here and announce that you're pregnant and you're not in any rush to tie the knot and she's just . . . fine with it. I guess I exhausted her."

"I was expecting a lot worse," I admitted.

"She likes Jess more than she likes the rest of us combined," Mom complained. "Honestly, I don't get it. If I had known that you were going to pull this off all along, I would have paid a lot more attention."

I sighed. "Nothing she said about how Jess is now is wrong," I pointed out.

"I'm not saying it's wrong, Rory," Mom replied. "It's just – it took her a long time to warm up to Luke."

"Well, now he's somehow charmed her into wanting to go fishing with him, so something must have worked," I remarked.

"It took nearly a decade to get her to that point, Rory," Mom continued. "Look, I'm happy for you, kid. It's just a little surprising to me, that's all."

"Did it bother you that much?" I asked. "What Grandma said . . . about you refusing to consider getting married for so long?"

Mom shrugged. "Not really," she said. "I mean, there isn't like there wasn't a little bit of truth in all of that. She's only going to accept so much about my choices without letting me know very loudly how much she doesn't approve. I suspected it was going to be easier for you and Jess. I guess I just didn't anticipate how much easier."

"Don't worry," I told her, taking another sip of my tea. "If we're not married by the time this baby starts teething, I'm sure she'll turn on me, too."

Mom looked at me seriously. "To what extent have you two really discussed that? What you said last night . . . is it really your decision to wait?"

I nodded. "It is."

"So, it wasn't just . . . a stock answer to placate her? Because if Jess is pressuring you into anything .
"He's not," I assured her. I took one of the sugar cookies off of the plate in front of us and took a bite. "We hadn't really talked about it in detail until after we left here last night," I admitted.

"And now?" Mom prodded me.

I finished off the cookie and took another sip of tea. "He wants to get married eventually," I said after a moment. "I don't know if I do."

"Does eventually have a timetable attached to it?" Mom asked, her voice starting to harden.

I wondered if her reasons for distrusting Jess were more complicated than either he or I had been able to determine.

"It doesn't," I told her. "He's just coming out of a long-term relationship that ended badly. He doesn't want the same thing to happen to us."

"And what about you?" Mom asked.

"I don't know," I told her. "Honestly, Mom, before last night . . . the farthest we'd gotten on the subject was me telling him I didn't want a surprise proposal. Now I know he wants this in the future at some point . . . and I don't know if I'm capable of it. I wasn't even comfortable calling him my boyfriend until after I told him I was pregnant. I can't even begin to see myself that way. How do I do it?"

Mom sighed. "I'm not sure I've taught you the right lessons here, kid," she said softly.

"The only relationship I have for reference I know that worked is you and Luke," I told her. "And you weren't married. You knew what made your relationship work and it didn't have anything to do with that. I don't even know where to start with doing things the traditional way."

"That's not true," Mom argued. "You have your grandparents. Your friends. Lane. Your friend Lucy from college. Paris. Even Liz and TJ if you want to scrape at the bottom of the barrel. I'm hardly your only example to emulate."

"But it doesn't feel like it's me," I insisted.

"Trust me, Rory, I felt that way for a long time," Mom said. "But just because something doesn't feel right in the moment doesn't mean it won't ever feel right. Luke and I – there were a lot of flaws between us, and a lot of damage we did to each other before we came back together. But I wouldn't be sitting in front of you married right now if I believed that things couldn't change. I just don't want you to be as afraid of those changes as I was."

"But what if things don't change?" I asked tentatively. "What if I always feel this way, and he's decides that he wants something else?"

"Then you've got to figure out if your relationship can weather that difference in opinion," Mom said.

I sighed. "Maybe it won't be that bad," I told her. "Your relationship weathered it."

"It did," Mom conceded. "But it could have been better. We missed out on a lot of opportunities because I didn't want things to change. And by the time I wanted to reconsider it, it was too late." She sighed. "I don't want Jess to talk you into anything you're not ready for, but I also don't want
you to be afraid to move things forward because you're worried about what might happen if you do. When you're ready for it, that is."

"I just don't know right now," I said honestly.

"And that's fine," Mom said. "You've had a lot of adjustments to make over the past couple of months. This is one you can hold off on for a while."

"I didn't think I'd adjust to pregnancy," I told her. "Much less be happy about it. But it ended up happening anyway."

