Meet Me Halfway

by missgoalie75

Summary

*(If Jess were a guy –) *(But she's not and this is what it is.)) | Jess is a girl and Rory's life's a little different.

Notes

**Characters/Pairings:** Rory, cisgirl!Jess, Paris, Lorelai, Luke; Rory/cisgirl!Jess, mentioned Lorelai/Luke, mentioned Rory/Dean (sorry) and Rory/Logan

**Spoilers/Warnings:** Jess sex swap – everyone else remains the same as in canon; biphobia + homophobia (external and internal), sexism, sexual content

**Disclaimer:** Recognizable dialogue is from the show. Lyrics referenced are not mine.

A/N: Thank you to Kahlia for not only being my beta, but also being my sounding board since I hit a lot of crossroads while writing this fic that gave me a hard time and she helped me manage to put together a plot that, I think/hope makes sense. Thanks also to Rain for helping contribute to the Pinterest board. Thanks to Annie for helping with the mix art. This is for everyone who follows me and has put up with my teasing and encouraged me. I sincerely hope this was worth the wait. But more importantly, this is for LGBTQA+ readers of the fandom – Happy Pride!

Rory's mom had told her that Luke was bringing his niece to their house for a feast made by Sookie
to welcome her to Stars Hollow. She didn't think much of it beyond the fact that this girl was going to be very bored coming from New York, but when she first sees her, twisting around in her chair to look at her, the first thought that comes to mind is 'cool.'

Jess Mariano wears old jeans cuffed at the ankle and combat boots and she maybe looks a little thin in her threadbare shirt and hoodie. She smells faintly of cigarettes and her hair is curly and wild, her eyes calculating. Always calculating.

**

Rory's mom hates Jess.

"She's basically me at that age!" her mom mutters for the third time as they clear off the table.

Rory looks out the kitchen door where Jess probably snuck out. Somehow, she doubts her mom's rebellion in high society compares much to growing up in New York, but Rory knows better than to interrupt her mom when she's angry like this. Besides, it's Jess' loss for missing this meal – the pot roast was out of this world.

**

The only people in Rory's life who read as much as she does are her grandfather (and while she loves him, he's not close to touching the postmodern literature) and Paris (who needs to be on a muzzle half the time; she can't hold a basic conversation without yelling).

Finding out that Jess not only reads but can carry on a thoughtful discussion is exciting.

(Rory reads over Jess' margin notes and wishes she had her handwriting.)

**

Rory finds Jess interesting to watch – the way she carries herself. She hasn't met anyone like that in Stars Hollow or at Chilton.

"Nice skirt," Jess comments, as soon as Rory's mom leaves Luke's to get to the Inn for a staff meeting.

Rory looks down at her plaid. "Thanks. Uniform for school."

"Where's Chilton?" Jess asks, eyes on the emblem on her chest.

Rory doesn't know why she's feeling herself blush. "Hartford. It's annoying taking the bus every day, but I really like it."

Jess nods. "Huh. Well at least you get a lot of reading done – what do you have in that bag, encyclopedias?"

"Well, a number of them are textbooks," Rory admits, "But I have a system I perfected."

Jess sits down across from her with the coffee pot, pouring her another cup. "Do share."

**

Jess has horrendous band shirts, wears jeans with holes and scuffed boots and Vans and sometimes has her bra showing in shirts that make Luke uncomfortable and angry.
She pulls pranks, puts people on edge, sparks a petition in a town meeting, fixes toasters, carries novels in her back pocket, and smiles at Rory, like she's in on the secret.

**

Dean is uncomfortable with Jess.

"Hey, Pumpkin and Honey Bunny," Jess coos with a smirk as she passes Dean and Rory on the sidewalk. Rory chokes on her breath in surprise before covering her mouth to mask her laughter.

"What does that make you?" Rory asks over her shoulder.

Jess turns but continues to walk backwards. "Butch, obviously." She throws a few punches and then turns around.

Rory shakes her head with a smile, but when she looks up at Dean, he's frowning.

"What?" she asks.

"Nothing, just…" Dean trails off. "She's just…so forward."

"What do you mean?"

"'Pumpkin and Honey Bunny?'"

Rory laughs. "That was a reference to *Pulp Fiction* – remember the robbers in the diner? That's what they called each other." She showed him the movie in the first few months of dating as soon as he admitted that he'd only seen parts of it on TV.

"Oh…still. At school she's always arguing with the teachers and flirting with everyone. It's weird."

"Oh…not flirting with you, I hope," Rory jokes.

"No, she just stares at me like I'm funny, which pisses me off."

**

It deteriorates from there.

Sure, Rory gets that Jess can be a little intense and rude at times, but she's not a *heartless slut*, as everyone likes to say.

"You know, for a town in a blue state, Stars Hollow is very uptight," Jess drawls as she serves Lane and Rory their meals, shooting glares at townspeople sitting by the windows, who are openly staring and whispering.

"They don't appreciate your ways, which is such a shame," Lane responds. "Lord knows Stars Hollow was in desperate need of a Courtney. I'm just sad that it couldn't have been me."

"You're more of a Courtney than I am, trust me," Jess says with a rare smile. "It's nothing to have your bra showing." She snaps her bra strap for emphasis. It's red today. "It's another to hide your double life from your scary mom."

"Hah, I knew you found her scary."

"I think anyone with a stable mind finds Mrs. Kim scary," Rory comments.
"I don't know," Jess ponders out loud, reaching onto Rory's plate to steal a fry. "Am I of a stable mind?" She raises an eyebrow and bites the fry in half, smirking.

"Debatable now," Rory mutters, but she can't keep a smile off her face.

"So, what's next on your list, Lane Kim? I must say, I never would've guessed I'd meet the PhD of Punk in this bumfuck town."

Lane beams at the compliment, pulls out *Mojo*, and starts talking.

**

"Hey, what do you and Dean talk about?"

The question throws her off guard. "What?"

"I mean, does he know Björk?"

"I've played him some stuff."

"Hm. So, you got a teacher-student thing going?"

Rory rolls her eyes. "Stop."

"No, really, I'm curious. What do you guys talk about?"

"Everything."

"Like..." Jess trails off expectantly.

"Just everything, tons of stuff, whatever," Rory answers dismissively, not knowing why she feels nervous.

"It's just in the brief non-argumentative time I've spent with him in class, he just doesn't seem like your kind of guy," Jess says with a shrug.

"Well, he is my kind of guy. He's exactly my kind of guy." Why is she defensive?

"Okay. I guess I don't know him that well."

"You don't," Rory insists. "You don't."

(He refuses to think about the growing number of instances in which he watches her study or work, watching movies in utter silence except for her rambling commentary that she would've given without his presence.)

**

Rory's mind goes utterly blank when Jess bids ten dollars.

Then twenty. Then forty. Then seventy-five. Then ninety.

Everyone in the town doesn't know what to make of it. They stare in silence as Jess walks with her usual swagger to the gazebo, handing Taylor crisp bills and taking Rory's basket.

Dean is in shock until it sinks in. Then he's angry.
Dean's increasing anger and annoyance with Jess is something Rory doesn't want to linger on, uncomfortable with his feelings about another girl. If Rory weren't so sure of his utter devotion to her, she would be worried about his being infatuated with Jess.

Jess, who laughs at town traditions, but will stand her ground and shoot Dean down for talking over Rory, a dangerous glint in her eyes she doesn't see very often. Even though the height difference between Jess and Dean is comical, Rory has no doubt that Jess could fight giants.

"You know, Ernest only has lovely things to say about you."

Rory pauses at the compliment, not sure how to take that and the fact that bidding for the basket was a plan.

Maybe Jess is lonely, needing a friend but not knowing how to go about it. Sort of like Paris, in a way, but definitely more socially aware. Either way, Rory likes Jess.

She likes that Jess has read more than she has, is quick with pop culture to the likes of her and her mom, is proficient at making the coffee just like Luke, and has a focus to her that feels like whatever Rory has to say or think matters.

Her mom is hesitant, which wouldn't bother Rory so much if it weren't for the fact that she and her boyfriend were having discussions about Rory behind her back about whom she should or shouldn't be friends with.

"Are you actually freezing out your mom?" Jess says to her while she's waiting for the bus, which is late.

"No." Pause. "A little."

Jess snorts. "Don't worry – it actually seems like you love each other, so it'll pass."

"Wow, nice attempt at comforting," Rory teases.

"I'm new at it. But I suspect I could be a great proficient."

"I don't know about that."

Jess gapes, affronted. "How so?"

"Well, for one, your Misfits shirt kind of gives the wrong impression. Not to mention those spikes on your wrist – is that even allowed in school?"

"No, I'm sure it'll get me thrown out of class and I can make a dent in my book."

"What book?"

The bus arrives.

"Another time, Gilmore."
Rory and her mom come to a peace offering, her mom hesitantly agreeing that Rory has good insight into people's character (even though Rory is pretty sure not wanting to agree with Emily Gilmore was a large factor in coming to that conclusion). But it's still bizarre that her mom doesn't approve of one of her friends.

She invites Jess over one night for a Tarantino marathon – something she would do with Lane – and her mom is civil, Jess is civil, and Rory thinks maybe this will work out after all.

"She likes you, you know."

"Well...we are in the realm of friends. Kind of comes with the territory."

"Not like that. I mean, likes you."

Rory doesn't like Paris' tone. "What? No. What makes you say that?"

"Well, she brought over enough food to feed Europe."

"That was Luke, not Jess."

"Well, she certainly didn't mind sticking around to help you eat it."

"That's just Jess. She plays games, she does it to annoy people."

"And does she annoy you?"


"But not tonight."

Rory doesn't say anything.

"Look, I don't care. I actually don't mind her. She actually has literary taste, even though she has some glaring mistakes with it."

"She's my friend – I have a boyfriend. There's nothing beyond that."

"That may be true, but she definitely likes you more than a friend."

"She's not a lesbian," Rory points out. "She's been with guys."

"Okay, well maybe she's bisexual, or at least you're her exception, because if she were a guy, Dean would've been much angrier about what happened."

"Of course Jess is the girl who kisses other girls for attention," her mom scoffs, after they've just heard the rumor.

Rory doesn't say anything.

**
"You can ask," Jess says to Rory as they're sitting on the bridge. The weather is getting warmer, so their jackets are off.

"Ask what?"

Jess pulls out a cigarette and gives Rory a look.

"Okay…do you…like girls?" Rory's face turns hot.

Jess grins at her blushing and flicks her lighter, burning the end of her cigarette. "Yup."

"And guys."

"Yup."

"So…"

"Bisexual is the term you're looking for, kiddo," Jess says before inhaling, taking care to exhale down wind.

"Right." She shifts uncomfortably. "Dean told me a while ago that you were flirting with everyone. I assumed he meant all the guys," she jokes.

Jess narrows her eyes. "Right." She stretches out her legs from under her and gets to her feet. "I'll give you some time to wrap your head around the fact that I like dick and vag, but that doesn't mean I'll fuck them all." She takes another drag, this time not caring where she exhales. Rory does her best not to cough. "I mean, it's not like I expect you to want to fuck every guy you see, right? That would be unfair to say."

Rory flushes with embarrassment and looks down at the bridge, hearing Jess walk away.

**

Before the library closes, Rory spends time pulling out LGBT books. There aren't a lot, but she makes do with what she has. When the librarian stares at her in surprise, Rory pulls a Jess move and stares unapologetically, eyebrow tilting up expectantly. She only blurs a little.

She stuffs the books in her bag before stepping outside.

**

She also visits the Gay-Straight Alliance at her Chilton, but that's a rather small group of people she tends to avoid, so she just takes the brochures offered and leaves.

When in doubt, research.

**

A few days later, Rory takes a seat at the counter at Luke's, and her legs shake out of nerves, waiting for Jess to appear.

Her hair is in a haphazard bun, curls falling onto her face and her army green shirt brings out the green in her hazel eyes.

"I'm sorry I wasn't respectful of your coming out," Rory says. "I was unsupportive and ignorant."
Jess stares at her for a few seconds before slapping a hand to her mouth, muffling her surprised laughter. It's unexpected and sort of adorable.

"Please don't tell me you read every book you could about this," Jess says, dropping her hand, but not doing very well at keeping a straight face.

"Of course I did," Rory retorts. "You're my friend and I didn't know something about you so I tried learning on my own."

"Okay. You could always just ask me, too. Could've saved you the trouble."

"It wasn't a trouble," Rory counters.

Jess' amused smile softens. "Well, thanks. For trying. Coffee?"

"Do you even need to ask?"

**

Jess has hinted a handful of times about why she's in Stars Hollow, why she's not seeking sanctuary in The Strand or riding the subways until sun rises above the East River.

Rory can't fathom having such a horrible relationship with her own mom, but Rory can't ask Jess about it, not when she has such a dark expression on her face when she mentions Liz in a derisive tone.

"Hard to wrap your mind around, huh," Jess guesses, hands fiddling for a cigarette, probably.

"A little," Rory admits. "But she sounds…"

"Shitty?"

Rory wants to downplay it, maybe suggest, difficult or terrible, even, but she ends up saying, "Yes."

Jess is surprised. "Really?"

*Of course* – Liz Danes didn't bother to offer Jess to come back to New York for Christmas Break, sent the rest of her belongings months after moving out, has said horrible things to her, things that are scarring, and yet -

"Yes," Rory says firmly.

The corner of Jess' mouth quirks up and she changes the conversation, but Rory doesn't mind; she got her point across.

(People who don't understand Jess' brilliance are sad at best, horrible at worst.)

**

Her mom points out that she never lets anyone ruin her books in anyway – Rory told Lane not to even so much as dog-ear a page with the last book she borrowed.

"What makes Jess worthier than *Lane*?" her mom asks her.

Rory doesn't have an answer for her.
Rory is sure she doesn't like girls – she's never looked at any girl and found herself attracted to them like she has with guys. She looks intently at photos of models and actresses, feeling nothing, but she thinks about Jess and it's different.

She goes to Luke's with her mom on a Sunday and Jess is wearing loose-fitting jeans that are slung low on her hips and a black shirt that's a little too short, her midriff showing. It has a Pepsi logo even though she hates Pepsi.

She looks away when Jess catches her.

When Luke asks Rory to tutor Jess, Rory thinks it's absolutely ridiculous. Jess is the smartest person Rory knows – if Rory found Stars Hollow to be easy, Jess might be able to do her classes in her sleep.

She doesn't know – she's curious. Maybe that's why she readily agrees to help tutor Jess, why she's looking forward to time alone with her. Just to see.

Rory has never seen Jess like this – on the verge of panic, making sure Rory isn't bleeding or nothing else is broken. Her hold is so gentle on Rory's wrist that Rory can't believe anyone would think Jess uncaring. She probably cares more than anyone else.

Rory doesn't know the specifics – everyone is treating her like she's made of glass. That she was so kind and brave to try to befriend the wild child, but look what happened – she hurt you.

"They're being stupid," Lane says calmly. "They obviously don't spend more than a minute with her. For all her posturing, Jess would defend you to the death like I would."

But not like Lane, not really.

Dean kicks his duffel bag in anger, her letter clutched in his hands and her stomach clenches and flips, her mouth dry and her throat sore. It hits her all at once and just as quickly as it arrives – she shuts it out.

No.

Rory would claim insanity – taking a bus to New York in her school uniform – but at the end of the day, she misses Jess.

Seeing Jess in her natural habitat makes Rory incapable of taking her eyes off her.
Jess is more at ease, her smiles given more freely and her eyes filled with endless amusement. She teases Rory for questioning bringing food onto the subway (which, in hindsight, was stupid since the subway platform is a very dirty place, indeed), but she takes the time to explain the subway map near the door, pointing at the different colored lines and naming neighborhoods.

There's a point when they're making their way to Port Authority and Jess is standing too close to the edge of the platform. The subway car rushes by and Rory feels her heart jump to her throat and she steps back, even though she was already safe. Jess' hair whips about her and she's grinning.

The thought again slams through her like the subway and she tries to shut it out once more, but it's hard when she's on the bus, looking through the open window at Jess, wanting to say something, anything, more, more, more.

When Jess walks away, Rory shuts her eyes and rests her head back, failing at keeping her breathing even.

**(If Jess were a guy –)

((But she's not and this is what it is.))

**

When she spots Jess standing by the lake, her heart unmistakably flips behind her ribs.

The way the sun reflects in her eyes – warm, bright brown, a little green, maybe – and Rory can't help but think that Jess is one of the most beautiful people Rory's ever met.

Maybe that's why she gravitates towards Jess, hugging her so tightly that she can't tell where her body ends and Jess' begins.

(It's not enough.)

**

That night, Jess visits Rory outside her bedroom window, an hour after Luke's closes. She comes bearing leftover doughnuts and coffee. Rory tells her about Paris and being student vice president.

"Go," Jess encourages her, ripping a strawberry frosted doughnut in half. "It's good to get out of this hell hole for a while."

*What about you*, is festering in Rory's mouth and she swallows it down with coffee.

"Besides," Jess continues, her eyebrow quirking up. "I've always wanted to go to our nation's capital."

**

Rory writes letters to Dean. Her excuse is that she shares a phone with Paris and has to save her time with her mom, obviously, *it sucks, but you understand.* She lies to Dean and lies to her mom.

She writes to Jess and they talk on the phone about letters. She bites her lip when Jess laughs and twirls the phone cord around her finger when Jess rants about Whitman and the Beats.

*"I'm heading to the city in a few days, as I told Luke,"* Jess says a half hour into their phone call.
"Well, that should be nice for you."

"Yeah it sure will. You think you can pick me up at Union Station on Saturday?"

"Wh-what?"

"Not my fault you guys automatically assume by 'the city' I mean New York," Jess teases.

"That's usually what you mean, though. That's what everyone means in the tristate area," Rory retorts.

Jess snorts. "Always take advantage of the blind spots, Gilmore. Always."

She stops twirling the cord. Sometimes the darkness in Jess makes her nervous. Rory takes a breath.

"How do you find them?"

It's quiet on the other line. "You already know – you're doing it now."

(it sucks but you understand –)

Rory's smile is a sad one, even though Jess can't see it.

"It's survival," Jess insists, like she knows.

And maybe she does.

**

Jess arrives at Union Station on time with a worn backpack hanging off her shoulders. She's wearing loose shorts and Vans and a t-shirt with armholes so large that they reveal the skin of her hip. She's smirking.

"I have to say, Amtrak is not half-bad," Jess says, in lieu of a greeting.

Rory's trying not to be so obvious with how happy she is, but Jess' smirk softens and she drops her bag to give Rory a hug. Rory blinks in surprise, but returns the hug happily.

**

Rory and Paris have a seminar in the afternoon, but Jess waves them off and promises to meet them outside the dorm afterwards.

"She's some friend," Paris notes innocently as they walk across campus.

Rory narrows her eyes at Paris.

"Oh, come on. You know what, I'm going to book a hotel for the next few days. I don't want to bear witness to your Sapphic awakening."

"I'm going to push you in front of an oncoming car if you don't shut up," Rory hisses, her face heating to unprecedented levels. "We're just friends."

"Okay, well, just friends, don't look at each other the way you do. You have way more chemistry with her than you do with the beanstalk."

Rory sighs, her steps slowing to a drag.
Paris sighs dramatically, rolls her eyes, and grabs Rory's wrist. "Look, I don't mean to…insult you or anything. All I'm saying is that if you did have…feelings for Jess. For a girl. I don't care. I know the world does because everyone is some level of an idiot, but you won't get that from me."

"Because you're not some level of an idiot?" Rory jokes, but her voice cracks.

Paris smiles. "Definitely not. And neither are you."

Rory swallows, unable to say another word.

"Now let's go, I need a good seat in this seminar. I need to make the professor sweat."

Rory hangs back a moment to wipe the corner of her eye before walking in stride with her.

**

The three of them go out to dinner. Jess changes into something that doesn't show half of her bra and she runs a brush through her wild hair. The waiter is almost charmed by Jess and her ordering a bottle of wine for the table, but Rory's face gives it all away. Jess just teases her and orders soda.

"It was worth a shot, I was just feeling classy," Jess says with a scoff, crossing one leg over the other, her black dress riding up a little. Rory sees a businessman checking Jess out and Rory wants to block him from watching.

"Right, because that fits with your taste in literature so well," Paris snorts.

Rory sighs as they immediately start to argue, but she smiles into her water.

**

Rory doesn't realize Jess is gone until Paris makes a comment about the gross businessmen in the restaurant looking at them and Jess hasn't said anything.

"Where the –?" Rory starts, whipping her head back and she sees Jess coming out of a store down the street, holding a bag.

They step forward to meet her, but Jess shakes her head and gestures forward, picking up her pace. "Sorry, needed to pick up some things."

"Like what – feeding into your gross and expensive smoking habit? It isn't cool, you know."

"I look damn good doing it," Jess replies with a quirked eyebrow. "Beyond that, I got the itch for wine again."

"Are you crazy – what if you got caught?" Rory hisses.


"Who are they?"

Paris narrows her eyes. "This can be explained over one glass of wine."

**

They drink more than one glass of wine.
"I have to go to one of these shindigs," Jess insists, her cheeks flushed and her smile brighter than usual.

"You don't – they're boring and terrible," Paris retorts. "I can teach half of these clowns a thing or two."

"Stop exaggerating," Rory says, snorting. "They're not all –"

"They're politicians and therefore are all garbage," Jess says, interrupting her.

Paris holds up a hand and Jess high-fives it.

"Do you think we could order a pizza?" Rory asks hopefully.

Jess throws a thumb in Rory's direction. "She's getting it."

**

Rory is only grateful that she's tipsy enough to not overthink Jess sharing her bed with her before falling asleep.

**

While Rory is listening to speeches and doing exercises with her peers, she thinks about what Jess is doing during the day. From Rory's understanding, the public transportation system isn't nearly as extensive as New York City's, but she's sure Jess is resourceful enough to make her way around.

Jess is always waiting outside, waiting to take her to whatever corner of the city she visited that day to check out this bookshop or this record store she just discovered.

Rory always has her routines – she doesn't stray beyond her schedule unless it's for a specific purpose. With Hartford, Rory only knows how to get to Chilton and from Chilton to her grandparents' house and to the one record store she only knew about because of Lane.

It's exciting – the deviance from the norm, the exploration of the unknown. It's why she wants to be an overseas correspondent; it's why she dreams about leaving her small town and experiencing a taste of the world to come in college. She never thought she could experience it all so soon and it makes her feel…

Rory watches Jess as she talks about *Advise and Consent*, how her hair whips behind her and she moves her hands and it makes Rory's heart ache that Jess is reading that in honor of this visit.

It makes her feel –

(She thinks she knows how it makes her feel and it makes her panic.)

**

After Jess leaves them for the day, Rory turns to Paris and asks, "You really don't care about gay people – boys liking boys, girls liking girls?"

Rory really appreciates Paris' mind, how sharp it is to cut through any nonsense that Rory may say, despite the fact that Rory is trying to be as direct as possible.

Paris looks her directly in the eye. "No. I don't care."
Rory inhales shakily and nods.

To her surprise, Paris smiles. "Come on. I need a partner to help eviscerate this senator we're hearing speak today."

"Sounds perfect."

When they arrive back to the dorm, there's a letter from Dean waiting for Rory.

Rory bites her lip, avoiding Jess' piercing gaze.

"I'm going to the coffee shop next door. I think that barista needs a bit of training from someone who scares the living pants off her," Paris says, marching away.

Rory sighs and stuffs the letter into her backpack as they make their way to her room.

"Rory…"

Rory forces a smile on her face. "Yes?"

Jess sighs and shrugs her shoulders. "Why are you with him?"

Rory swallows thickly and takes out her key. "Because I love him," Rory says defensively, the words falling flat in her own ears as she unlocks the door.

"That face when you got that letter told a different story."

"I'm just tired."

"You always seem to be tired when dealing with Dean."

"Why do you care?"

The door slams shut behind them. "Because you're my friend and I don't think he makes you happy, at least not now."

"I've been with Dean for over a year –"

"So?"

"So?"

"This isn't a goddamn Austen novel. It's the twenty-first century, Buck Rogers, it wouldn't be the first time a couple's broken up."

Rory flushes in embarrassment and anger. "It would be for me. And besides, I doubt you've ever had a real relationship – what would you know about breaking up with someone?"

Jess narrows her eyes and Rory can see the moment when she slams up walls; Rory can't read her at all. "I think I've read enough and watched enough to get a basic understanding. It would probably involve something along the lines of – you need to make up your goddamn mind about what you want, Rory, because this isn't working."

"What do you mean?" Rory asks stupidly after a moment.
"You know what I mean, you know exactly what I mean. So what's it gonna be, Rory Gilmore?"

She can't – she can't, she can't, she –

Jess clenches her jaw and nods. "I think a breakup also involves someone leaving, so I'm gone."

It takes Jess all of ten seconds to collect her things and slam the door behind her.

Rory does her best not to cry but utterly fails.

**

Thankfully, Paris doesn't pry, not when she has her own love life to contend with. Still, she's obviously concerned, not asking about Jess beyond where she was when she finally returned from the coffee shop.

It takes Rory almost three days to muster up the energy to write back to Dean.

**

Rory's mom doesn't find out about Jess' secret visit until a few weeks later, when Rory returns to Stars Hollow and sees Jess being extremely cozy with a random blonde girl.

"You're upset," Lorelai says, flabbergasted by the sight of Jess, but sure of herself.

"No, I'm not upset."

"Yes, you are upset. I know when you're upset 'cause you look like my mother."

"Thanks a lot."

"You like my mother."

"Yes, but you don't like your mother, so when you tell me that I look like your mother, it's not exactly a compliment."

"Honey, what's wrong?"

There shouldn't be anything wrong – who cares if her friend is with someone? But the fact of the matter is Rory is beginning to come to terms with her feelings and how they're nothing like the feelings she has for Lane or even Paris now. She knows it's something more akin to what she used to feel for Dean, except it's sharper and a lot scarier.

This secret is almost too much to keep from her mom, but Rory just doesn't know how she'll react and the unknown has always been too much for Rory on her own.

She knows her mom is confused, but Rory can't bring herself to clarify, to tell her the truth.

She wishes Lane were here. She wishes her dad didn't disappoint her. She wishes that the feelings she has for Jess were as acceptable as the feelings she had for Dean. She wishes for a lot of things.

But when Dean finds her and brings her in for a kiss, Rory realizes she has the power to control a few things in her life.

**
Rory breaks up with Dean that night while her mom is at Friday Night Dinner. She botches it horribly – she stutters and talks in circles and the heartbreak on Dean’s face makes her want to take it all back, but the fact of the matter is she can't stand Dean kissing her anymore and she’s overwhelmed by his height and how possessive he is.

He's just not for her anymore.

She cries as she walks home and forces composure so when her mom asks if there's still a Dean, Rory is able to answer 'no' in calm and collected voice.

**

Jess is ignoring Rory.

Rory wants to talk to Jess, misses her profoundly, but she's afraid to bridge that chasm between them.

She looks down at her breakfast when the blonde girl enters the diner and then leaves with Jess.

**

The week has been difficult, to say the least. School politics, which she thought would be irritating at worst, are unbelievably unbearable. What with Francie breathing down her neck and her mom's concern over her happiness and not being able to look Jess in the eye, frankly, Rory shouldn't be surprised when her father decides to storm into Friday Night Dinner.

Rory feels like bursting at the seams by the time he finally leaves and she's back in Stars Hollow, but the night wouldn't be complete without bumping into Jess in Doose's Market.

They freeze and Jess opens her mouth to say something, maybe a smart quip, maybe not, but she pauses after a few moments.

"Rory?" Jess asks, quietly.

Her face crumples and it takes everything she has to fight for a straight face. "I can't right now, I really can't, okay?"

Jess blinks and nods, letting Rory pass by.

**

There's a light knock on Rory's bedroom window late that night. Jess is standing with hot chocolate and what looks like three slices of peach pie.

"You seem...better," Jess says after she's climbed through the window.

Rory takes a shaky breath before sipping her hot chocolate. She doesn't know what Jess does to it, but it's always better than when Luke makes it, a fact which she'll take to her grave. "My dad...paid us a surprise visit tonight at dinner."

Jess lightly snorts, shaking her head. "Wow."

"He let me down. He let my mom down. He always disappoints me, even though I try so hard not to disappoint anyone."

Jess meets her gaze.
"I'm...really out of my depth and I'm scared."

Rory looks down at her drink, hating how her throat is closing and her eyes are stinging.

"I'm sorry if I was...if I put you on the spot," Jess says, a little awkwardly.

Rory swallows. "You were right. I mean, about Dean, how I felt about him. I broke up with him, you know."

Jess doesn't bother to mask her surprise. "You did?"

Rory nods.

"Good for you. I mean, you really did seem miserable. I did mean what I said – as a friend."

"I know – it's just – I wish someone else could've said something to me."

"Sweetheart, I don't think you realize how good you are at playing it close to the vest," Jess says, an eyebrow quirked up.

Rory bites her lip. "I'll...work on it."

A corner of Jess' mouth slowly moves up into an amused smirk. "Okay."

**

It's a weird place to be in – a quasi-acknowledgment of what's going on between them, but choosing to do nothing about it.

Or Rory is the one holding them back, she guesses. She doesn't know. It's confusing.

Which is why she asks to meet Lane after school at the Inn, where she and her mom used to live; it's far away enough from other people that Rory can pretend that they're in their own world that has nothing to do with Stars Hollow.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of such a great arrangement of snacks? It's like you knew that Mrs. Kim was trying a new version of meatloaf that's actually tofu and wheatgrass and – whatever. What's up?" Lane asks, opening up a bag of chips.

Rory fiddles with a pack of M&Ms. "Uh, how, um. How do you feel about...gay people?"

Lane furrows her brow, chewing. "Well..." she starts, reaching for another few chips. "I'm supposed to say that they're evil, or whatever, but I never thought that made sense in relation to what the Bible teaches us – that God loves all His children." Lane eats some more chips. "So, wouldn't that include gay people, who probably didn't choose to be gay. I mean, who would when the world is the way that it is?" She eats some more. "It can't be easy. But they're just people. The same as everyone else." She furrows her brow again. "Rory, what's wrong?"

Rory's in near tears when she answers. "I think I like Jess."

Lane slows her chewing to a near stop. Rory waits an unbearable amount of time for her to finish. "Have you told Lorelai?"

Rory shakes her head. "I'm afraid to." Her voice cracks and she inhales sharply, not wanting to cry. Lane nods understandably. "Okay. Well. What's going on? Are you two...?"
"No! No, uh. No."

"Okay…"

"I mean…like. We know. That we…it's just. I'm…"

"Wow, The Rory Gilmore is actually tongue-tied for words," Lane says lightly, smiling.

Rory shrugs. "I thought I was bad with Dean." She smiles for a moment before biting her lip. "You really don't care?"

Lane shakes her head. "You're my best friend. As long as you don't admit that you're a serial killer, I'm still going to like you."

Rory nods and sniffs, looking down at her hands. Her tears are hot against her face.

"Rory…"

Lane brings her in for a hug and she cries.

**

Rory will just have to accept the fact that she'll only have the support of two people. That's okay, right? She doesn't need more than that.

(Right? (Right?))

**

It's why as much as the thought of being awake and dancing for twenty-four hours is exhausting, she's looking forward to the Dance Marathon.

(And so what if she maybe takes the time to curl her hair at five in the morning and put on makeup? There will be plenty of pictures and everyone gets dressed up in period clothing.)

**

"Wow," Jess draws out, cocking her hip and resting it against Lane's mom's stand. Her eyes drift from the top of Rory's head to her feet.

Rory laughs. "Seriously?"

"It's very nice."

Rory flushes, but keeps smiling. "Are you here for one of Mrs. Kim's famous sandwiches?"

Jess looks over at the table and grimaces. "Not if you want me poisoned."

"It won't kill you."

"It may scar you because of the taste, but it won't actually physically end your life," Lane offers.

"That makes it enticing, then."

Mrs. Kim comes by and never has Rory seen Jess be so polite, taking a sandwich without complaint, shooting Rory a desperate look before disappearing into the crowd.
Lane side-eyes Rory.

"What?" Rory asks.

Lane smiles. "Oh, nothing, she just seemed to really admire the effort you put into your admittedly very cute period outfit."

Rory looks down and smiles.

"Is something…?"

"Later, I promise."

**

There's a certain level of desperation (and lack of sleep) involved when Rory's mom spots Jess in the audience and demands her to keep Rory standing up straight as she goes off to fix her broken shoe.

"You Gilmores need your regular six to eight hours as recommended by your doctor, huh," Jess teases.

"I'm so tired," Rory whimpers.

"You're actually close – you may just win the grand prize."

"It's a damn trophy that'll go on my mom's dresser," Rory grumbles.

Jess laughs under her breath. "The least you could win is a hundred bucks or something."

"That's supposed to go to the bridge."

Jess rolls her eyes. "That bridge is never going to be fixed – I'm sure one day I'm going to walk across it, and –"

There's an ear-piercing feedback noise from the megaphone.

"Uh, excuse me, you're not her dance partner –" Taylor slurs, waking up from his doze.

"Her mom used a card, it's fine," Jess drawls.

"Well you can't dance with her."


Rory looks up and sees Jess staring at Taylor with a dangerous expression.

"Well, I mean, this is a family event."

Jess quickly, but obviously, glances at Kirk and his dance partner. "They're not related. In fact, there were plenty of couples who weren't related – through blood or marriage. So, I have to wonder why exactly, this isn't allowed."

"You know very well why –"

"Say it."

"Jess," Rory starts.
"Because you've made it quite obvious about your…preferences and it's just not appropriate. It gives the wrong impression."

There's a scenario in some universe – if one believed in the multiverse theory – that involves Jess storming over to Taylor and taking his blow horn and blasting it in his ear until he went temporarily deaf. There's also another scenario where maybe either of them looks at each other at the right moment and just –

But in this current one, Rory drops her hold on Jess and turns to Taylor. "You are an ignorant, awful person. We're not having sex on the floor – we're dancing. She's filling in while my mom is fixing her broken shoe and you –" Rory takes a deep breath, but it shakes in her chest and she has tears in her eyes. "Whatever. Fine. Kirk, it's all yours, you win. Taylor, good luck getting me to participate in anything else you run."

She storms out of the gym, Jess quickly following behind, and bumps into her mom.

"Rory, what –"

"I'm done," Rory says, a sob coming out before she can stop it.

Her mom looks to Jess, immediately jumping to the wrong conclusion.

"I'll see you at home," Rory says, reaching back for Jess' hand and blowing past her mom. **

They end up at the bridge. They're still holding hands.

"I'm sorry," Jess says, her hand twitching in Rory's.

Rory holds her hand tighter so she won't let go. "Don't be. He's a jerk. I'm sorry."

"I'm used to it." Jess drops her hold on Rory's hand, sitting down on the bridge and pulling out a pack of cigarettes.

"Would you, um…" Rory swallows, her face going hot, "mind not doing that?"

Jess shrugs her shoulders and slips the pack inside her jacket.

Rory sits down next to Jess, nervous in a way that she's pretending not to know why, but really knowing fully well.

"And that's only when they suspect it. It only gets worse when it's real," Jess says with a sigh, staring at Rory with exhausted, heavy eyes. Jess Mariano is seventeen-years-old and even though Rory knows Jess will take on the world with her fists and teeth, Rory also knows she's just a girl who shouldn't have to.

Or, at least, she doesn't have to do it alone.

It's so simple, so easy, to brush her mouth against Jess'. At first, the softness of her mouth is strange, mostly because Rory has only known what Dean's lips felt like against hers, but she's quick at adapting and comes to really, really like it.

Rory feels Jess smile against her mouth briefly before pulling back a few inches.

They're both sleep deprived and Rory feels it in every bone of her body. They're slow to get to their
feet and Jess walks Rory home. They're even slower to let go of each other's hands when they part ways.

**

There's a moment when Rory considers what she'll say in the morning to her mom, and when she wakes up, she decides not to.

And honestly, it's surprisingly easy to compartmentalize.

**

They hang out. They're left alone. They kiss. A lot.

And nobody has a clue.

Nobody has a damn clue.

**

Paris catches on quickly.

"I can't believe you're dating a girl who loves Kerouac. Seriously, Gilmore?" Paris hisses into Rory's ear.

"She likes his prose – it's not like she's obsessed."

"I don't know, I think with her tastes, she should've ended up XY chromosomes instead."

Rory rolls her eyes. "Shut up."

**

Dean becomes an issue in a way that Rory doesn't expect. Jess can't be jealous – they can't be more different from one another. Except that's the thing – Dean is a boy. Jess is not.

Jess wants to flaunt what they have – Rory won't let her. Jess understands, but her patience is strained and her hatred for Stars Hollow becomes uglier with every passing day, week, month.

A few days after an eventful Friday Night Dinner, Rory laughs while talking about the photographs of eligible bachelors that are her age that her grandparents would love to see her with. Jess grimaces.

They're alone in Rory's house, sitting across from one another on her bed. Her mom is running an event at the Inn and won't be back until late – they still keep Rory's bedroom door firmly shut, though.