"Well, there you go," Mom said. She left the table to pour herself another cup of coffee.

I waited until she was sitting back down to ask the question I had been wanting to ask all day.

"Mom," I began. "Jess and I talked about some other things last night."

She looked up at me. Warm. Open. Uncomprehending. I almost forgot that I wanted to be angry at her.

"Jess said that Celeste had a couple of miscarriages," I said softly. "He said that Luke knew about it. And that you probably did, too."

Mom took a sip of coffee and calmly placed her cup back on the table. "I only knew about the last one," she said. "How many were there?"

"Two," I said, my voice becoming almost a whisper.

Mom's gaze met mine, but it didn't seem guilty. Merely tired. Like she had been expecting this for a long time.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I asked.

"It wasn't my secret to tell," Mom said.

The rational side of me knew she was right, but right now the side of me that still felt betrayed wasn't letting that through. How could it be dismissed this easily?

"You let me sit there that morning and go on and on about how I didn't know if Jess would be happy I was pregnant," I argued. "You let me believe that he didn't want kids. I thought I was trapping him into something, and you let me believe that. Couldn't you have said something? Even if you didn't tell me the whole truth?"

"I never said anything like that, Rory," Mom argued back. "In fact, I asked you if he gave you any reason for you not to trust him. I told you I was happy for your relationship. Do you think I would have done that if I wanted you to believe that he was going to react the way that she though he would?"

"No," I admitted.

"You threw a lot of things at me that morning, Rory," Mom continued. "One minute you're my adult daughter who's still living in my house and figuring things out, and then I learn that you're in a relationship with Jess, that you're moving four hours away to live with him, that you're expecting his baby. I didn't have a lot of time to think about how he might react. I was worried about you. I didn't want Jess to talk you into something you weren't ready for if you didn't know if it was what you
wanted to do."

"I already knew I wanted the baby," I pointed out.

"I know, Rory," Mom retorted. "But this was – probably going to be the most momentous decision of your life. I knew that it would change you like it changed me. And I also knew that Jess had his own reasons to want this baby. I wanted to make sure I knew how you felt about it before I even considered him."

"Is that why you don't trust him?" I asked. "You acted as if – he was only a slightly better alternative than Logan. As if the only thing that recommended him was that he wasn't engaged to someone else."

"Oh, Rory," Mom said. "That's not it at all. If there's any trust missing from my relationship with my nephew, it's on his side, not mine. I just didn't know if you were ready. And part of me still doesn't know if Jess has recovered from everything he went through with Celeste."

I remained silent while I let Mom continue.

"I was here when Jess had to come home and spend all those months above the diner depressed and avoiding moving on with his life," Mom said. "I could see it happening again after Celeste left. Jess never talked about it directly with me. That was Luke's department, his thing – we always let each other have some space when it came to dealing with the kids. But I knew Celeste had miscarried and that she had decided she didn't want kids afterwards, and that Jess didn't agree. I knew that was probably the main reason why they broke up. And your grandfather had died, and the pain I felt, that darkness – we had too much in common. I could see it in his face when I looked at him, even before Celeste left. I knew it could drag him under again. He'd retreat back to that apartment, and he wouldn't leave."

"Why didn't you tell me back then?" I asked her. "He was my friend, Mom. I could have helped him."

"I don't think you could have," Mom said softly. "Rory, what he was going through – it went deeper than that. And even though I knew I couldn't talk to him directly about it, I went to him while he was here last winter. I told him how hard he had worked for his life in Philadelphia. That Luke was proud of him. That I was proud of him. That he had that, no matter what." She took another sip of coffee. "I don't know if it helped. But when I saw him a few months after the break-up, he seemed better. But even now, Rory, I still wonder if it's been enough time for him to really be there for you and the baby. I hope that it is, Rory. But I still know how much all of it took out of him."

"I don't know how to deal with the kind of loss that he went through," I confessed. "It's just – it's such a wide gulf, Mom. I don't understand it. I don't know how to help him." I met her gaze guiltily. "It happened to Lane, too."

"I suspected about Lane," Mom said. "About six years ago, when she was living in Hartford?"

I nodded. "She said she gave up on having more kids after the miscarriage. Celeste gave up on having kids, too. I just don't know how to deal with something that intense, Mom. And it puts all this pressure on me on how I'm going to deal with having my own family with him. I don't know if I can handle it."