"Hilarious," Jess drawls.

"I wish I could've brought them home so I could show you the stupid outfits," Rory continues, hoping to see her smile.

Jess doesn't smile. "Don't need visuals for that, do I?" she says, plucking at Rory's sweater.

"Hey, I thought you didn't mind the school uniform," she teases, inching closer.

The corner of Jess' mouth twitches. "Certain things."
"Like…"

Jess tilts her head to the side in thought. "It brings out your eyes," she starts.

"Okay…"

"And…" Jess curls Rory's hair behind her ear, fingers lingering along her jaw.

"And?" Rory prompts.

"I like when you take it off."

Rory flushes, bites her lip. "You've only ever seen me take off the sweater."

Jess shrugs. "I have a strong imagination."

Rory smiles and shakes her head, accidentally but not quite looking down Jess' low cut shirt. She's wearing a dark green bra – something new.

"I'll show you mine, if you show me yours," Jess teases.

"Like they're that much different," Rory quips.

Jess grins, her face bright and youthful and pretty. Rory leans forward to kiss her and Jess is always quick on her feet, meeting her halfway.

Rory doesn't take off her shirt that afternoon or really reveals much, but Jess does move slowly, carefully, sliding her tights down her legs. "You have killer legs, Gilmore, the tights drive me crazy, how do you wear them?" Jess grumbles by Rory's collarbone, which makes her laugh.

She stops laughing when their hips are flushed together, Jess' thigh pressed between Rory's legs.

There are times when it feels like Jess is so far away that she's untouchable, but here, above Rory, she's present, reachable, possible to love.

Possible –

**

Rory Gilmore is seventeen years old – will be eighteen in October – and she is in a relationship with a teenage girl.

They do things that men and women in relationships do: hold hands, laugh, smile at each other, kiss. It's all the same.

In a perfect world, Jess being a girl wouldn't matter. She could tell her mom, she could be honest with everyone besides Lane and Paris.

She could go to prom.

(She didn't know how much she wanted to go to prom until she realized she couldn't, not really. Not in the way she imagined or expected.)

**

Jess shouldn't look so cool with Rory's quilt wrapped around her, naked, but she does. All that's
missing to complete the picture is the cigarette, but Jess seems to be keeping to her promise to quit.

"What?" Jess asks, smiling.

Rory blushes out of embarrassment, crossing her arms over her chest, even though her sheets are already covering her. "Just…wondering."

Jess reaches out to cup Rory's cheek. "You flush so easily."

Rory reaches out and pokes the apples of Jess' cheeks. "You have no leg to stand on."

Jess shrugs, unashamed. "It was a nice orgasm, what can I say."

Rory drops her head onto Jess' chest in embarrassment and she can feel the vibration of contained laughter. Eventually, one of Jess' hands starts combing through Rory's hair.

Rory pulls back a little to speak. "Would you consider this – what we did – sex? I mean, all the components were there, but –"

"There wasn't a dick involved," Jess finishes for her.

"I was going to say 'male anatomy,'" Rory counters weakly.

Jess sighs. "I'd say it was sex, yeah."

"So…I'm no longer a virgin, I guess, by that conclusion."

"Virginty isn't an identity."

"I would've thought you'd hold some small pleasure in that."

"Oh, I consider it a great honor that I was the first person to make you come," Jess says with a teasing glint in her eyes. "But you're still Rory Gilmore. Nothing's changed."

"I think something's changed – you don't think so?"

Her face stills. Rory always has a difficult time reading her when this happens. After a few moments of silence, Rory's lips part to say something, but Jess' mouth finds hers and well, Rory is distracted.

**

When Paris storms into Rory's house, ranting about combining speeches for C-SPAN, Rory has enough common sense to shut her bedroom door and hiss at Paris to lower your voice when she tells her that she had sex with Jamie.

"Your mom isn't even here," Paris argues.

"She can be any second."

Paris looks at her and to Rory's extreme annoyance, there's a level of pity in Paris' eyes.

It's faint, but Rory hears the front door open. "Mom's home," Rory whispers.

"Wow, what are you, a superhero?"

"No, I'm in the closet. Anyway, this isn't about me and my relationship. So, you and Jamie…"
"Had sex."

It's horrible that the first thing that comes to Rory's mind is – Paris having sex doesn't compute, so Rory pushes that aside and focuses on Paris, who tries to be logical and wants to figure out what it means on a psychological level.

Now Rory is the one feeling a little sorry for her.

Rory tries to explain that it's about feeling safe – and being safe, at least in Paris' case since pregnancy is a looming threat – and whether she felt she was treated well.

"I just feel like this should've been planned or something. Scheduled a date and time. Everything else that means something has been marked in my planner. I have ten saved planners, I can tell you exactly when momentous occasions have occurred," Paris insists.

"Sometimes you can't plan things. Sometimes it's just...when it feels right."

"Is that how you felt about Dean?"

Rory doesn't mean to burst out laughing, but she does. "No, I never slept with Dean."

"Well, what about -"

Even though Paris' voice is soft, Rory's eyes widen and she shakes her head to cut her off. Paris promptly shuts her mouth.

Rory swallows and tries not to think about her and Jess in her bed the night before. "Yeah. I mean, we talked a little, she knew that I had never, so…"

Paris sighs. "I just wish there was data to sift through, that would back it up."

"Some things can't be analyzed."

"Listen, Rory, these last few weeks," Paris starts, voice louder, audible most likely through Rory's bedroom door. "Francie got things all twisted around."

Rory wants to hug Paris. "You let her get things all twisted around," Rory points out, meeting her voice with Paris'.

"I know. I just tend to believe the worst in people, you know?"

"Oh yeah, I know."

"I'm…"

"That's okay."

"Hello, Mommy's home!" Rory hears her mom call out from the kitchen.


(When Rory tells Jess about it a couple of days later, she thought Jess would find it funny or maybe even impressive, but instead, Jess almost looks sad. Guilty. She's restless in how she taps her pen against the notepad where she takes orders in the diner and she gestures towards Luke's apartment with her eyes. His apartment has been a safe haven in a way that Rory's house really can't be, but in that afternoon, Stars Hollow doesn't really feel safe for them at all.)
Twenty-two-point-eight miles.

Rory considers a future with Jess outside of Stars Hollow's town borders and it's...very overwhelming and a little scary, but it's also...nice.

A few weeks later, at a stupid party, through tear-filled eyes, Rory watches Dean reach out to grab Jess' arm. Even though her vision is poor, Rory's heart drops to her stomach at Jess' visceral reaction – a split moment in which Rory sees the shock, shut down, and rage. Jess swings her arm and punches Dean in the face with a strong left hook that knocks Dean off balance.

The next thing Rory realizes, Dean is in Jess' face. Jess presses her forehead and against his. "I fucking dare you," she spits.

Rory's voice is stuck in her throat as the veins in Dean's right-hand twitch.

Jess pushes Dean back and shoulders her way through the crowd.

Jess never talked much about growing up in New York City, but when Rory finally finds her voice again, calling out to her, Rory realizes that she doesn't recognize the person staring back.

It's the longest they've gone without speaking.

Rory's mom is confused as she gently probes, but Rory can't say anything beyond their having a fight. After all, it's not like her mom has any idea that she has been sexually active for months and steals moments to hold Jess' hand in public and feels like she's really found her other half.

A fight, that's all.

Jess freezes when Rory spots her in the back of the bus.

There's nausea and Rory can't keep her gaze straight; she doesn't even know how she's attempting a normal conversation.

There's Jess' stupid, ugly duffle bag sitting by her left knee.

"I'm sorry," Jess says, jaw locked and her hair a mess. Dark circles under her eyes. She reeks of cigarettes.

"This is my stop," is the only thing Rory can eventually say.

Before she steps off the bus, she looks back. She partially recognizes her – enough to make it hurt, not enough to allow herself to cry as she walks into Chilton.

Rory wakes up at five in the morning the day before she's supposed to graduate. She sneaks out of the house and heads to Luke's.
Luke looks as exhausted as she feels, but refuses to really acknowledge. He brews her a fresh pot of coffee and they wait in silence for it to finish.

She has questions, but he beats her to it.

"She missed too many classes – she was going to be held back."

Rory feels like a moron for not realizing that it was impossible for Jess to go to school full time and work the ridiculous hours she did.

"Her dad came by. I don't know if you knew that her dad walked out on Liz – Jess' mom – and her when she was born. Caught me off guard, never thought I'd see that lowlife again, but," Luke clenches his jaw.

Rory didn't, or at least, didn't know that Jess had gone her entire life without knowing her father.

Rory drinks her coffee and doesn't flinch when it scalds the back of her throat.

"We don't have to talk about it – you can just ignore me, but. Uh, you should know…that I knew. Know, I mean. I…I don't know if that's ultimately why she left, that I confronted her about it –"

She loses her grip on her mug and has a fast-enough reflex to catch it right before it crashes on the counter, coffee sloshing over the rim.

Rory squeezes her eyes shut and tries so hard to hold it in, but Luke, in his awkward yet caring way, places a hand on her head and she makes a horrible, anguished noise in her throat.

Jess never cared about people knowing – it was only a secret because of Rory. She tells Luke just as much and begs him to never breathe a word of it to her mom. She wasn't ready to tell her when it happened, she isn't ready to tell her now when she feels like her heart is a giant bruise, and she doesn't think she ever will.

Jess is probably one of the most resourceful people Rory knows besides her mom, but that doesn't mean she isn't scared for what's out there. Rory knows that this haunts Luke and she hopes that Jess will at least have the goddamn courtesy to let Luke know where she ends up.

Rory leaves with a final gulp of cold coffee and an overwhelming need to pick apart her graduation speech all over again until it's really perfect this time.

**

For not having a script to go by, Rory thinks what she says on the phone is almost cinematic. Except at the end of the day, there isn't an appreciation for the failed relationship; Rory wishes she never fucking met Jess, who ruined her life, who made her doubt and question herself. She could've gone the rest of her life without knowing that there was a girl out there who could make her feel the way she felt, that guys didn't compare. She should've ignored it, should've listened to her mom, should've –

"Hey. You okay?"

Rory exhales. "I'm okay."

**

It's stupid to have heart-stopping moments while traveling around Europe, convinced for a split
second that the girl with dark wavy hair that passes by is Jess.

But it happens enough to embarrass and infuriate her.

(Sometimes it hurts like a cut, but she ignores it.)

**

When they return home and are scarfing down meals, there's a moment where a group of teenage boys are laughing in the back by the window and one of them says, 'you're acting like such a fag,' and before Rory can even pinpoint a negative feeling to have, Luke storms over to the table and slams his hand down on the table, startling them all.

"I won't tolerate that kind of language in my diner, do you understand me?"

A few of them visibly gulp like cartoon characters. The one who said the slur nods.

Luke stares at them longer. "Finish your meals and get out."

(Before Rory and her mom leave, she shares a grateful smile with Luke, who nods back.)

**

Yale – college in general – means a clean slate. Starting fresh. She can be Rory Gilmore, a girl from a small town in Connecticut who always excelled at school and had one long term boyfriend and has been single since.

She doesn't look at the Gay-Straight Alliance flyers posted around campus and she dives head-first into college life as best she can.

Sure, there are setbacks and sure, maybe she breaks down more than once. And sure, maybe when she has her hand between her legs she tries to think about nothing, but her mind inevitably drifts and soon it's not her hand, but Jess', and she remembers the way Jess looked there and soon Rory's coming quick and hard and she hates herself for it.

But other than that, she's fine. She's totally fine.

**

Rory is not fine when she spots Jess' awful car across the street from Luke's.

She turns around to look at Luke's, at the top window which she knows Jess used to smoke out of in her first few weeks of living in Stars Hollow. She doesn't know if Jess is there, or if she's sleeping under the bridge, but Rory just needs to never see her.

**

Rory's mom seems pleased about Rory's blasé attitude regarding Jess being back in town, saying she was ultimately a bad friend and that soon enough she'll go away.

"She'll be gone soon," she repeats, mostly to herself.

**

Jess had said Stars Hollow is too fucking small so many times that Rory can't help but hear her voice in her head when she keeps running into her.
It doesn't help that she's wearing a black beanie and a leather jacket that makes her look cool (and she's not cool – there's nothing cool about dropping out of high school and burning every bridge you have). Although her face is a little thin and it looks like she hacked off her hair with shears. But she's not thinking about her – she has better things to do.

**

She can't explain why she starts running away, but maybe there is some sort of twisted desire in having the final word, to be the one walking away, to leave someone behind with words stuck in their mouth.

But Rory isn't athletic by any means and Jess catches up with her quickly enough.

She's proud that she keeps strong eye contact, that her voice doesn't fail her. She faces Jess with every bit of righteous anger she has and for a moment, she knows no matter what Jess wants to say, it will mean absolutely nothing.

Jess exhales. "I love you."

Rory shuts down.

**

During spring break, Paris kisses her and Rory finds herself vomiting, snot on her face and tears landing on the sand.

She doesn't really remember how Jess' mouth felt against hers.

**

It's almost poetic how Dean starts coming into her life again.

She remembers what first attracted her to him: how tall he is, his warm smile, his floppy hair. She likes the way his deep voice sounds on the phone.

She starts to feel butterflies in her stomach again. She doesn't look at the wedding band around his finger.

Dean was her first love and really, wasn't she so hasty in letting him go? Jess confused her – convinced her of feeling one way when she wasn't really sure.

She was supposed to be with Dean forever – didn't she think so?

So, it's all meant to be, really, that Jess comes and goes, yet again, and Dean and Rory are in her house and when he kisses her, there's triumph.

**

Except afterwards, she feels nothing at best, guilty and wrong at worst.

But maybe, what really makes her feel the worst besides the guilt and wrongness of sleeping with a married man, which is bad enough, is that it wasn't good. Not really.

She redresses on autopilot. She ignores Dean, who is asking if she's okay, what's going on, Rory, please –
"This was a mistake," Rory grits out, crossing her arms over her chest. "I would like for you to leave, please."

"But –"

"Go home, Dean. To your wife."

His fingers twitch and she remembers that night at Kyle's house. She feels sick to her stomach.

Eventually, he dresses and leaves. She stands outside her bedroom, contemplating what to do (is throwing out the bedding too extreme?). Seeing Dean wrapped around those same sheets that Jess was in makes her think being stabbed in the heart is less painful.

Eventually, her mom comes home, rambling, but Rory isn't listening.

Eventually, her mom sees her and comes to stand where she is standing, looking into room at the unmade bed.

"What's…going on?" her mom asks.

Nothing is there on the tip of her tongue, but instead, not giving a flying fuck, as Jess would probably say, Rory says, "I slept with Dean."

Her mom blinks a few times. "Excuse me?"

"I slept with Dean. And it was a mistake."

Maybe it's just because she's lied for so long at this point that she's forgotten how to do it when it matters; she's not meant to have secrets from her mom – since when did it become as natural as breathing? She feels like she's drowning.

Her mom is at a loss for words. "Uh, I think I'm going to need a little more than that, kid."

"I'm not a kid, I'm nineteen," Rory snaps.

Her mom looks like she's having difficulty breathing too. "How can you be so nonchalant about this? This was your first time. It's just not the way your first time was supposed to be!"

"Oh, and how was my first time supposed to be?"

"Well, first of all, it was supposed to be in a retirement home. And secondly, ideally, it was supposed to be with someone single."

"You know what, whatever, who even said this was my first time?"

Rory doesn't realize exactly what she said until her mom stares at her with a confused expression.

"What do you mean?" her mom demands rather than asks, with a forced calmness that drives Rory insane.

"It means this wasn't my first time. That happened over a year ago."

"With who?"

"With Jess, obviously. I mean, whom else was I with all the goddamn time?"
"Rory –"

"Yes, that Jess. Luke's niece, Jess. Jess with the long brown hair and who always showed her bra – that Jess. The Jess you hated, the Jess that I guess reminded you too much of yourself, or maybe you wished you could've been her, I don't know."

"Rory –"

Rory starts to walk away. Her mom follows after her.

"Rory, what the hell are you talking about? I don't get it –"

"Forget it," Rory screeches.

At the end of it, her mom doesn't know what to make of it, if she even believes it all. Rory ends up sitting on her front yard, tempted and desperate to call Dean, even though she knows he won't be the one answering. She doesn't need anyone besides herself vilifying her for her own screw ups.

And as for finding out the truth about Jess – well, Lorelai Gilmore takes a page out of Emily Gilmore's book: she ignores it.

At least until she makes a quip that sounds more like a snark along the lines of – aren't you supposed to have the Sapphic experience in college?

So, Rory packs her bags with great speed and doesn't look back for a second when she runs away to Europe for the summer. She may not be a kid, but that doesn't mean she's mature.

**

This time, she doesn't see Jess around every corner. She thinks this is moving on.

**

There's a day in Rome in which Rory is staring out at the Tiber River during the time her grandma naps and she spots a girl smoking. Wild hair haphazardly twisted into a bun, strands dyed purple and blonde, and sunglasses covering half of her face.

Despite being unable to see the girl's eyes, Rory knows that she's checking her out.

"Sigaretta?" the girl offers.

"No grazie," Rory says.

She smiles knowingly. "American. Fun. First time in Rome?"

"No, second. Hasn't lost its charm though."

"And who are you here with?"

"My grandma. She likes to take an afternoon nap, so I go off on my own. Yesterday was the catacombs, today…I don't know."

The girl brings the cigarette to her mouth and inhales. Rory's heart pounds, but she doesn't know if it's out of immediate attraction or an echo of something else.

"How about Trastevere? It's…cool. Funky."
"Sounds good. How do you get there?"

The girl puts out her cigarette. "Follow me."

**

Her name is Sofia and she attends the University of Rome – or Sapienza, as she calls it. She lives with her three best friends from growing up and she learned her English from watching Friends and American films. Rachel Green was part of her sexual awakening.

"And you?" Sofia asks. They're sharing a glass of wine on a cobble-stoned street. Rory needs to head back soon, or at least find a payphone.

Rory sighs. "I don't know. It's...confusing. I mean...at one point I loved a boy, at one point I...loved a girl, and now...I look at you and you're pretty and cool and I think I should feel something, but...I don't know if Jess is my only exception or something, but..." She sighs again and looks down at her almost-finished glass.

When she looks up, Sofia's eyes are soft. "You don't have to force or search for attraction. You don't need to label yourself if you don't want to. Or you don't have to feel so...attached to any label. It doesn't have to be permanent."

Rory saw the way people treated Jess for being unabashed and unashamed about being bisexual. Rory isn't there yet, doesn't even know if it's accurate; she feels like there needs to be another time, another girl, which will prove that it wasn't fluke, that this is what she feels, who she is, because otherwise, is she a fraud?

It's too confusing and too difficult to talk about, especially after a glass of wine on an empty stomach. Sofia takes her back to the hotel and kisses both of her cheeks, then finally, kisses her briefly on the lips before disappearing.

Her mouth buzzes in a pleasant way that makes it easy to smile.

A little later, she calls her mom and apologizes.

**

Rory doesn't know if they'll ever talk about it, Jess, anything in that realm, but Rory knows she doesn't want to go through anything like that again – she doesn't want to be in a constant state of lying.

So, she makes a promise going forward – to be honest about whom she likes. No matter what gender the person may end up being. That's simple enough – right?

**

(Shes sees Dean one time across the street. She looks away and keeps walking.)

**

The first time Rory started Yale, she felt a confusing mixture of relief and terror. This time, she feels relief and excitement. She hopes eventually she'll stop feeling the relief associated with distancing herself from her messed up love life.

But at least at school there is beautiful homework and papers and the Yale Daily News – she has her
future career to focus on, even if Logan Huntzberger does his best to distract the entire staff with his classic Hollywood references and flirtatious smiles at every girl.

**

Lane asks Rory to come over after Friday Night Dinner. She looks nervous as she ushers Rory past the guys who are glued to the TV, playing a video game.

Once Lane has shut the door, she leads Rory to sit down on her bed.

"Okay, what is going on?" Rory asks, confused and a little concerned.

Lane sits down next to her, takes a deep breath, and says, "I think I'm open to the possibility of liking girls."

Rory blinks at her a few times. "What?"

"Okay, so, over the summer, we were performing, and I saw this girl and she was like, Courtney Love circa 1992, just, so cool. And we got to talking and we're still keeping in touch and, I don't know, it's like…it reminds me of when I was falling for Dave and Henry and – you get what I'm saying?"

Rory manages to get over her shock and smiles weakly. "Yeah, I do."

"I mean, who knows, maybe I just idolize her since her fashion is amazing, but I'm keeping an open mind and…I just wanted you to know because I wouldn't be thinking about this or even…not angsting about this if it weren't for you or Jess." She winces. "I know we don't talk about her and I'm sorry, but. I thought you should know."

Rory reaches over to cover Lane's restless hands. "I don't want anyone – especially you of all people – to go through even a quarter of what I went through. I'm glad. Keep me posted?"

"Definitely."

Rory smiles. "And, for the record, in the beginning, I just thought Jess was cool too."

Lane beams.

**

Rory doesn't like holding disdain for her father. It's cliché and it ultimately upsets her. But she's seen the damage Christopher has done throughout the years with a new perspective. Hell, even Jess, who never even met her own father ran away from the chance of getting to know him once he showed the tiniest interest. That won't be her, and it won't be her mom – not anymore.

"You can't just break free of him," Rory insists to her mom once her dad and Gigi leave, her voice cracking.

Her mom denies, denies, denies, but Rory is twenty years old and almost jaded when it comes to flaky people.

**

When Rory leaves her father's house, she starts crying again. It's her dad's father, which is her grandfather – even though he wasn't the nicest guy when she met him, he was still…family. She carries part of his DNA.
But really, what hurts and scares her is that life can end in a *second*.

**

Logan Huntzberger isn't the kind of person she's supposed to find interesting or engaging or attractive. But he is.

(There's relief in it; he may think he's wild and crazy, but he's safe in a way she hasn't felt since she was sixteen and stuttering while talking to a cute boy.)

Maybe it has to do with jumping off a seven-story structure and feeling a high she never experienced before, or maybe it has to do with her grandfather's death and realizing how fragile life is, or maybe it has to do with the fact that she clearly has a *thing* for people who are larger than life, always the brightest person in the room, and pay attention to her.

Or maybe it's just because she thinks she looks *really* good in a suit and is feeling confident and it's been a long time since she wanted to unabashedly hook up with someone she likes and finds interesting, engaging, and attractive. That works.

(She can ignore the two gay jokes he makes – she's not *gay*, after all. It doesn't apply to her, at least not right now when she thoroughly enjoyed making out with him and feeling him pressed against her.)

**

So, she's a little out practice with the heartache that comes with really liking someone and knowing they don't like her the way she does back, but she's fine, she's totally fine. Even after sobbing on the bathroom floor in her mom's lap, drunk as can be, she's *fine*.

**

She ignores the rollercoaster of emotions she feels with Logan – it's easy to do when the highs are *so* high. She forgot how wonderful and great not only being in a relationship is, but being able to kiss in public and hold hands and have people *know* she's taken.

The conversation about their dating history is short, mostly because Logan's consists primarily of 'friends with benefits' and one-night stands. Rory brings up Dean as her first boyfriend and then, when she brings up Jess as an impulsive decision, well. It's not her fault that he assumes Jess is a guy.

She doesn't do anything to correct his assumption, but sometimes Rory thinks of her time with Jess as some sort of fever dream.

((But also, beyond that, there's a loss of companionship that Rory doesn't think she'll ever get back or find again, but she's okay with that; she has her friends and she has her boyfriend.))

**

And so her life, finally, feels like it's on a trajectory that it was always meant to be on. She's succeeding in school, she's rising through the ranks at the *Yale Daily News*, she's killing it at her internship, she has a boyfriend who can intellectually keep up with her and charms her – everything...
is finally perfect.

**

(As Rory sits in a jail cell in Bridgeport, Connecticut, she shuts her eyes and thinks about anyone she knows getting arrested, but can only remember Jess standing by her drawers in a black bra, reminiscing about a shirt she pulled out of her bottom drawer, how she ran close to thirty blocks to get away from a cop. She was fifteen at the time and did it in chunky heels.

"And that's why I don't wear heels," she said, pulling the shirt on. She smirked. "You never know when you'll need to run over a mile from the cops."

Rory catches sight of her kitten heels and brings a hand to her mouth to muffle a choked laugh.)

**

It can be fixed – all of it. She can bounce back, she can lessen the charges against her, she –

She can stare out the window during her last final. She can feel a sensation of drowning when considering her future, which used to look bright and open. She can cry in her grandpa's arms and choke on words. She can calmly call Yale and inform the administrators that she will not be attending school in the fall and she is not sure if she will be returning in the spring.

She can move into her grandparents' pool house. She can wear a frumpy skirt and sweater she wants to burn in front of a small, underwhelming courtroom that still manages to nearly knock her off her feet once her sentence is served.

She can avoid her mom.

**

(It probably shouldn't be taken as a challenge to be queen of the sloths, but she does. The New Lorelai Gilmore, a perfect match for Logan Huntzberger in wasting time and experiencing a life of unrespectability. The Old Lorelai Gilmore loved school, but now, The New Lorelai Gilmore can do without it – there are other things to do with her time and she's going relish in it.)

**

It's funny how she adjusts to the notion that she's not going back to school in September. She was always excited to go back every year, but there was always a layer of anxiety to it as well.

Now she can just...exist. Be. Figure out what she wants to do while she completes hundreds of hours of community service.

Even though the idea was ridiculous, she does end up using the pack of smokes her grandma gave her before her first day. That night, she goes to a gas station to fill her car and buys the brand that Jess used to smoke – it's the only one she really recognizes anyway.

(Although the smell the next day takes her back and it's surprisingly…not as awful she thought it would be. Smoking is still gross, but there's something about that particular smell that makes her nostalgic, a little.)

**

Rory doesn't remember driving home from Stars Hollow after speaking with Luke and finding out he
and her mom are engaged, but she does know her throat is sore and her eyes are red when she looks in the rearview mirror.

**

After the brief but brutal confrontation she has with her mom on the side of the highway, Rory’s life enters a new normal, a new routine. Instead of sleeping in and getting brunch with her mom and hanging out in the sun with her books, she rushes every morning with a piece of toast, an apple, a pastry, a granola bar in her mouth to make it to community service on time. She has brief phone calls with Logan as he flounces around Europe. She files paperwork and takes calls at the DAR office.

She wears skirts and dresses that go down to her knees and she twists her hair into buns and gets an expensive cut and color at her grandma’s salon.

(It takes Rory over a month for the disorientation of waking up somewhere new to go away.)

**

“So, how’s Logan?” Lane asks, fifteen minutes before Rory is supposed to be at the church and become a godmother.

Surprising. Difficult to keep up with. Fast moving. Thrilling. All in a good way.

And distracting, Rory considers as she grips Logan’s hand on the helicopter taking them to New York City.

**

All good things must come to an end – Rory has no idea who came up with this catchphrase, but she’s starting to understand it now more than ever that it’s an inevitability.

She chafes under her grandparents’ rule and she finally has firsthand experience of what her mom ranted about for years. She sneaks Logan into the pool house and gets a sick little pleasure in having him in her bed.

She says I love you for the first time in a few years, even though it hasn't been quite as long since she felt the words. Instead of feeling insecure and upset when Logan doesn’t say the words back to her, she feels confident, sure that Logan will soon follow; there's no way he doesn't feel the same.

(She ends up looking up the Birkin Bag and oh my.)

**

Rory knew as soon as she was introduced to this reverend that her grandparents had a plan – she just couldn’t imagine it would be about her having sex and her virtue being a precious gift, which makes her want to die a little.

While she claims her virtue is long gone, she doesn't know how this reverend would react if she said she actually lost her virginity to another girl; that would probably blow his mind.

Except at the end of the day, she admitted too much and now she’s stuck sharing a damn wall with her grandma.

**

When her twenty-first birthday comes around, she's never wanted to close the distance between her
and her mother more, but she doesn't really know how.

Her mom comes to her birthday and they talk, but it's awkward and not them. She pushes down the hurt and pretends not to care that her mom left before she blew out the candles.

At one point toward the end of the party, she takes out the box with the pearls Luke gave her and puts on the necklace. It rests along her collarbone and she thinks her heart will have permanent residence in her throat.

"What's that?" her grandma asks, eyes narrowing in on the new piece of a jewelry like a hawk.

Rory brings a hand to it. "Luke gave it to me. They were his mom's."

Her grandma's eyes soften a fraction. "Oh. Well it's not appropriate to open gifts while the party is still going on."

"Noted," Rory says sharply. "Excuse me, I need to make sure my guests leave with a chocolate box."

**

Beyond her grandparents annoying her, Logan is beginning to irritate her.

She finds herself drinking less and less while going out with him to the point that she's sitting in the Rich Man's Shoe stone-cold sober with a club soda and Logan is slurring his speech.

He's decidedly less charming while drunk.

By the time she gets him and his friends into her car, she's exhausted to her bones and she's trying ignore the painful question of what the hell is her life?

When she pulls into the driveway, the last thing she ever expects is to see Jess Mariano coming through the gates.

**

"I…" Rory starts, faltering.

Jess looks better from the last time she saw her – her face is a bit fuller, her hair has grown out and seems like it was cut by a professional and not by herself in front of a dirty bathroom mirror. She's wearing a jean jacket and dark pants that hug her thighs and she's carrying a messenger bag. The girl who kept a men's wallet in her pocket and kept everything else on her person is carrying a bag. And – are there pearl studs in one of her set of piercings?

"Sorry, that wasn't a sentence," Rory ends up saying, giving up on a proper greeting.

"I got the gist," Jess brushes off easily, sauntering up to her in a way that's so achingly familiar.

It's surreal bantering with her, like the years didn't really happen even though she carries them with her. She feels them in the way her jacket is on the wrong side of snug when she crosses her arms in front of herself, a strange means of hiding herself.

But there's no hiding from Jess when she repeats time off in a way that triggers a wave of embarrassment and a need to deflect.

When Rory ever considered Jess and what she was doing with her life, she imagined something in
New York or maybe she stuck around in California for whatever reason, maybe finding a Kurt Cobain to her Courtney Love, but the reality is not nearly as glamorous or as scary as Rory had feared. But the way she talks about Philadelphia and her job – Rory feels the tension she associated with Jess' future fade away. She's okay, she's okay, she allows herself to think.

But what she can't stop saying out loud is – "You wrote a book?"

Even though it's a short novel, it weighs in her hands. She doesn't know whether to laugh or cry as she flips through the first few pages. Her heart pounds with every mention of Jess' name in stark, black ink.

"So, I just basically wanted to show you that. Uh, tell you…” Jess shrugs a little. "Tell you that I couldn't have done it without you."

Tears are winning out this time. "Thanks."

Jess smiles a little. "I'm gonna be around for a couple of days. Want to hang out? Preferably while having a conversation above a whisper." The corner of her mouth quirks a little – a less obnoxious version of her old smirk.

"Yeah, I'd like that. How about tomorrow night?"

"Eight okay?"

"Yep."

"Good." She gestures toward the door. "I'll sneak out on my own."

This may be a new and improved Jess Mariano, but there are some things you just can't shake.

(Like how as soon as Jess leaves, Rory opens the book and begins reading.)

((She reads it twice and doesn't go to sleep past two in the morning – when was the last time she did that?))

**

There are a few things Rory picks up on when Logan gets out of his car. One: he is annoyed on some level, maybe because she's not showing enough jubilation at his early return. Two: he has definitely had a drink or two on his flight home – she recognizes all levels of his intoxicity. Three: he thinks Jess is irrelevant, ignorable.

It's an insult, but it's also a giant mistake.

There are also a few things Rory doesn't expect with Jess and Logan sharing the same space. One: she doesn't expect him to invite himself out; he was probably hoping Jess would back down, but that's his incorrect assumption. Two: she doesn't expect that once Logan does pay attention to Jess, she irritates him. Three: she doesn't expect Jess to even agree to the three of them going out at all.

"You can squeeze in the back," Logan offers, an attempt at gallantry.

"Got an early morning, so I'll drive," Jess says, but Rory can see Jess' mind moving quickly, calculating the quickest means of exiting. The safest.

(Of course Jess can recognize intoxication, even if it's mild enough.)
Rory's mouth parts, considering claiming that she has an early morning too, but the notion is absolutely ridiculous given that she hasn't an early morning since May. She smiles tightly.

"You can follow us," Logan says, draping an arm around Rory's shoulders, leading her to the car.

**

This is the Jess that Rory knows – challenging, quiet. She sips slowly at her beer, eyes watching over the glass rim.

Rory wants Logan to shut up – where's that stranger from the other night when you need him?

"So...what do you do, Jess?"

"Oh, this and that."

Such a distinctive Jess Mariano answer that used to annoy her, but in this moment she appreciates it.

"Describe the this, describe the that."

"She writes," Rory answers with a roll of her eyes.

"You write? Impressive. What do you write?"

"Nothing important."

"She wrote a book."

"Oh, you penned the great American novel, Jess?"

Why is he being such a ass? It's almost like...

(It's almost like he's figured it out, but there's no way. He's drunk and he won't remember something she shared months ago.)

"Wasn't quite that ambitious."

"So, what are we talking here? Short novel? Kafka length, or longer? Dos Passos, Tolstoy? Or longer? Robert Musil? Proust?" He smirks. "I'm not throwing you with these names, am I?"

Jess' eyes narrow, her mouth twisted in an almost amused grimace. "You seem very obsessed with length."

"I'm just trying to get a picture in my head, that's all."

"It's a short novel," Rory states, hoping to end this conversation.

"Any good?" Logan asks her.

Rory stares at Jess. "Amazing. I read it twice."

The corner of Jess' mouth twitches.

"Well, at least you have one reader. That's something."

Rory glares at Logan, unable to look at Jess and see her reaction.
"You know, I should just write down all my random thoughts and stuff that happens to me and conversations i have and just add a bunch of ‘he said, she said's and get it published. You got a copy on you?"

For a moment, Rory wishes she did so she could whack him in the face with it.

"No."

"You should send me a copy."

"Sure. And where do I send it? The blond dick at Yale?"

"Whoa, whoa," Logan says as Jess grabs her jean jacket and walks past the table. "We're just trying to keep it friendly here." Logan stands in front of her, blocking her exit, and Rory recalls this scenario with nauseating familiarity. Logan may be shorter than Dean and Jess may be a few years past seventeen, but that fire in her eyes is exactly the same. "Get out of my way."

Logan chuckles condescendingly and Rory mostly just feels embarrassment for herself.

"Forget her, Rory."

Rory ignores Logan and rushes after Jess.

**

This isn't about him. Okay, fuck him! What's going on with you? This isn't you, Rory. You know it isn't. What's going on?

I don't know. I don't know.

But Rory talks it out, ranting about her life and where she's at and of course, Logan Huntzberger has to make it about himself.

Before he leaves her with more money than she's ever had at any given time, he says, "And you thought you were bein' so slick. That one of your high school sweethearts?"

Rory's stomach drops to the floor and doesn't confirm or deny.

He finally leaves.

Rory stares at the crumbled bills on the table. One of them is a hundred-dollar bill. Rory numbly sits down on the chair that Jess was in and takes the fresh beer. She sips for a moment before gulping half of it down. When she puts the glass down, she stands up, takes a twenty-dollar bill from the table, and leaves.

His Porsche is gone and she stands on the sidewalk. She pulls out her phone, her thumb hovering over the cab number, contemplating on where she wants to be taken. When she looks up, Jess is leaning against a silver car across the street, a lit cigarette between her fingers.

Rory looks both ways before crossing the street.

"Wanna try that again?" Jess asks, an eyebrow quirked. She brings the cigarette back to her mouth.

Rory nods, unable to use her voice yet.

Jess inhales, drops the cigarette on the ground and squashes it out. She exhales up and away from
Rory, exposing her neck. Rory swallows. Jess pushes off her car and gets inside. Rory goes over to the passenger side without hesitation.

**

They go to a dive bar that's across the street from the record store Lane had always asked her to go to when they were in high school.

"I can't believe this place is still running," Jess snorts as they wait for their drinks. She ordered a beer, Rory ordered a vodka soda, light on the soda.

"Let me guess, after work beers with Walmart coworkers?" Rory jokes.

"Nah. My liver was clean then."

"And now?"

"It could use a workout tonight." Jess shoots her a smile before their drinks are provided. "Thank you, sir," she says, reaching into her back pocket.

"Put your money away. I'm using Logan's and then grandma's," Rory says, slapping down the twenty she took.

"Fine by me."

They drink quietly for a minute.

"So," Jess starts.

"I need to take at least a shot before having any sort of conversation."

"That can be arranged," Jess says, flagging down the bartender.

"Double tequila, please."

Jess raises her eyebrows in amusement. "I'll take a single shot."

"Baby."

"Driver," Jess reminds.

"Next time."

Jess smiles. "Yes."

Their shots arrive.

"I don't think we need to cheers," Jess jokes.

Rory grimaces as she drops lowers the shot glass to the bar for a tap and then throws the shot back.