"What does Jess say about all of this?" Mom asked. "About Celeste, the other baby? About putting it in the past?"
"Jess says that he and Celeste had grown apart by the time she became pregnant last year," I told her. "He says he doesn't have any feelings for her. That he loves me, that he wants me and the baby. He says it's good that we want the same things. And I believe him, but – "

"But – "

"I'm just barely holding myself together sometimes," I admitted. "I've always leaned on him to be the strong one, to be the person who knows what it's like to be a grown-up. And now I find out that he wanted a family, he wanted a family for years, that he wanted it so much he was willing to have it with someone he didn't even love anymore. How am I ever going to be able to live up to the other half of that?"

"Well, do you think Jess expects you to be some sort of superhuman wife – or almost wife – or mother?" Mom asked. "Because I don't think that he does. And if he does, he's in for a rude awakening, because he knows I didn't raise you like that."

"No," I conceded. "He's bent over backwards to make everything easier for me."

"Look, Rory, this thing Jess has been through is part of his past," Mom said. "It may have been easier to think of him as this guy you loved in high school who's been pining for you all along, but you know that isn't what his life has been like. It may seem darker and scarier to you than what you've been through, but that doesn't mean that it is. You're not coming into this as kids, but as adults. What you've been through before informs what you want now. You may have to figure things out a little faster than you would have without a baby involved, but it doesn't mean you won't be able to get there. Parenthood has a way of taking theory out of the equation. But I know that you guys can do it."

"I don't feel very much like an adult most of the time," I told Mom. "I was with Logan for almost two years and I never even thought to ask him if he wanted a relationship. I never even considered getting married or having kids with anyone. I mean, I'm not stupid. I know I had to make a decision in the next couple of years if I was something I wanted. But it never fit into my life until now."

"Do you want to go back to the way your life used to be?" Mom asked.

"No," I said with absolute conviction. "I just don't know how much I've learned over the past ten years that I can actually use."

"You've learned what you don't want," Mom suggested. "Sometimes that's more than enough."

I wished I believed her. Sometimes I could convince myself the past couple of years had been worth it, for the spontaneity, the carelessness, the freedom that I had enjoyed. But that was only as long as I could pretend that the only person who had been affected by it was myself.

"Does Grandma know about me and Logan?" I asked my mother.

Mom sighed. "I've been wondering about that," she replied.

"You didn't – "

She guffawed. "Rory, of course not."

"I just can't figure it out," I told her. "Logan and I were always discreet."

"Rory, you can't possibly – "Mom laughed. "Oh, wait, you really do believe that."
"You didn't know until I told you," I pointed out.

"My world is Stars Hollow and the inn and Luke," Mom said. "I'm not part of the crowd that Logan travels in. But you were, Rory. He took you out to his family's restaurant, right? You went to plays, journalism functions, parties?"

"We did," I admitted. "But we were never a couple in public, at least where we knew anyone we worked with. Things were a little more relaxed when we with his friends, but we never hid ourselves away, either."

"And you don't think anyone noticed when you showed up at the same functions over and over again and his fiancé was never there?" Mom asked. "He's a public figure, Rory. You weren't exactly unknown outside of intellectual circles, either. You don't think anyone else caught on?"

"What exactly are you trying to say?" I asked her, feeling annoyed.

"Logan probably had permission to be with you," Mom said. "That arrangement you had with Paul? It's unlikely Logan didn't have one of his own, at least until he got married. If your relationship was visible enough for my mother to find out about it, it's unlikely that the heiress didn't know, either."

"That doesn't mean it was right," I argued.

"I agree, Rory," Mom said. "It wasn't right. And maybe I should have spelled this out to you a long time ago, but you made it clear years ago you didn't want me to judge what you did in your personal life. But you don't need to cast yourself as the bad guy in whatever morality play you've got running in your head. There's too much you don't know about the situation to keep believing that."

"I never even thought about her," I confessed. "It didn't even occur to me to consider who else I was hurting. And I never thought about asking Logan to change things between us. I didn't want to change things between us. I was happy with being the person who wasn't quite his girlfriend."

"You used him and he used you," Mom stated bluntly. "Which is the way of consenting adults, but it's something different when other people's feelings are involved. Not to mention your reputations."