Jess still has her shot and is staring at her, clearly impressed. "Color me shocked," she says before taking her shot without a wince.

"Why – did you think I would only like fruity concoctions?" Rory asks. She leaves her second shot for later.
Jess shrugs. "I figured you'd be more of a mixer kind of person: Jack and Coke, Gin and Ginger…"

"Whisky soda?"

Jess grins. "I can't even pretend to tolerate that."

"Hemingway would be so disappointed."

"Not as disappointed as his knowing that I find grapefruit in any form to be an abomination, so that rules out a daiquiri."

"Alcoholic daiquiris are just not as good as virgin ones, ultimately."

Jess smiles. "I've missed you, kid."

"You know, I've actually been thinking about you a lot lately. It's almost fate," Rory admits.

"Really?"

Rory wordlessly unzips her purse and pulls out a half-full pack of cigarettes. Jess laughs out loud.

"It's currency for community service!"

"What kind of fucking community service are you doing?" Jess takes the pack and pulls out two cigarettes.

"The kind that a court of law requires you to do."

Jess pauses, reading Rory's face. Her mouth opens, probably to insist that she's joking, but ultimately, Jess exhales in disbelief, taking out another two cigarettes.

"You definitely have to explain that one."

Rory takes a generous sip of her drink and begins.

**

Two drinks and a shot later, Rory is properly tipsy and Jess has switched to water, but eyes Rory's drink with mild envy.

"Wow," Jess says.

"What a mess," Rory says out loud, breaking the silence.

"Trust me, honey, you can clean up your mess in a few simple steps."

Rory opens her mouth to argue, but really, there's nothing to contend with – Jess is right. Rory has known the plan the moment she stepped away from Logan. It's work, but she was never afraid of hard work.

"I hope you're still writing," Rory says. "I meant what I said earlier. It's brilliant. It doesn't remind me of anything else – it's just…you."

Jess lowers her head, a rare vision of humility. "Thanks. You really read it twice?"

"As soon as I flipped to the last page, I went back to the first and started again," Rory confirms. "Where are you off to next in your author distributing journey?"
"Stamford and then this one bookstore somewhere in Westchester County somewhere before New York. Then back home." She snorts. "Home."

"Okay, I gotta ask," Rory says suddenly, gesturing toward Jess' pierced ears. "Pearls?"

Jess rolls her eyes and touches her right ear. "Luke. He said they belonged to my grandma. It was either these or a necklace, but I figured you were better off with the necklace."

Rory blinks in surprise.

Jess smiles. "When I asked him where you were, he confessed that he gave you the necklace for your birthday. He knew I wouldn't have cared about that, but I think he felt guilty or something."

"Well, only you can somehow make pearl earrings cool."

"That's the goal."

"What did you do for your twenty-first?"

"Honestly? Got a bottle of wine and ordered pasta from my favorite Italian restaurant and read Nine Stories for the hundredth time."

"I was supposed to go to Atlantic City with my mom. We had this whole plan. Instead I had a stuffy party at my grandparents'."

"I heard the chocolate boxes were superb."

Rory smiles. "There's that." Suddenly, she yawns. "God, what time is it?"

Jess checks her watch. "Late." Pause. "Need to crash at in my hotel?"

Rory swallows and nods. "If it's not an imposition."

Jess shakes her head and rolls her eyes, smiling. "Come on."

**

Rory doesn't know why she's so surprised she's staying at a Marriott.

"It just seems so...corporate or whatever," Rory says as she chugs water. She's not sober yet, but she's definitely not as drunk.

"Call me a snob, but I prefer to stay in establishments that don't have mold in the ceiling," Jess says, pulling out clothes from her small duffel bag. "Here," she offers.

Rory takes the clothes.

"I have to leave in a couple of hours, but my card is on file if you want to check out later," Jess says.

"No, it's fine, I'll leave when you do. I have a lot to do when I wake up."

Jess nods toward the bed. "You mind?"

"No," Rory says honestly. "Look, Jess -"

"I think we've done enough unloading tonight. We have time...right?"
Rory's throat closes as she nods.

They have time.

**

Rory wakes up a couple of hours later and is pleased to not be hungover. While Jess' hair the night before had some semblance of control – in the morning it's a familiar mess of curls. She wears a loose pair of jeans that Rory recognizes and a pullover she doesn't, and is packed and ready to go in minutes. Rory puts her clothes from the night before back on and hands Jess back the shorts and shirt.

"Where do you want to go?" Jess asks as they make her way to the parking lot.

"My grandparents'. I need my car," Rory says.

Jess looks out at the horizon where the sun is just beginning to shine. "You may just miss them."

"Wait, Jess," Rory says once they're standing by the car. She flushes and goes to curl her hair behind her ear, but she had already wrapped her hair in a bun earlier. "How...do you have a phone?"

Jess unlocks her car. "As a matter of fact, I do."

"I had to get a new number, so. We should probably exchange."

Jess tries and fails to hide a smile as she gets in the car. "Probably."

Rory grins as she gets in the passenger seat.

**

Rory has never been grateful for the "sleepovers with Paris" because she has a bag filled with clothes in her trunk. All she has to do is go.

**

The next few days are a whirlwind – job hunting and rewriting cover letters for different internships. She forgot how productive she can be with a laptop and a mug of coffee by her hand.

Even though she hasn't spoken to Logan, she reaches out to Colin and Finn to move her stuff – they don't seem to question the request; who knows if Logan said anything about their fight.

Rory feels more like herself than she has in months. Maybe for longer than that. So once she's gotten her life back on track, she calls her mom. For a split second, she's concerned, but her mom is excited and once she's hugging her, Rory knows she never wants to go through something like this.

Her mom runs to Luke's to get food and Rory gets back in her car and exhales, not realizing she was caring such a tightness in her chest for so long until she came home. She flips open her phone and goes through her contacts.

Jess answers on the second ring.


"I'm home," Rory says with a smile, tears in her eyes. "I got a job at The Stanford Gazette. I'm going back to Yale."
Rory shuts her eyes for a second and imagines Jess smiling. "Make sure to send me a change of address."

"I'll probably be with Paris," Rory snorts, starting her car.

"I still can't believe that you two are going to the same school."

"Just can't shake her."

"Guess not."

Rory starts her car. "I'm about to go to Lane's and get my stuff and bring it home. I'll keep you posted." She pauses, opens her mouth to add something else, maybe if you're interested, but Jess says:

"Please do. Maybe I will figure out in the meantime whether if murdering a poet would actually be considered homicide or a good deed."

"I think in the eyes of the law it would still be considered homicide and worthy of a jail sentence, but I'm sure people would be very appreciative depending on how bad the poet is."

"Mary had a fucking little lamb made an appearance."

"I would be appreciative, then." She pulls into Lane's driveway. "I gotta go, I'm at Lane's, I'll talk to you later."

"I'll do you one better and text you."

Rory gasps. "You?"

"Goodbye, Rory."

Rory laughs. "Bye, Jess." She hangs up and rushes inside.

**

Rory and her mom eat so much food it even makes her nauseous just thinking about it in hindsight. There's also a bottle of sparkling cider in celebration, but it barely gets touched.

Her mom asks her late in the night when she's half asleep what the trigger was. The final straw. Rory considers, but then says, "I'll tell you later. It's a long, long story."

"'Kay."

**

Rory is surprised when she wakes up to a text from Jess.

From Jess Mariano:

Hey, I forgot to mention this when we saw each other: I've been keeping in touch with Dave Regalski. I bumped into him on the Venice Beach Boardwalk while I was still out there over a year ago.

From Jess Mariano:

I have his number if Lane wants it.
From Rory Gilmore:
*I take it he lost his phone and never kept a contact book?*

From Jess Mariano:
*You're the only person under the age of 60 who keeps a book. But essentially.*

From Rory Gilmore:
*I'll bring it up. Thanks.*

From Rory Gilmore:
*That's so random, by the way. How often do you talk?*

From Jess Mariano:
*Not a lot. Mostly it centers on music releases. He got way into whiny shit.*

From Rory Gilmore:
*Oh man, seriously?*

From Jess Mariano:
*I would say it was directly related to a broken heart, but he always leaned toward it before.*

From Rory Gilmore:
*Hahaha. I'll let her know either way.*

From Jess Mariano:
*Roger that.*

Rory smiles and begins the rest of the day.

**

Lane blinks at her. "Seriously?"

Rory nods. "Yeah. Seriously."

Lane looks out at the town thoughtfully. "We did break up for a reason…" she ponders out loud.

"I think she's just offering as a means of...as closure. If you want. Or just to know he didn't just drop off the face of the earth even after you technically ended things."

"I can't believe Jess and Dave -"

"Okay, not Jess and Dave. Just...they talk. It really doesn't seem like it's a lot," Rory reassures her and herself at the same time.

"No I know, I mean, Jess was clearly focused on you, it's just...wow."

Rory sighs. "Yeah."

Lane smiles a little. "I'll take the number. Not sure I'll call, but it'll be nice to update the contacts list."

**

It's not that Rory is *avoiding* telling her mother about Jess, it's just...she's waiting for an opportunity. The right moment. And that isn't just after admitting that she is not speaking to her boyfriend.

**
"So, how was the showcase?" her mom asks brightly once Rory returned home from Hep Alien's first big break.

"A disaster – Zach had a major meltdown," Rory sighs.

"What? Why?"

"Well, turns out he's been harboring some crush on Lane for like, a year, and I guess he found out about her reaching out to Dave, and -"

"Whoa, how did Dave end up in the picture again?"

Rory bites her bottom lip, inhaling.

"What?" her mom prods.

"I never really finished telling you...how I snapped out of it," Rory starts slowly.

"Okay…"

"Someone I hadn't seen in a long time came by out of the blue and...reminded me of myself, I guess."

"Who are you talking about?"

Rory winces a little. "Jess."

Her mom blinks. "Jess."

"Mariano," Rory confirms.

"Jess Mariano."

"Do you need a minute to reboot?"

"I mean – maybe – Jess? What the – she was here? I thought she flew off to the west coast!"

"She did -" Rory sits down with an exhausted exhale. "Can you sit?"

Eventually, her mom sits down next to her, uncharacteristically silent, waiting.

"She's in Philadelphia -"

"There's a joke in there somewhere, I just know it -"

"She works at a printing press -"

"How is she qualified without -"

"She wrote a book."

Her mom stops.

Her mom stares at her with soft eyes. "Wow."

"Yeah."

"Didn't see that coming," her mom admits.

Rory laughs wetly. "Yeah, me neither."

"So...what does Jess have to do with Dave?"

"It's a small world – she bumped into him in LA since he goes to USC."

"Ah, got it."

"Yeah."

Her mom exhales. "So...Jess..."

"I've missed her. I always have," Rory confesses.

"She was one of your best friends," her mom acknowledges.

"Yeah. I...it's funny. It didn't feel like time passed. It did, obviously, but in the way I guess it matters, it didn't."

"Luke never brings her up."

"Well, she was a point of contention for a while."

"That she was," her mom mutters. "But I suppose if she helped you get back to Yale, then she's not the worst." Her mom pauses. "Wait. Please tell me that Jess met Logan."

Rory gasps. "How the hell did you know -"

"I mean, she has a funny way of disrupting your relationships."

"It was just Dean – and Jess wasn't the only reason why that happened, come on."

"Okay, okay, fine, but I don't see you denying it!"

Rory rolls her eyes. "Logan came back a day early from his trip and we attempted to get dinner as a threesome."

"Oh, I bet Jess hated Logan," her mom says a little too gleefully.

"Keep it in your pants, won't you?" Rory retorts dryly. "But pretty much. It didn't help that Logan didn't even try and was a total jerk, which I told him, and then – boom. Huge fight in the middle of a bar and grill."

Her mom whistles lowly.

"Yeah, so, I ended up spending half the night in a dive bar on Grandma's money, I crashed in Jess' hotel room, and she gave me a ride back to the house so I could get my car and, well, you know the rest."

Her mom leans back against the couch. "I take it you're talking? You and Jess?"
"Texting, actually. She's very consistent."

"Really."

"Yeah.

"So...Jess Mariano is officially back in your life."

"Looks like it." Pause. "It feels right," Rory says.

"So, wait, I think you need to go in fuller detail of how exactly Zach had a meltdown. I want a reenactment. But first, hot chocolate. Want some?"

"Yeah, thanks."

While her mom is busy in the kitchen, Rory gets a text from Jess commenting on Hep Alien's new songs that Rory e-mailed her (many thanks to that nerd she interviewed for that failed article idea prior to covering the Life and Death Brigade). Rory isn't surprised that Jess' favorite was also "Rebecca In The Morning."

---

During Thanksgiving dinner, it's the first real moment Luke and Rory have had alone since she and her mom have reunited.

"So, uh, did...did Jess...?" Luke trails off, voice quiet.

Rory smiles. "Yeah. We're good. Thank you, Luke."

Luke exhales in relief. "Good. Good. She sounds good, right?"

"Yeah. Looks good too. Not as skinny."

"Good. I was always worried, you know?"

"I know." She doesn't say the same, but Luke knows – he has to. They were the only ones that cared.

"So...how's that paper you're working at in Stamford?" Luke segues awkwardly, but Rory takes it.

---

From Rory Gilmore:

*I've just gotten broken up in the worst way possible: through a phone call with his SISTER.*

From Jess Mariano:

*What?*

From Rory Gilmore:

*Oh yeah, Logan's sister called me to say she was sorry about us breaking up!!!*

From Jess Mariano:

*Wow, I mean, I get lack of experience in the relationship department, but...geez. Sorry.*

From Rory Gilmore:

*JERK.*
From Jess Mariano:
I think you might want to upgrade to ASSHOLE.

From Rory Gilmore:
Sorry I should’ve started off with Happy Thanksgiving before complaining about my now ex-boyfriend who treated you like crap.

From Jess Mariano:
I'll live. Happy Thanksgiving to you too. Did Luke cook or are you waiting with the fire department because Liz blew up the stove?

From Rory Gilmore:
We're eating at the inn and your mom apparently turned cranberry sauce into a radioactive color, so she's here with her cohort of strange people.

From Jess Mariano:
Could've been worse. We ate Boston Market and are watching the game. Well, they are. I'm buying ginger ale because I'm sure there will be complaints of stomach aches later and I'm craving vanilla ice cream for my apple pie.

From Rory Gilmore:
Good idea – will get that on the way home. And get Tums – they're for amateurs, but even I will occasionally give in.

From Jess Mariano:
Thanks for the tip.

From Rory Gilmore:
I'm going to Atlantic City for the rest of the weekend – do you want a hat? Shot glass?

From Jess Mariano:
Belated birthday? How about a copy of Boardwalk Empire: The Birth, High Times, and Corruption of Atlantic City.

From Rory Gilmore:
Seriously?

From Jess Mariano:
Nothing will beat Murder Inc., but I'm interested. Got into the habit of picking up books in places where they take place.

From Rory Gilmore:
I tried to do that when I was in Europe the first time, but I ended up reading some too slow or too fast. Great concept, though. You've got a deal.

From Rory Gilmore:
I'm definitely getting you an ugly shirt too.

From Jess Mariano:
I'd rather get a Himalayan salt shot glass with a tacky print.

From Rory Gilmore:
Hahaha done.

Rory smiles a little, feeling a bit less upset and humiliated.
Even though Rory is absolutely 
**horrified** by this new neighborhood, this building, her neighbors, the 
apartment, Paris and Doyle claiming to practice Krav Maga when she's pretty sure it's some twisted 
form of foreplay, Rory is so happy to be back in New Haven.

...Except for when she passes the coffee cart and she's reminded of Logan Huntzberger's existence. 
Although, that becomes difficult when he says *I love you* –

(It only took about *how long* for him to say it back? And – why can't someone tell her she loves her 
and her be *ready for it*)

She cries in a psychologist's office and she thinks maybe ranting and raving for forty-five minutes 
every week may not be such a horrible thing after all. She wonders if she will make his head explode 
– she didn't even mention about her relationship with a girl.

...Maybe she just won't share that one since he was clearly judgmental about her sleeping with a 
married man, which, when she thinks on it, judges herself. But she refuses to let other people judge 
Jess and what she had with her.

It all shouldn't be working – the bouquets of flowers, the food, the *coffee cart*, the waiting around, 
*going to see her mom*, but, well. At the end of the day, she still loves him.

So she agrees to dinner.

"Did you know?" Rory demands on the phone while she's standing outside in the freezing cold. It's 
almost midnight and she still can't get rid of the look on her mom's face as she worried about trusting 
*Luke*, of all people.

"Know what?" Jess asks.


There's a pause. "*What about Luke?*

Rory pauses. This isn't what she thought the response would be. "Okay...you don't know?"

"*I don't know what I know or don't know,*" Jess says, sounding a little irritated. "*Mind cluing me in?*

"...I think you need to call Luke."

"*What is going on?*" Jess asks.

Rory winces. "I'm sorry, I didn't -"

"*Give me a minute.*" Jess hangs up.

Rory stares at her cell phone and considers turning it off in embarrassment, but instead rolls it in her 
hands, contemplating on going back inside. After three minutes, it buzzes.

"Yeah?" Rory greets cautiously.
She hears Jess exhale sharply on the other line. "A fucking kid?"

"Yep."

"I have a cousin."

"You sure do."

"And she's twelve."

"I'm sorry – I thought -"

"I know what you thought," Jess interrupts sharply. She sighs. "Sorry. I may be on better terms with people, but it's not like I'm talking to Luke every day. I talk to him maybe every couple of weeks. So."

"I'm sorry, really, I just – it took so long for them to get together, you know? I don't want anything to mess them up," Rory admits.

"Like a random twelve-year-old popping up?"

"I'm terrible."

"How did Lorelai take it?"

"Amazing, considering, I think. But she's shook up. He hid it for two months."

"I would be impressed, except that's supremely fucked up."

Rory snorts.

"What's really is killing me is that Liz managed to keep it a secret too. But I don't answer all of her calls so I probably missed the ones where she was dying to blab."

Rory bites her lip. "I'm sorry," she repeats.

"It's okay. Who knows when I would've found out if you didn't call me?"

Now Rory feels really guilty. "I'm sure Luke would've told you."

"I'm sure. Look, I have to go, but don't sweat it, okay? I'm over it."

"Okay...bye, Jess."

"Later."

Rory still feels like a royal ass, so she regifts one of Logan's many gifts to her – a few boxes of chocolate – and sends it off to Philly.

(A little over a week later, she gets a picture of her and two of the guys she works with a square of chocolate resting on tongues in open mouths with the attached message: much appreciated, honey bunny. Rory laughs for a while.)

**

"The wedding is on hold for now. I mean, who knows, I'm probably thinking too far ahead, but right now, Luke is overwhelmed and I can't say I blame him, his world has totally tilted on its axis, so – I mean, we'll see. But I figured I would tell you anyway." Her mom breathes, trying to finish her rant
with a smile.

Rory tries to smile back. What's a little while longer for soulmates, right?

**

At first, when Rory heard Paris was made editor of the *Yale Daily News*, she figured that was a perfect fit. Besides, she was able to run *The Franklin* well enough. But now, opening the paper to see *blank spots*, she realizes maybe it wasn't such a good choice.

While Rory is rushing across campus to confront Paris, she gets a call from Jess.

"*Hey, not sure if you've checked out your own paper -*"

"I'm on my way. I can't believe Paris," Rory gripes. She almost slows down for a second. "Wait, do you read *The Yale Daily News*?"

"Yeah – I show you mine, you show me yours. I went back and read what you wrote. That review of that dancer was *scathing*. I shared it with everyone at *Truncheon* and now we're all quoting it. Chris paid a painter to do 'the grace of a drunken dock worker' in calligraphy to hang over his desk."

Rory groans. "You don't even *know* – she threatened me! She wrote 'die, jerk' on my whiteboard on my door!"

Jess laughs. "*I mean, you were ruthless. You ‘regretting how evolution had led to man standing on two feet because it led to that night’? Incredible.*"

"*God. I have to run and try not to murder Paris now."

"*Good luck."

"*Thanks, Jess.* Rory hangs up and nearly growls, picking up the pace.

**

A stressful sixteen hours later, scarfing down the takeout Logan managed to bring to the paper and then dragging her feet to Logan's apartment because hers is too far, she passes out as soon as her head hits the pillow.

She doesn't even have time to dread Friday Night Dinner until she's getting in her car to drive to Hartford, even if Logan tries to kiss her enough to distract her.

And then after a rollercoaster five hours with her grandparents, she's ready to hide away from the world, at least until Monday.

**

"*So…Jess…*" Logan brings up at one point on Sunday afternoon.

They're in bed and Rory was considering on what to order in. She stares at him, trying to read this expression, but he doesn't appear judgmental or angry or upset. He seems curious.

"*What about Jess?*" she asks carefully.

"*I was right, wasn't I? That was the same Jess you said was your one of your previous exes?"
Rory swallows.

"Look, whatever, Ace, no judging from me. I went to all boys boarding schools, I understand shit happens. Finn I think has had at least hooked up with two guys a year since sophomore year."

This is a moment, Rory thinks suddenly. She can be honest – correct him, say it wasn't a phase and it wasn't because she had no options or whatever other experience Logan has known.

But she doesn't know how he'll react to one of her best friends being her ex.

"We were best friends, and then we were a thing, then we had a falling out. That was the first time I'd seen her in a year and a half. I've always missed her, so we're back to what we were. Friends," Rory says.

That's honest enough, right?

"Well, she's definitely seemed less crazy than Paris," Logan offers.

"Everyone is less crazy than Paris, but yeah. In high school, Lane was always jealous of Jess living the punk life."

Logan raises his eyebrows. "You definitely keep interesting company."

"You don't have a leg to stand on, mister," she counters with a smile.

He reaches out to touch her face. "I love you."

She kisses his palm. "I love you too."

**

By the end of the following week, she wants to hide away from the world again, so she's in bed reading while Logan is out to dinner with his father and business associates. She's going to try to fall asleep before he comes in so she can avoid hearing his complaining until he's calmed down.

She's sympathetic – Mitchum is one of the worst people she has the misfortune of knowing, but her week has been crappy and he's not the only one with problems.

Her phone chimes with a text and it's her mom sending a picture of Paul Anka just being cute. Once she closes out of the text, she realizes she hasn't managed to talk to Jess this week beyond a draft of a text stating how much she actually liked the poet featured in the zine last week.

She calls her and just went she thinks she'll catch her voicemail, Jess picks up.

"Congratulations, Editor."

Rory smiles. "Thanks. It's crazy – we were voting for three days and then someone threw my name in the ring, and well, I never thought about it, but I love it so far. Absolutely insane week. How's Trunchon?"

"The same – we manage to struggle something out every week. We're considering on an open house or something in the spring, but we'll see. That would require a lot of cleaning on the boys’ part."

"And not yours?" Rory asks incredulously.

"There's a method to my madness, but they're just slobs."
"Ew, gross."

"Boys," Jess reiterates. "So, how did Paris take it? I know she was cracking up, but I can't see her going down without a fight – wait, please don't tell me you had a duel."

"That's so high school," Rory quips. "And she took it as badly as you can imagine – she kicked me out of the apartment."

"Wait, what?"

"She managed to get all my stuff into the hallway in like, an hour. I'm now living with Logan since I couldn't find any housing," Rory sighs.

"You're living with Logan? Big step," Jess says lightly.

"Did I mention that Yale had no other housing options?" Rory sighs again. "I know, but I love him and it's okay for now."

"Love, huh?"

She winces and she's grateful Jess can't see her. "Yeah."

She can hear Jess hum on the other line. "Maybe I should call Matthew's poet and have him explain love to me. Poets know all about it, right?"

"They're supposed to," Rory answers slowly, not sure how to react to Jess' tone.

Silence.

"Jess?"

She can hear her breathing.

"I know we don't talk about it and this is too late, but, I did. I do. I always will," she tells Jess quietly. "You don't need to torture yourself by talking to that poet," she adds with a forced laugh.

She hears Jess exhale a laugh. "Okay."

There's more she wants to say, that she feels. Like how she created a Facebook page for herself recently and found Truncheon's page, drinking in the few pictures that feature Jess. An arm around Matthew's neck, her other outstretched so her hand blocks her face, jeans slung low and a new pair of Vans on her feet; one of her lying on her back with her legs up against the wall, writing on a notebook above her head with a furrowed brow; a shot of her with her hair pulled into a messy bun, strands framing her face as she's talking to an artist in front of their painting that isn't too horrible.

Rory remembers all the bad: the moody silences, the rage that was barely contained, the lack of communication in the end. She remembers how she felt like she wasn't going to recover when Jess left. She remembers how she tried to hide it all and how it didn't work. She remembers growing out a stupid, impulsive haircut.

But she also remembers the first time she saw Jess wearing a red bra under a shirt with gaping holes in the sleeves. She remembers the way she'd smile at her in a way that made her feel so cherished that her hands ached. She remembers how alive she looked walking down the streets of New York. She remembers sharing her bed, her lips on her neck.

She remembers her best friend in her entirety and sometimes thinks, tries not to think -
"I'm sorry. For all of it."

Rory wipes the tears from her face. "How about you be sorry for your part and I'll be sorry for mine?"

"Works for me."

They breathe together and don't speak for a while. Eventually, Rory hears shuffling on Jess' end, the flipping of pages, the scratch of pencil on paper. Rory goes back to her book. They don't say much for the next hour until she hears Logan struggling to unlock the apartment door and she tells Jess she has to go, but they'll talk soon.

**

Being in Martha's Vineyard, playing house, has made her realize that this could be her life. Can something be comforting and terrifying at the same time? Probably not – she's going insane.

(But she actually doesn't mind cooking. Maybe in a few decades when her life isn't so busy, she can do it on a regular basis.)

**

Just when things are going well – minus her not speaking to Paris, but sometimes the distance can be admittedly a minor relief – she's sitting with a bridal party in which 80% of the room has slept with her boyfriend.

While they were together.

It's simple to break up on the spot after seething and stewing in her own hurt and embarrassment for an hour. She gets a car from New York to New Haven, which was an expensive, terrible choice to make, but she forgets about it when she's sitting at the bar, ordering drink number three.

Pathetic.

Although, she supposes she is not as pathetic as Doyle, who kissed her neck and is wearing her fanciest coat with rhinestones as buttons. She distantly hopes it'll be brought back to her.

When Doyle leaves, her phone rings in her pocket. She loves that she got a dress with pockets. She moves her bags to one arm and she ends up missing the call by the time she grabs her phone. She grins when she sees the latest missed call (the rest are all from stupid Logan).

She returns the call. "Jess! Hi!" she exclaims.

"Hey, Ror, got your text...what are you up to?"

"Oh, y'know, kickin' it. Drinks. A few. Gross pretzels."

Oh, right. She responded to a text Jess had sent earlier and it probably wasn't coherent.

"Doesn't sound very good."

"No. It wasn't. Sucks. Everything sucks. I'm homeless."

"Do you not know where you are?"

"No, I know, but I have no home. Logan's is no more."
"What, a fire burned it down?"

"No, Logan burned it down through a bridal party."

"...Is he murdering people?"

"Fucking," Rory clarifies sharply.

"...I don't think I've ever heard you say that word before. Wait – Logan cheated on you?"

"Oh yeah, an underachiever in school, but he's an overachiever in other aspects."

"Do you have enough money for a cab?"

"Out of money," Rory pouts.

"Okay, do you know where you are?"

"Mmm...Paris'."

"Go there. She'll take you in when she sees you in your current state."

"'Kay, good. Bye."

"Call me when you make it," Jess says quickly.

"Yeah, okay." Rory hangs up and stumbles down the next few blocks to reach the crappy apartment building she thought she had left behind for good.

But Jess is right – Paris listens and takes her in and they make up.

Speaking of -

Her phone rings.

"Hey, Jess, sorry," Rory says in a rush.

"Well, you sound more sober. I'm assuming you made it?"

"It's the stale crackers tiding me over until the Chinese gets here, but. Yeah, I did. Thanks. Sorry about that."


"I recognize that piercing voice anywhere," Jess sighs.

Rory puts Jess on speakerphone. "Paris, say hi to Jess."

"Uh, when the hell did this happen?" Paris demands instead.


"Long story, but we reconnected a couple of months ago," Rory explains. "I was going to tell you, but then you kicked me out."

"Huh. Well. That's something. Jess: are you currently suffering through the stupidity of a man?"
"Well, technically always since we live in an oppressive patriarchy. But if you mean romantically, then no. Sorry. But if you plan on ranting while stuffing your faces with Chinese food, then I’m down. I have leftover lo mein in the fridge and a six pack to steal."

"Great. Oh, by the way, I took your Austen and Bukowski concept and wrote a fifteen page paper on it. Got an A. I did give you proper credit for the original statement."

"I feel honored," Jess says dryly.


Jess sighs.

"You can borrow my copy, but I want it back," Rory says.

"I'll just send you one, Paris. I'm sure you're going to want to eviscerate it."

Paris smiles. "You remember me well."

"And fondly to boot."

There's a series of knocks.

"Thank God! Rory, get the bowls and plates for everyone," Paris announces.

"Everyone?"

"It's just the two of us. We ordered for ten at least."

"Ah, okay, eating feelings."

"Better than drinking them – I think I'm getting a headache," Rory complains.

"Just eat, baby," Jess says with a mouthful of what Rory assumes is food.

"Yeah, food is good."

Paris slams the bags onto the table. "Alright, let's begin."

**

At some point while they're breaking into the second container of lo mein, Rory realizes her phone is going to die.

"My phone is dying, we have to go, but thanks, Jess," Rory says while simultaneously wondering where her charger is – she thinks it's buried at the bottom of her bag, still by the door.

"G'night, guys. I still say go for the pizza."

"I knew I liked you," Paris says.

"Hah, you too. Later." She hangs up.

It's silent for a minute as they eat.
"So...friends with Jess again?"

"Yep."

"It's like we're back in high school."

"A little, but. We're different. She's...and I'm..."

"Yeah. Well, I always liked her, even if she pissed me off with her mediocre taste. And I do actually want to read that book."

"I'll give it to you when we're not covered in grease."

"Deal."

They eat.

"I say we repaint," Paris states.

"Did you ever paint?"

"No, Doyle doesn't believe in improving someone else's property."

"Men!"

"Yeah, men."

**

She understands Logan. He thought they were broken up, he thought the fight they had in the bar was their breakup scene. So he didn't see it as cheating, sleeping with all those girls, he saw it as a means of soothing his pain and loneliness.

She understood when she agreed to go home with him and she understood when she got into bed with him and fell asleep. Now in the morning, her stomach queasy and her head aching from the residual hangover and the lack of caffeine she had yesterday, she realizes that she understands him, but that doesn't mean her feelings have changed.

She wasn't broken up with him. She feels that he cheated. And those feelings and perceptions win out over his logical train of thinking. So she's quiet when she slips out of bed, packs a few bags of clothes, changes, and leaves for Stars Hollow.

**

"Hey, this is a surprise!" her mom says when Rory enters the diner.

"A good one?"

"Always, kid. What's wrong? You have mild hangover face."

"What makes you think something's wrong? And how do you know that?"

"Because you inherited the unfortunate furrowed brow look. How bad?"

Rory gives up. "Logan and I are done. Put down a change of address."

"What? What happened? The wedding was that bad?"
"Oh, you don't even know – that time apart where I thought we were taking some time? He assumed we were totally broken up and proceeded to sleep with his sister's entire bridal party, pretty much. Oh wait, I'm sorry, he slept with some and only ‘fooled around' with the others. My mistake."

"Oh my God, Rory, I'm so sorry," her mom says, reaching out to touch her arm.

"Yeah, me too. I just...need time away. I came back home with him last night, but I realized this morning that just because he thought he didn't cheat on me doesn't negate the fact that I feel like he did. How could I trust him again? If we fight, am I just going to expect he'll go off and sleep with a handful of people?"

Her mom frowns. "I'm sorry," she says again.

"Yeah, well, I'm here to not think about it and you're the queen of distraction."

"That I am. Movie?"

Rory smiles at her gratefully.

---

At one point during a gruesome scene in *Final Destination 3*, Rory texts Jess.

From Rory Gilmore:
*Thanks again for the last night. I'll call you later to detail the rest of the night, but summary: Logan came, we temporarily got back together for a few hours, and now I'm in Stars Hollow and will definitely finalize the breakup.*

From Jess Mariano:
*Oy.*

From Rory Gilmore:
*Amen sister friend.*

---

She ignores Logan's calls for a while, but eventually, she answers.

"Hi," she says.

"Hey – where the hell are you?"

"I went to Stars Hollow to visit my mom for a couple of days."

"You could've told me, Ace. Left a note, called, something."

"Yeah, I know, I should have."

"I mean, I wake up, and you're gone."

Rory considers apologizing again, but her voice is caught in her throat. Tears spring up in her eyes.

"Rory?"

She sniffs. "I'm sorry, Logan. I can't."
"Can't what?"

She inhales shakily, looks up at the ceiling to fight off her tears. "Do this – I know where you're coming from and I get it, but I just...I can't forgive you. The thought of coming back to that apartment makes me sick and I'm – I'm sorry. I mean it this time, Logan. I'm sorry, it's done." Tears spill down her cheeks.

Logan doesn't say anything for a while. "Okay," he says quietly. "I am sorry," he adds.

She knows he means it, that's why this hurts so much. "I know. Me too."

That's all that can be said, really.

(What she does, though, is take out the huge tub of ice cream in the freezer and cry her heart out, playing Damien Rice's *O* since it's still as cathartic crying to it as it was three years ago.)

**

"You okay, Ror?"

Rory thought she did a decent job muffling her sobs, but she supposes even with the expansion of the house, she still did a poor job.

"Yeah, I'm okay."

Her mom smiles. "Want to get into the *Saw* movies?"

Rory groans, but laughs.

**

Texting is one of the best inventions, Rory concludes as she communicates with Logan with coordinating her move out. He's generous enough to hire movers (without her permission, but her bank account didn't need the expense) to bring her stuff back to Paris' apartment.

Thankfully, Paris and Doyle have kept future sex acts out of the shared living space.

She hears through the grapevine that the Life and Death Brigade are in the midst of planning their most insane stunt yet – something involving parachuting off a plane and water rafting somewhere in South America. But that's not her concern, not anymore. She considers reaching out to ask questions, to make sure, but that's not her place anymore.

**

On her desk in the newsroom, Rory finds mail addressed to her, with Logan's address on the front. Jess' name is on the return address.

*Just checked the mail yesterday and saw this, sorry.* – Logan

She shoots him a text thanking him and opens the letter that details the open house Truncheon is hosting in a week. Once she's done for the day, she calls Jess.

"Hey, I just got the invite for the open house – I was wondering when I'd be blessed," Rory says.

"Ah, fuck, sorry, I sent it before everything."
"It's fine. He left it on my desk at the paper. So, I'm definitely coming and save room on a couch for me."

Jess laughs. "Okay, deal. Guess I'm having a full house."

"What do you mean?"

"Luke and April are coming. Guess the kid has some sort of school trip in the area and they're stopping in."

"Oh."

"What?"

"Nothing, I mean. It's nothing. Sorry."

"Oh, you had a mean thought didn't you. Let's hear it."

Rory sighs. "Okay, fine. I thought ‘everyone and their grandma gets to officially meet April except my own mother.’ But you're not just anyone – you're her cousin, so. I'm a jerk."

"Lorelai still hasn't met April?"

"Nope. Want to speak to your uncle about that?" Rory asks dryly.

"Worth a shot. He's an idiot."

"I think most men are."

"I think most everyone is, but men in particular reach special heights."

"Please don't tell me you've been talking to Paris behind my back – that's so something she'd say."

"You know she searched through your phone and found my number. We've been talking about Jonathan Safran Foer for the last week."

Rory groans. "Geez."

"Sorry, your friend is my friend now."

"How many is that now?"

Jess laughs. Rory has never heard her laugh so much when they were in high school and she's hooked. "I know. I'm a social butterfly now."

"I think I definitely have to get you a shirt now."

"I'll burn it."

"I'm excited to see you."

Jess exhales a laugh. "Me too. Wait until you see the hair."

"What do you mean?"

"If you're lucky you can park out front, but if not, there's a bodega – corner store – three blocks away with a picture of pancakes on the window that you can park in front of and just say Jess sends
her love."

"Okay…are the pancakes any good?"

"Absolutely not, but Juan makes a killer bacon egg and cheese."

Rory shakes her head. "I'll trust your judgment."

"You should. Seventeen years in New York City? High standards on that front."

"And everything else?"

"As long as I'm not violently ill afterwards, I'm excellent." Rory hears Jess speaking to someone. "Gotta go, something's up with our printer guy." Jess scoffs. "And Matthew sends his greetings."

"Greetings?"

"You'll meet him soon. Bye."

"Bye." Rory smiles when she hangs up, considering on what to wear for this upcoming trip.