"Do you think that might have had something to do with what happened to me?" I asked. "My reputation, that is."

"I'd like to think that the world doesn't work that way anymore," Mom said.

"I still wonder why Logan gave his blessing to the book," I said. "He was always supportive of everything I did, but now I wonder if he had some other angle to it. Even though I said I was going to shield his identity, there's a lot about our Yale days he wouldn't want to get out."

"Maybe he didn't think you were that serious about it," Mom suggested.

"Maybe," I agreed. "The more I think about it, though, the less I'm thinking his fiancé is going to want it to come out. And that affects way more than just me. I could ruin Jess's company if I don't get this right."

Mom sighed. "Look, Rory, I don't know that much about the business aspects of it," she said. "But even considering what did or didn't happen with Logan, I don't think it's wrong to learn a little too late that you made a mistake and that you don't want to repeat it. Even if that means making a bigger adjustment than you thought you were going to have to make."

of any possibility of dealing with one thing at a time anymore."

"Well, kid," Mom said, "That's a pretty accurate description of parenthood. It's best that you start preparing early."

I stared down at the frothy liquid in my cup, wondering if I would ever manage to find a way to keep from letting these disparate strands of worry unweave themselves in my head.

One thing was clear, however: I was going to have to deal with Logan sooner rather than later.
"You're quiet," Jess remarked as we made our way back from Hyannis to Philadelphia on the interstate.

I sighed and stared out the window. "It's a long drive," I remarked.

"I can veer off and take the scenic route," Jess suggested. "It'll take a little longer, but we might have more opportunities to stop."

I glanced over at him, grateful for his attempts to placate me. "It's fine, Jess," I told him. "I'm just eager to get back home, I guess."

The rest of the week had gone by fairly quickly. Grandma had made three attempts to fish with the menfolk of the family (twice with Luke, once with Jess and Luke) only to come up empty each time while Mom and I stayed inside and gorged ourselves on old movies and Christmas snacks. All talks of recently unveiled secrets had gone unmentioned by all parties. It would have been easy to believe that nothing new was amiss amongst the five of us.

Jess and I knew better, though. The visitation of those ghosts from our past relationships were never far from the front of my mind. I would catch Jess's eye during quiet moments and I'd know that it was probably the same for him. But we hadn't talked about it for days.

"Are you still mad?" Jess asked tentatively.

I turned my attention back to him and sighed. "I've had a lot of things to get adjusted to over the past few days," I told him honestly. "But no, I'm not."

"You talked to your mom," Jess guessed.

"I did," I replied.

"And?"

I stared out the window. "It was what you suspected. Luke told her about what happened with Celeste."

"Does it help if I say I'm sorry again?" Jess asked.

"I know you're sorry, Jess," I told him. "You can keep telling me it a million times, and every time I know you're being sincere and I know that you feel bad about it. But it doesn't take away the fact that we went into this wanting to be partners, wanting to be honest with each other, and you kept something this huge from me. And I still feel like I'm partially on the outside of my own relationship, because my family knew about what you guys went through and I didn't. And I'm feeling a little humiliated because of it."

"I never intended for you to feel that way," Jess said. I winced at the look of pure regret on his face.

I didn't want to make either of us go through that whirlpool of emotional turmoil again. Unfortunately, my pride didn't seem to want to go along with my better intentions.

"I didn't want to humiliate you, Rory," Jess said. "I didn't intend to keep things from you. Believe me, the last thing I wanted to do was to give you any reason not to trust me. I just didn't know how
"And that's still what concerns me, Jess," I told him. "When you talk about this, I know how hard it is for you to deal with it, and that it's a loss that I don't – really understand. But we're heading into something that's even scarier and more complicated than what you've already been through. And I need you to be able to talk to me about it."

"I didn't want to put any additional pressure on you than you were already under," Jess said. He looked at me pointedly. "I didn't want to risk anything happening to you."

"I know," I told him. "And you had lots of reasons to be scared, Jess. I can't even say what I would have done if I was in your position, if I had been the one to lose a baby. But I'm not as fragile as you think, Jess. Even though I'm the one who's actually pregnant, it's not always about me. I can handle it."

"I just worry about you," Jess said. "You didn't know everything that could go wrong, Rory – and I didn't want to scare you with what I did know. Whatever stupid mistakes I made in my past, the things I handled wrong – they weren't about you. I didn't want them to be about you. I didn't want my baggage tangled up with us."