**

Even though Rory and Jess had been talking for months, Rory is still nervous when she manages to grab a spot in front of Truncheon. She had never been to Philadelphia and she thinks she rather likes it, from what she's managed to see. One day she'd love to come back and do proper tours of monuments and places, but for now, she has to stop fixing nonexistent hair flyaways and enter. She takes a deep breath before walking in and when she sees Jess wearing a blazer of all things and straight hair in a messy bun, she's almost unrecognizable, but then she realizes the shirt under the blazer is a Dinosaur Jr. album cover and she's wearing scoffed combat boots and her smile is still the same.

"Hey," Jess greets, "How was I-95? I heard about some asshole in a Ferrari going ninety and then hitting some cheap Honda Civic and...Italy did not win against Japan."

Rory grins and her nerves disappear.

**

She finally gets to meet Chris and Matthew who ask a lot of questions about Jess, but Rory gives vague answers with teasing smiles tacked on. She meets a few of the artists who have hung their work and even though they're a little loopy, she appreciates their passion.

She sneaks looks at Jess, who flits arounds with a beer in her hand, the most social Rory has ever seen her. It's strange to see her engage with strangers, but ultimately she's proud of her, she's so proud.

The only thing that distracts her is seeing Luke with April.

Jess catches her staring at him. "Yeah, there's a definite, 'Jess Mariano, this is your life' vibe here today."

Rory stops looking at April and smiles at Jess. "It looks great. I'm really happy for you."

Jess nudges her with her shoulder and says, "Hey, Luke."
Rory tries to act naturally, taking in every detail of April to dutifully report back to her mom and she can't but feel so bitter about the timing. But it's not this kid's fault – it's not anyone's fault.

She barely listens to April babble though as she watches Jess hand Luke a copy of her book and they argue about what looks like a check, but ultimately, Luke takes it and hugs Jess tightly. Rory smiles through a lump in her throat.

Rory and Jess say their goodbyes and Jess looks to Rory. "This was your first time meeting her, right?"

Rory nods.

"And your mom still hasn't, officially."

Rory shakes her head.

Jess rolls her eyes. "He's a fucking idiot." She nods her head to the other end of the store to where the beer is. "Come on. You need a drink and I need a refill."

**

"He changed it up on us. He wasn't supposed to premiere new material tonight," Jess points out.

"It wasn't bad," Matthew argues.

"It was rambling," Chris says.

"It was a little rambling…"

"And what was that whole part about desiring Golda Meir?"

"Please tell me that was symbolic," Jess says pained, which makes Rory smile.

A beat of silence. "I'll talk to my poet," Matthew relents.

"Hey, we're hitting that bar that we're not going to call 'Cedar Bar Redux.' You coming?"

Jess turns to look at her, eyes drifting to her book in Rory's hands and shaking her head. "You know you don't have to read it again."

"I know I don't."

Jess sighs. "We're going to a bar across the street. Do you need to be fed first?"

"I can consume all the peanuts in the bar and be fine," Rory says, putting Jess' book reverently back on the bookshelf.

"Atta girl."

"So, what did you think besides Matthew's poetry?" Chris asks when they make their way outside.

"I love it here. I'm almost converted to working here, but I'd miss working on my school paper too much."

"Yale needs your definitive talents. Okay, so this bar is unimaginatively titled 'A Bar,' but the owners are considering us letting us buy into it," Chris explains.
It's a few steps up from a dive bar, but there's a huge neon pineapple on the exposed brick wall across from the bar that stretches all the way to the back.

"I love it," Rory announces. "You know, why change the name? It's simple and sweet."

"Because we must exert our influence into this enterprise," Jess says like she's quoting someone. She flags down the bartender with a flirtatious wave.

"I think if Matthew was nurtured the way he should've been, he probably could've been way more successful in life," Chris snorts.

"Could say that about a lot of people," Jess says dryly, watching the bartender fill their glasses with draft beer. She glances at Rory. "One day I'll have Matthew and Paris meet. They can bond over argyle sweaters and the beauty of The Iliad."

"Did someone say The Iliad?"

Jess groans. "For fuck's sake!"

Matthew shuffles over and takes the free seat next to Rory. "You mock, but it's a beautiful story."

Jess pretends to gag before taking a long pull from her beer.

"If you guys ever make your way to New Haven, I have the person for you," Rory says, patting Matthew on the shoulder.

Jess raises an eyebrow.

"Sorry, Paris and Doyle are still madly in love." Rory leans in and says in a lower voice, "Paris would eat Matthew alive. There would be nothing left of him."

"Or she could inspire him," she counters with an amused smirk. "Come on, drink your beer. It's from a local brewery."

"Heaven's nectar," Matthew adds.

"Never say that again," Chris and Jess say at the same time.

Rory takes a tentative sip. "I love this bar," she repeats again. "I'd say it's a heaven's nectar," she adds with a grin to Matthew.

Matthew points to Rory and stares at Jess. "I like her. She's so nice. How? Are we sure this is the same person that wrote that ballet review?"

"Rory's got a sassy streak in her," Jess says.

"Just like Jess has a kind streak," Rory chirps.

"Ruining my street cred."

"What street cred – you hang out with artists who talk about getting it on with Golda Meir."

Jess grimaces. "Can't argue with that."

"Yeah, let's not go down that road of discussion, because nothing brings a party down more than discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict," Matthew says, finally getting a beer for himself.
"Cheers to that," Chris says. "Also, free Palestine."

"Free Palestine," everyone repeats, clinking their beers together.

**

"I love this bar!" Rory says loudly over the music, but also because she's a little drunk. "These loaded tater tots are amazing."

Jess takes a cheese covered tater tot and pop it in her mouth, sucking the sauce off her finger. Rory flushes. "I know, right? Sometimes I just order this for lunch or dinner."

"Excellent hangover cure as well," Matthew adds, over enunciating his words.

"But you need to try the chicken and waffle grilled cheese," Chris adds, waiving down the bartender.

"Do you want her to become sick?"

"Oh, Matthew," Jess sighs. "Rory's stomach is made of iron. There is nothing that could ruin it."

"Founder's Day Punch," Rory says.

"What's that?"

"If you ever come back to Stars Hollow, I'll show you."

"I'm sure I'll make my way for a hot second."

Rory beams, taking a tater tot.

**

Rory is very grateful that the bar is only across the street, so she only has to stumble so far. Thankfully, Chris is steady enough to hold onto and Jess is holding her hand.

"I love that bar."

"Best bar."

"Very best."

"I'm gonna put Cedar Bar Redux in teeny tiny writing under the sign," Matthew states.

"You fuckin' wish," Chris says.

"G'night, you degenerates," Jess says tiredly, walking ahead of the boys and wrapping an arm around Rory's waist.

"Night!" Rory says.

Rory passes out in Jess' bed, but before she does, she snorts, remembering how familiar this is. Some things really do come in full circle.

**

Rory wakes up with a minor headache, but she's able to untangle herself from Jess' sheets and make her way downstairs with her hair pulled into a messy bun, wearing yesterday's pants and a threadbare
Hanes shirt that was left for her by the foot of the bed.

She can hear tinkering and shot conversation in the kitchen and Rory watches from the doorway as Jess cracks eggs against the edge of the counter with her phone tucked in between her ear and her shoulder. She's wearing cut offs that Rory never in a million years thought Jess would own – she seems straight out of a California beach babe closet – but they work in a number of ways.

"Don't worry about it, Liz. No biggie." Pause. "Yes, I swear. I'll send you the article on the open house when it's out." Pause again. Jess begins adding shredded cheese to the eggs on the stove, stirring. "Yeah, I met her...what's there to say? Seems nice, I guess. Nerd for sure." A beat and then Jess snorts. "I know, I asked him the same question. Look, I gotta go, I'm cooking." Pause. "Bye," she says finally, a little flatter, colder. She lets go of the spatula and removes the phone from her shoulder, tossing it on the counter.

"I sent Liz the invitation too late intentionally," Jess says without turning around. "Didn't want to risk it."

Jess has never asked, so Rory never tells her when that she does see Liz, she just seems like an airhead than anything else; not harmful by any means. But it doesn't matter how much better Liz may be than she was a couple of years ago. The damage was done.

"You don't have to explain yourself to me," Rory says.

Jess cranes her head to look at Rory, who smiles.

"Eggs are pretty much done. Grab a plate from the cabinet to the left," Jess says, nodding above her.

They sit across from each other at a round, wooden table that has seen better days. At one point, Chris comes in and begs with puppy eyes for Jess to make him breakfast. Jess is unmoved and leans back in her chair, stretching her legs so she rests them on top of Rory's thighs.

Rory lifts her hand to grab her ankles like she used to and just stops herself in time.

"You're mean," Chris pouts.

"Rory is my guest. You're my lazy roommate. Make your own."

"But yours are so good," he whines.

"You shouldn't have shown off your ability to cook," Rory says to Jess.

"I managed to hide it for four months. Matthew blew my cover."

"Please. I'll buy you two rounds of drinks."

"Deal, but one of them better be a cocktail."

He gapes at her. "Oh, come on."

"Think about how good my eggs are."

A few seconds.

"Deal," Chris grumbles.

Jess smiles brightly and gets to her feet with grace. Rory watches her cook for a minute until she
remembers Chris is there. She sneaks a glance at him, but he's already staring at her with a serious expression.

Rory tilts her head to the side and furrows her brow.

Chris briefly looks to Jess then back at Rory.

Rory opens her mouth, intending to say something along the lines of, seriously? or are you kidding me? or Jess has been taking care of herself her entire life – what makes you think she'd appreciate this?

But then she realizes that Jess wouldn't, but that doesn't mean she shouldn't have people looking out for her.

Rory shuts her mouth and doesn't know how to come across as reassuring, so she just stares back and smiles faintly.

"Hey, Chris? Stop being as subtle as a bat to the head and grab another bottle of seltzer."

Chris winces and rubs his neck, but does as he's told.

Jess looks to Rory and shakes her head, rolls her eyes.

Big brother, Rory mouths to her.

I know, she mouths back.

There's a high-pitched groan coming from the hallway. "Jess…"

Jess throws her head back to shake her head at the sky. "Chris, get me two more eggs."

"And what are you going to charge him?"

"Three rounds since he's more desperate than you are."

"Cruel."

"Resourceful."

Rory shakes her head and finishes her eggs.

**

They part ways an hour later, with Jess hugging her by her car.

"When I'm done with school for the year...we can plan something?" Rory says by Jess' ear.

"I can give you your nerdy tour of Philly," Jess offers.

Rory almost offers Stars Hollow, but refrains. "I'm going to be planning that tour, missy."

Jess laughs a little. "Let me know when you get home."

"I will."

Rory steps back and with the sun streaming through the trees and Jess' hair is messy and starting to curl again. Her eyes look close to green.
"Are you happy?" Rory asks quietly.

Rory has seen Jess in a lot of ways, but never as this soft. "Yeah, I am," she says.

Eventually, Rory is driving back to Connecticut and she can't stop landing back on the thought that she wanted to kiss Jess. But what is odd to her, is that there's no guilt or shame or anger or anything negative. It's simple.

Well, not completely. There's still the fact that she's recently left a long term relationship and she doesn't know how Jess feels after all this time. Damage was done on both sides, but Rory is wise enough to recognize how deep her cuts went.

It's a long drive and she considers it during long stretches of highway. When she makes it back to New Haven, she's not any closer to figuring anything out, but there's time.

**

"I saw pictures – open house looked decent," Paris says while she's in the middle of planning her schedule for the week. "You're in the background of a few."

"It was great. They have some really talented people."

"Uh huh."

"What?" Rory asks with a sigh.

"Nothing. I think it's very nice you went to a city in a state over three hours away to support your friend. You set the bar high, Rory Gilmore."

"I'm ignoring what you're insinuating," Rory announces.

"All I'm saying is – would you do that for me?"

"I would do it for you and Lane and anyone else I really cared about."

"Okay, but would you be constantly texting me after being together nonstop for forty-eight hours?"

*Definitely not,* comes to mind, but Rory doesn't confirm that.

"Thought so," Paris says smugly, getting to her feet. "I'm making some sort of pasta with chicken in it for dinner – want some?"

"Yeah, sure," Rory mutters, defeated.

"Okay, you owe me seven bucks as chipping in for the groceries and my labor."

Rory rolls her eyes and reaches into her bag for her wallet.

**

It was supposed to be a celebration of Patty's engagement (how she managed to sneak another man into her life without anyone knowing is beyond everyone's comprehension), and before Rory realizes it, her mom is going on stage and saying something about Miss Patty being on her 'gazillionth' marriage while she'll never get married.

Rory has seen her mother drunk on various occasions, but never like this.
But after a year of being with Logan and hanging out with his crew, she knows the drill of trying to ply her mom with coffee and whatever random food she can find, but in the end, by the time she and her dad (why was he even invited in the first place?) make it home, her mom is passed out cold.

Her hand twitches to grab her phone and text Jess, but why bring back potentially awful memories?

Her phone suddenly vibrates and for a second, she thinks it's the universe making her thoughts reality, but she doesn't recognize the number – mostly because it's an international one. With dread forming in her gut, she picks up. "Hello?"

She immediately knows its bad service, but she can recognize who's calling. "Colin? What's wrong?"

"Logan – he's – plane...hurt...sent to New York," he cuts in and out.

"Which hospital?" Rory demands, already considering logistics of driving there with parking in the waiting room to do her work and the awkward potential of sitting with the entire Huntzberger clan.

"Columbia-Presbyterian."

"I'm on my way." She hangs up and life suddenly seems on fast forward, letting her father know about going to New York and zooming down I-95 South.

**

"How is he? Is he okay?" Rory demands once she sees Colin and Finn, who look like utter messes. "What about about his family – did you talk to them? What about Mitchum?"

But of course, they devolve into jokes and laughs, except, when Colin says, "And even then, adopting as a gay couple is never easy," Rory loses it.

"What the hell is wrong with you two? Your best friend is lying unconscious in a hospital and you don't even care!"

"Rory."

"Why they hell aren't you two lying unconscious in there, huh?"

"Come on."

"You don't care, because if you did, you wouldn't be like this. You couldn't. You're supposed to have his back. You're supposed to watch out for each other on these stupid trips of yours. But no, everything's a big joke. Everything's hilarious. You're useless, so just go home – both of you. I can't stand to look at you. And if you ever joke about being gay again, you're going to wish you fell off a cliff."

They leave with their tail between their legs, but it still takes a while for her anger to go away.

She lies to doctors and nurses about her relationship with Logan because she's selfish and needs to know if he's going to be okay. Once she manages to find an outlet to charge her phone in and takes a seat in a chair, she realizes that she hasn't had a proper conversation with Logan that didn't involve the paper in weeks. And why is she the only one in the waiting room – where is his family? Honor must still be on her honeymoon since Rory recalls it being weeks long, but what about his mom? His dad? Anyone else?
She receives a text from Jess.

From Jess Mariano:
*Please tell me Miss Patty's future husband made an appearance at his own engagement party.*

From Rory Gilmore:
*Can you talk?*

From Jess Mariano:
*In a boring meeting. I can pretend it's an emergency.*

Rory Gilmore:
*You don't have to pretend.*

Her phone rings immediately.

"*What happened?*

"Logan's hurt badly. He got into an accident being an idiot in South America somewhere and I'm the only one here. I don't understand where his family is. I mean," she drops her voice to a whisper. "We're broken up, I'm not even his girlfriend and I'm here."

"*What hospital are you at? Columbia?*

"Yeah."

"Well, Presbyterian is the best New York has to offer, so he should be okay. Jesus Christ. How long have you been there?"

"A few hours. I barely slept. And they're not telling me anything because I'm not family."

"Have you tried reaching his family?"

"I'm going to call his sister now – she's definitely still on her honeymoon, but his friends Colin and Finn have reached out to his parents and his mom is in some sort of rehab on the other side of the country and nothing from Mitchum."


"I gotta go, but thanks for listening. Sorry if I freaked you out."

"It's fine. Hopefully it's not as bad as you're thinking. And hey, maybe if you want some answers, you may want to take advantage of your friend Paris Geller. I think she has the power to make HIPAA seem like a pesky nuisance."

"...I'm going to call Paris. But I'll text you."

Jess laughs a little. "*Bye.*"

Jess is right – Paris Geller is a force of nature and finds out what Rory's been dying to for the last half a day. But it's still so serious that when she's told that Logan is finally awake, she feels dizzy with relief.

"Rory...what are you doing here?" Logan asks, groggy.

"Tweedle-dee and tweedle-dumb called me. I wanted to make sure you were okay and – is this
okay? I can go -"

"Are you sure – what about the paper, school?"

Rory tries to smile. "I have my laptop. I can stay on top of my schoolwork. And Bill can run the paper for a while."

"I don't want you to fall behind."

"Logan, it's okay. Relax." She reaches out to briefly touch his shoulder.

"It's not okay. I was showing off. I knew it wasn't safe from that cliff. I was so drunk, I was lucky I pulled my chute at all."

"But you're going to be fine. You're in the best hospital in the world and you're going to make a full recovery."

Logan sighs. "You really don't have to be here."

"I know. I am anyway. Or, as long as you want me to be."

Logan smiles as best he can with his bruised face. "I've missed you, Ace."

She's missed him too. "Get some rest. You're going to need it. I'll be outside. I have a few calls to make."

Rory goes through her contacts to reach Honor.

"He's just not coming," Honor says matter-of-factly.

"...What?"

"It's the Life and Death Brigade thing. He's very against it."

"But he was in the Life and Death Brigade."

"Yes, but he feels that he knew when to grow up and accept responsibility and that Logan doesn't. He wanted his precious boy done with that by now, so he's boycotting."

"He's boycotting his injured son? Logan had emergency surgery!" Rory snaps.

"Hypocrisy runs very deep in the Huntzberger family. Anyhow, forget it. I'm sure Logan isn't expecting him. Okay so, I'll call later when I have more flight information."

"Okay...bye..."

She's a woman possessed when she takes Logan's cell phone from his nightstand and goes through his contacts, finding his father listed as 'Mitchum "Douche Master" Huntzberger,' which almost makes her laugh.

But she calls and bites his head off, calling him an incredibly selfish, narcissistic ass and demanding he get himself to New York now. She's never thought she'd be in such a position – yelling at an adult, but she's now an adult too and sometimes, adults act like goddamn babies.

But what really surprises her is the fact that a few hours later, Mitchum does come – he swallowed his pride and came for his injured son. Even people set in their ways can change.
Hopefully this is the last major catastrophe to happen.

**

Logan is eventually released from the hospital and Rory offers her help in between her finals, but Logan insists he's fine and he'll force Colin and Finn to play Miss Nightingale for a while. Rory also offers to send Paris since she keeps complaining about wanting hands on experience.

"Thanks Rory, you're – I really appreciate it."