"And I understand that, Jess," I told him. "But I don't think you've completely processed it, either."

Jess turned his eyes back to the road and gripped the steering wheel. "Maybe I haven't," he admitted.

I shifted slightly in my seat, wanting to nudge him in the right direction but not wanting to push him too far. "Do you think maybe it would help if you talked to a professional?"

"I wouldn't feel comfortable doing that," Jess said quickly.

"But, Jess, if you can't talk to me – "

"Rory – " Jess began. He sighed wearily, as if all of the angst and pain of the past few years were being forced out of him at once. "Look, it didn't happen the way I wanted it to, but I did talk to you about it. It took a lot out of me. I don't think I can do it again. Not to someone I don't know, not about that. If you really want me to, I will, but I think it's going to take more out of me than I can give to this family. I'm asking you not to ask that of me, Rory. Please."

He turned to me briefly, that look in his eyes seeming almost despondent, and I knew I couldn't push him any farther. "Okay, Jess," I said softly. "I won't."

"Thank you," Jess replied in a relieved voice.

The car lapsed into a tense silence for the next couple of minutes.

"I'm trying to help you, Jess," I told him. "I'm kind of a novice at this, if you haven't noticed. I just want you to be able to talk to me about this part of your past the same way you talk about your parents, or Luke and Lorelai. At least as much as you can."

"I'll try," Jess said tersely. "It's difficult for me, Rory – but I'll try."

I took a deep breath, knowing that as much as I had exhausted him, we weren't close to talking about all of those ancient matters that we still needed to discuss. "My mom and I talked about a couple of other things from my past, too."

Jess looked over at me and silently raised an eyebrow.
"I think you know who the subject of our discussion was," I said.

Jess grimaced. "I'm not really enthusiastic about that subject, but it's not going to go away any time soon," he said. "What did she have to say?"

"She doesn't think Logan's fiancé is going to be that thrilled about the book," I told him. "I kind of have to agree. I'm not sure why Logan consented to it so easily, but I don't think she's going to share his point of view."

"You don't know that," Jess pointed out. "Maybe for them it is really a case of having separate lives."

"Mom thought that maybe Logan believed I wouldn't actually go through with it," I told Jess. "That it was a vanity project, a lark of mine, and he wouldn't really be exposed."

"And what do you think?" he asked me.

"I'd like to believe Logan took me more seriously than that," I replied. "I'd like to believe that he understood how important this was to me, and he wasn't just tossing out his support like he used to toss around money."

Jess cocked an eyebrow at me.

"Okay, like he still tosses around money," I conceded.

"For the sake of the book, I'd like to believe that your mom was wrong," Jess said. "We've done so much to cover ourselves, from you taking out the latter part of your relationship to shielding the details of the arrest to agreeing to make the entire thing fiction. I want to do everything possible to avoid incurring the wrath of the Huntzburger legal team, believe me. However, the possibility still remains that it doesn't matter."

"How can it not matter?" I asked him, feeling annoyed.

"Look, before I get into this, I just want to say that I recognize that the past is the past," Jess said. "I've always hated the guy, but you were with him for years and I understand that he was important to you. I'm not judging you for the kind of life you lived while you were with him."

"However – "I continued for him.

"The arrest didn't have any effect on Logan's career, did it?" Jess asked me. "Not to mention the other sorts of trouble he got into before or after that point, did it?"

"It didn't," I admitted.

"He had a dynasty and a life planned out for him no matter what kind of trouble he got up to when he was young," Jess continued. "This person he's marrying was fully aware of this when she agreed to be with him. I know you felt guilty about getting involved with him again considering the circumstances, and it's not something that I'm usually personally comfortable with, but for them – "

"– it's expected," I finished for him.

"Your grandmother hinted that your relationship with Logan was common knowledge," Jess reminded me. "Maybe Odette knew about all of this from the beginning. We've spent so much time talking about the threat that this person hypothetically poses to your book, my company, our reputations – and it might not matter to her at all."
"That's a big gamble to take, Jess," I said.

"I know," Jess agreed. "Which is why I'm not taking it. We're going to do everything possible to protect this book and make it the success it should be. I'm not taking any chances. Especially when I've got another very important person to protect now."

He grinned at me, and my heart began to thump in its customary manner. Still, I couldn't push my doubts completely out of my mind.

And in the end, did it matter if Odette was indifferent to Logan's entanglement with me? I hadn't bothered to consider if she was or not. She hadn't been a person to me, merely a theoretical obstacle to my enjoyment. It hadn't even been difficult not to think about her. I hadn't even cared enough about the reality of Logan cheating on his fiancé with me to consider the idea that technically he might not be.

And now I was internally punishing myself for something that possibly bothered no one but me.

How had I ever gotten myself involved in this mess?

And despite all of the swirling possibilities of relationships that may or may not have been as open as all of mine used to be, I still didn't want to actually talk to Logan.

I had avoided the Maury Povich baby daddy conversation with Jess. I didn't want to have another one with someone who mistakenly believed he had fathered my child.

"I'm guessing legal discussions are going to come into play sooner or later," I surmised aloud.

"There are," Jess clarified. He glanced over at me. "We're going to have to talk to him again. It might not quite turn out to be as much of a calamity as we're fearing, but – "He shrugged. "It's necessary."

"Maybe it isn't," I suggested. "Maybe I just won't put Logan in the book."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Jess said.

I looked over at him, slightly surprised. "You don't?"

"I would be perfectly content to live the rest of my life without either of us ever having to deal with Logan Huntzberger again," Jess stated. "But I'm saying that as your partner and the person who's going to be raising a child with you. As your editor, it doesn't work. He's all tangled up with your relationship with your grandparents and your experiences with Yale. Thematically, the book doesn't make sense without him."

"But if it put us at risk – "I started to argue.

"Then we will deal with that if and when it happens," Jess said. "It's up to you, Rory. If you want to leave him out, I'm still going to work with you to help make this book as great as I know it's going to be. But personally, I don't think it's a good idea."

"It's still a while before I plan to work him in," I pointed out. "We don't have to make any decisions now."

"That's right," Jess agreed. "We don't. But this business with Odette isn't the only reason you don't want to talk to him, is it?"

"No," I reluctantly conceded.
"It's the baby, right?" Jess guessed.

I nodded. "He's going to have questions," I pointed out. "A lot of questions. I don't want to force that conversation if I don't have to. I mean, it's the same for you, right? You wouldn't choose to seek out Celeste and discuss our situation with her, would you?"

Jess gripped the steering wheel again. "Definitely not," he said.

"It's going to make all of our lives easier if I don't write about him," I pointed out.

"Easier, maybe," Jess said. "But not better."

Jess took advantage of the temporary standstill in traffic to turn his attention towards me. "I may not ever expunge all these demons I have from my time with Celeste," he said quietly. "I think it's different for you. I think you need to make peace with your life with him before we can move on. This book, this project – I think it's a gift to you, of sorts. I think you need it."

"I've already made peace with my old life," I insisted. "I just haven't made peace with what it may have done to other people. I chose this life with you, Jess. It's not some temporary fling that's taking place in the shadows – it's substantial, it's real. I don't want to go back."

"I believe you, Rory," Jess said. "You know, before we saw the sonogram, before I knew you were going to be okay, I still had it in the back of my mind that if the baby didn't make it that you might go back to him. That whatever else I had to offer you wouldn't measure up to what you used to have."

He shook his head. "It's was a crazy thought, but it was there. Maybe that's part of why I held things back from you. I don't know."

"Oh, Jess," I said, reaching out to stroke his shoulder. "That was never, ever going to happen. I'm with you because I want to be with you. That always came first. You always came first."

"I love you," Jess said, his brown pulling me in with an intense glare that quickly turned me to mush.

"I love you, too," I told him as I pulled him to me for a kiss.

Unfortunately, our quiet moment was interrupted by the sound of angry horns.

"I'm even going to take your advice," I told him as Jess collected himself and we resumed making our way towards Philadelphia.

"Yeah?"

"I think it's a good idea to write about the things that I planned on," I told him. "As a practical matter, maybe they don't need to actually be put out there for the world to read. I don't think we'll know that until the words are actually on the page. We can make those decisions later. We've got time."

"Twenty-five weeks," Jess deadpanned next to me. "Think we can make it?"

"I do," I told him with conviction. "I really do."

Hopefully, my brain would cooperate with my body's self-imposed deadline before another sort of creation made its debut unto the world.

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