"'The most I can do for my friend is simply be his friend,'" Rory quotes.

"Thoreau? Nice."

"I try."

"So...friends?" Logan ventures cautiously.

She smiles. "Friends. Definitely."

Logan smiles up at her. "Well, I won't keep you from studying."

"No one can do that, but yeah, I need to study, I have a few more finals to go. If you need anything, let me know."

"I don't suppose that means taking Paris back?"

"Nope, because I don't trust Colin and Finn."

"Fair enough. Good luck."

Rory hugs Logan gently and only for a second, which prompts him to say, "I'm fine, you can put your back into it," before she leaves him in his apartment.

**

Despite checking on Logan's health, her routine normalizes. Sure, there's Mitchum taking credit for her accomplishments, but she harnesses her anger and spite into her finals and making sure the paper is perfect.

Rory's phone vibrates in the middle of one of her journalism classes, in which they're discussing their final papers. She had gotten an A, so her attention has been in and out of class. She takes a peak at the caller ID to make sure it's not her mom, but she's surprised to see it's Jess.

She brings the phone to her chest and steps out of the classroom.

"Jess?" she answers quietly. "What's going on?"

Silence save for what sounds like wind.

"Jess? Are you there?"

"Here."

Her voice is flat.

"What's wrong?" Rory asks immediately.
There's a long silence until: "Liz is fucking pregnant."

Rory has no idea what to say to that. "Where are you?" she asks instead.

"I'm driving. I'll be in New York in an hour."

Rory checks her watch. "I can be at Grand Central in a little over two. Wait for me?"

She thinks Jess will decline, but eventually, she responds, "Okay." And hangs up.

Rory rushes back in the classroom and gathers her belongings. "Sorry, emergency," she says to the professor, before running out.

First, she calls her mom while she's rushing to her apartment. "Hey, I'm heading into New York. Something happened with Jess."

"Is everything okay?"

"She found out her mom is pregnant and I think it...it's bringing up a lot of bad things." When her mom doesn't respond, when Rory figures out that this is just another thing Luke isn't sharing with her, Rory says, "I have to figure out when the next train is. I'll text you along the way."

"Be safe," her mom only says.

She runs up the stairs to her apartment and unlocks the door in record time. Thankfully, Paris and Doyle are both out, so there are no questions asked as she throws her wallet and keys into her purse and changes into more comfortable shoes before running out again to the New Haven Metro North train station.

**

(She fumbles with her phone the entire time, considering texting Jess, but she knows she won't answer.)

**

Rory sighs in relief when she walks into the main concourse of Grand Central Station and sees Jess standing in the middle by the clock. Except once she gets closer, her relief falters when she takes in Jess' outfit: fishnets, scuffed combat boots, ripped shorts, a shirt with too many holes and a red bra.

She's straight out of Rory's memories of 2002 except Jess looks...closed off. Unapproachable. Rory has experienced that with Jess before, but the harsh black around her eyes makes her scarier.

Maybe this is how it was when she was fifteen, sixteen, days before moving to Stars Hollow.

Jess stares at her with a sharp gaze. Rory can't see the green in her eyes. "Ready?"

Rory swallows, tightens her grip on her bag, and nods.

"Good. We're going to Brooklyn." Jess says as she walks into the crowd, not checking to see if Rory catches up.

When she was last in New York with Jess, she remembers being in awe of how Jess navigated through the city. Now, she's struggling to keep up and wonders if she made a mistake coming, except Jess swipes her metrocard twice so Rory can get through and stays close on the subway. They transfer after a few stops to another line and stop by stop, the crowd changes. Jess doesn't blink.
When Rory isn't expecting it, Jess takes Rory's arm and leads her out of the subway car. From what Rory's seen, subways are always dirty, but it seems they're especially so outside of Manhattan.

The streets are dark and even though New Haven isn't exactly the best area, Rory is scared, but she still doesn't say anything as they walk quickly straight, then making a right, then a left, then straight. At one point, Jess reaches into her pocket and takes out a tube of lipstick and applies it without losing stride.

Rory doesn't think she's ever seen Jess with lipstick – didn't even think she owned it.

There is graffiti on the walls of buildings and they seem abandoned. But Jess walks with purpose to a nondescript door and bangs on it five times in a pattern.

The door opens at once. The sudden light makes Rory wince. Jess looks heart-stopping.

The man – tall, black, and intricate tattoos on his large arms – takes a look at Jess and smiles. "Well, well. Long time."

"Been out of state," Jess says. She reaches into her back pocket and takes out her pack of cigarettes.

"I'm good. Just quit a few days ago."

"Congratulations."

"Yeah, we'll see how long it lasts." He steps aside. "Enjoy." He finally looks to Rory. "Friend?" he questions, glancing to Jess.

"No," Jess answers, taking Rory's hand and leading her in.

There's even more graffiti on the ways and on the floor as they walk down a narrow corridor. They go down a set of stairs and start to see more people with beer cans and cups in their hands.

She can hear the bass thumping through the walls.

She's not wearing anything close to what other people are wearing, but it seems like people are too drunk or high to notice her. Jess opens a black door with spray painted with 'DRINK' on it. Inside, there are kegs and buckets of canned beer. Three guys seemed to be parked inside, playing cards.

"You want something?" Jess asks, taking out her wallet.

Not at all, but Rory picks out a beer she recognizes from the closest bucket and Jess grabs a solo cup. "How much for a bomb shot?" she asks.

The one wearing a cap looks at her. He slowly grins and adjusts his cap. "Mariano, Jess." He reaches into his back and pulls out a bottle of vodka.

"Darling, you know I don't drink that," Jess says, using the keg to pour herself beer.

"Still Mommy's drink of choice?" He searches through his bag again. Rory hates this guy. "Whiskey?"

"Label broken?"

He hands her the bottle and she inspects it before twisting the cap off.

"Jess," Rory starts as a warning.
"Aw, Joshua wouldn't drug me. Not after all the tests I let him copy off me. Right, babe?" She brings the bottle to her mouth and takes a pull.

"You left at an inopportune time. Got held back and I dropped out," he quips.

"Sorry, got sent to the boondocks."

He nods to Rory. "Who's this?"

"Girlfriend."

Rory prides herself in not reacting.

He raises his eyebrows. "Looks expensive."

"Fuck off," Rory snaps before she can stop herself. Jess looks at her with a hint of surprise.

He laughs. "Pretty with a bite. Nice one." He looks to Jess, shaking his head at the cash in her hand. "You're good, girl. Nice to see you."

"You too," Jess says with the most warmth she's shown all night. She takes a longer pull from the bottle and hands it back with a cough.

Rory looks back for a moment and sees Joshua nod at her.

"Seems like you had a friend before me," Rory says, attempting to joke.

"I took his v-card, so he finds that a bonding experience," Jess answers without looking at her.

Rory had planned on nursing her beer, but she cracks open the can and takes a pull, grimacing at its temperature.

The music gets louder the further they down the hallway until Jess opens a door and Rory is tempted to slap her hands over her ears. There's a band playing and it's just total noise. Bodies are everywhere and flailing and Jess folds into the crowd, downing half her cup in one go, but beer still spills out onto her hand and falling on the already dirty floor.

Rory loses track of time, just trying to move along with the crowd so she doesn't topple over. She watches Jess thrash violently, unlike the way she did in the handful of shows they went to in high school (the last one being at the Distillers in which Rory dared to lean against her).

Rory finishes her beer just so she doesn't have to worry about spilling on herself. She considers fighting her way out of the crowd a dozen times, but she's afraid if she leaves, Jess will be swallowed whole.

At one point, Jess takes someone else's cup and is about to bring it to her mouth when Rory grabs her wrist. "Jess! Talk to me."

"Why? What's the point?" Jess snaps with venom.

"You don't know what's in that," Rory says, taking that from Jess.

"You paid too much attention in DARE."

"Fine, then I guess it's peachy if I just have some," Rory retorts, bringing the cup to her mouth, but Jess' eyes widen and Jess grabs the cup back, most of it sloshing out of the cup and onto her arm and
the floor. "Please, Jess," Rory says, too quiet that there's no way Jess could hear over the yelling and music.

"What's the point?" Jess says again.

"Because it has to be better than this." Rory gestures around as best she can with the limited space she has.

Jess hands the half-empty cup to a stranger and grips Rory's hand with her sticky one. It's a battle to push through, but Jess was always strong and had no qualms about elbowing and shoving. Once they're through, Jess leads her down the hallway to the bathroom.

"I'll stand outside," Rory says, shifting on her feet. There were times she shared a stall with one or two girls when out, but even though she's seen Jess without clothes entirely, it doesn't feel right.

Jess shuts the door and quickly, Rory gets her phone and shoots out texts.

From Rory Gilmore:
With Jess. She's upset. I might be here all night. Text when I can.

From Lorelai Gilmore:
You're safe?

From Rory Gilmore:
Yeah, we're okay. Just at a bar.

A lie won't hurt.

From Lorelai Gilmore:
Keep me posted along the way and let me know when you're heading back.

From Rory Gilmore:
I will, love you.

Then, she sends another to Paris to let her know she won't be coming home. Then:

From Rory Gilmore:
I'm with Jess in NY. I'll try to get her back to you tomorrow.

From Matthew Steinman:
Oh thank god. She just walked out it was really scary. Her phone is off too.

From Rory Gilmore:
It's a family thing.

From Matthew Steinman:
How is she?

Rory bites her lip when she hears the toilet flush.

From Rory Gilmore:
She'll be better.

From Matthew Steinman:
OK. Thanks for letting us know.
Rory puts her phone away when Jess comes out of the bathroom with bruised knuckles, which she's rubbing. Rory gently takes one of them as they go through the hallway and up the stairs. Jess is catatonic.

"You have a good life, Jess," the man guarding the door says.

Jess' shoulders hunch a little in reflex. Maybe it was like a shot to the back.

They walk back the way they came – at least, Rory hopes so.

From random streetlights, Rory can see Jess' eye makeup up is smudged halfway down her cheeks and her lipstick has left nothing but a stain.

Rory recognizes the entrance to the subway, but Jess keeps on walking.

And walking.

And walking.

The streets become fuller with people and Rory feels a bit more comfortable, but Jess has crossed her arms over her chest and Rory is power-walking in order to keep up with Jess' quick strides.

A bridge is visible as they walk and Rory isn't sure which one it is – Brooklyn? Williamsburg? – and Jess seems to be planning to walk across it.

Rory opens her mouth, ready to call out her name, but she's gone this far without anything awful happening, so she just closes her mouth and follows her up the path and then they're on the bridge.

Halfway across, Jess stops and looks out at the East River.

"I used to walk this bridge so many times once they rebuilt this walkway. It was stupid since where was I going to go? Brownsville? Bed-Stuy? Queens? Long Island? It led fucking nowhere. So I would just go back the way I came. I thought about finding a way to jump over and swim, but obviously that was stupid too."

Rory holds her breath, afraid to make a noise.

"I've made my fucking peace with it. Damage is done, it's all good, but she," Jess stops herself a short, inhaling sharply. "When she told me she was pregnant, I almost told her to get a fucking abortion and spare it the agony. But hey," she turns to smile bitterly at Rory, who has never seen Jess cry, ever, "I'm not seventeen and angry about my shitty hand, so I just hung up on her – if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all, right?"

Rory grits her teeth and ignores her stinging eyes.

"Oh, but Uncle Luke," she starts again, her voice cracking, "when I called him – he sounded so excited. He figured since I turned out fantastic that it's all good. I mean, right? I'm no longer vandalizing public property and crashing cars and flunking out of high school – it's all about the outcome, not the journey in the Danes family."

"Jess," Rory says quietly.

"But who cares, right? I mean, whatever. Jess is fine and working and has grown out of whatever fucking shit she went through, just your average teenage angst, at least it didn't have a body count."

"You're allowed to be upset -"
"I guess it was really just me being stupid again, thinking that Luke was supposed to be in my corner. After all this time, living with him and knowing me. It should've been him and me against my crazy fucking mother. But why change after all that? It's not like he gave a shit that she was barely sober half the time when I was growing up and I went days without eating real food."

Rory wipes her face.

"Aw, don't cry, babe. It's all good, right?"

It's a risky move, hugging Jess. For a moment, Rory thinks she made a huge mistake judging by the way Jess becomes rigid, but eventually she relaxes and Rory starts crying and then she can feel Jess' tears on her neck and they're standing in the middle of a bridge at three o'clock in the morning.

What Rory can't figure out is how they go from crying onto each others shoulders so their foreheads touching, lips briefly meeting; Rory can feel their combined tears and her stomach flipping.

Jess winces and squeezes her eyes shut, stepping backwards, but Rory is quick to take hold of her arms. "Don't, it's fine." She lifts one hand off her arm to cup Jess' face, attempting to wipe off some of Jess' makeup.

Jess snorts. "I know, fucking terrifying."

"It's not."

Jess smiles and wipes the makeup away from her other eye. It's not perfect, but it's okay.

"You pull it off," Rory says dryly.

Jess rolls her eyes. "Want to eat?"

"Always."

"I know a place."

Jess offers her hand and Rory takes it. They hold hands the rest of the way to the Lower East Side.

**

Jess takes her to a diner and Rory just orders the same thing Jess gets. At one point, Jess goes to the bathroom and scrubs off her makeup. She looks pale and has shadows under her eyes, but she seems okay.

They don't talk much. Rory doesn't know what to say and Jess seems comfortable not saying anything at all after sharing more than Rory ever would've expected.

The first train out of Grand Central is at five in the morning, so Jess offers to drive her there. Thankfully, Jess isn't parked far away. Rory asks if Jess is okay to drive on no sleep and coming down from drinking.

"I wouldn't drive you if I wasn't sure I was okay," Jess says, which reassures Rory.

(Rory still buys Jess a large coffee at a corner bodega.)

Rory dozes as soon as Jess pulls out of her spot on a side street. Next time she comes to, they're slowing to a stop on 42nd Street.
They promise to let one another know when they make it back to their respective homes.

Rory watches from the sidewalk as Jess drives away. Then she goes inside and finds her track number and grabs a seat by a window. As soon as the train pulls out, she passes out until she arrives in New Haven.

She's slow when she walks onto the platform and to the parking lot where her car is. She gets inside and starts driving back to her apartment, except she sees the exit to get her onto the highway that will eventually lead to Stars Hollow. It's almost eight o'clock in the morning and Rory could cry she's so tired, but she quickly switches two lanes over to catch it. She grips the wheel tightly as she drives on autopilot. She snaps back to reality when she sees the Welcome to Stars Hollow sign.

She swings the car around so she can park directly in front of the diner. There's a bit of a morning rush, so when Rory storms in, she calls out, "Luke?" and, "Everyone, get out, now."

Maybe she looks more terrifying than she thought, but because the handful of people in the diner clear out.

Luke stumbles out of the kitchen and freezes when he sees Rory. "Rory? Are you -?"

"I'm saying this because I know Jess never will and someone should set the record straight," Rory interrupts him.

Luke blinks. "What are you -?"

"You saying that Liz had anything to do with Jess being where she is now? I'm offended you would even come to that conclusion. It's insulting to me, to you, to Jess. Any influence she had on Jess has been horrible and only set her back."

"Now wait a second -"

"I mean, God, did the two years she lived here really mean nothing? Did nothing come out of it? Liz sent her away because she couldn't handle her." Rory snorts. "What a great influence. An excellent mom, I mean, statues should be erected in her honor along the likes of Mother Teresa."

"Rory -"

"No," Rory half-yells, her eye burning. "You listen to me. I sincerely hope you only said those things to reassure Liz and give her confidence because God knows she screwed up every which way the first time, but I will be damned if you for even a second believe it to be true."

Luke is the definition of flabbergasted.

"Oh, and for the record, you might want to open your mouth and communicate with my mom every once in a while. Jess grew out out of it and she's twenty-one. What's your excuse?"

Rory leaves in a dramatic fashion, something straight out of a movie, but instead of the elation she thinks she's supposed to feel while driving out of town, she just feels nauseous and like she needs to cry for a week.

**

As soon as Rory arrives back in her apartment, she sends an e-mail to the professor of her one o'clock class that she's ill and can't make it, but she will pick up her final paper first thing tomorrow. After that, she texts her mom that she's back and she'll speak to her after she's slept.
She also texts Jess, but she doesn't expect to hear from her for a while.

**

When Rory wakes up in the late afternoon, there's a single text from Jess, stating: *I'm back in PA. I'm sorry.*

And nothing else.

**

The next day, Rory considers drafting a response, but Logan calls her and asks if they can get lunch a day or two before he graduates, his treat. She agrees.

He takes her to a place they went to a few times while they were dating, but she doesn't have any strong memories associated with it. She orders a soda and he does the same, which surprises her.

"So, you're graduating, wow," Rory says after the waiter leaves them alone.

"Yeah, I know. Crazy. What's even crazier is that I'm leaving the day after for London."

"London? Why?"

"Mitchum. It's for a year, get myself acclimated in the business."

"Oh wow. A year? Are you nervous?"

"A little, but I'm kind of excited. We'll see how it goes."

Rory smiles. "That's amazing. I'm really proud of you."

"Thanks. So, what's going on with you?"

"Nothing much – I submitted all my final papers, so I'm just starting to get them back. I have to pick one up after our lunch – I missed the last class."

"You? Miss a class?" Logan questions incredulously. "What happened?"

She considers saying a friend was having a rough time, or that there was a kind of family emergency. Instead, she asks, "How...would you feel if your parents had another child now? Or a couple of years ago?"

Logan furrows his brow in thought. "How would I feel?" He shrugs. "I don't know...confused, I guess, since my parents only wanted two kids, but...I don't know, the only thing that comes to mind is, 'oh boy, another poor bastard with Mitchum and Shira as parents.'" He laughs a little.

"Would you be worried about him? or her?"

Logan thinks for a few seconds. "I mean, the kid could be born under way worse circumstances. I know the kid would be taken care of – fed, clothed, given the best education money can buy, but I guess I'd be worried about the kid being a fuck up. A few years ago, I wouldn't have thought too much about it. Now, I'd probably mediate. My sister definitely would, or at least try her best. She did with me, so."

Rory nods, picking up her drink and sipping it.
Logan's eyes bug out of his head. "Is your mom…?"

Rory almost chokes. "No! No, it's – well. Jess' mom, actually. She was...really...she had a lot of strong emotions about it."

"Ah. Well, I'm sure it's worse when you're not as stupidly wealthy as my family," he points out. "But I don't know her drama. From the very brief amount of time I spent with her, it seems like she's tough to crack, so. Maybe she had legitimate reasons for feeling some kind of way."

Rory nods. "Yeah, she does."

"Well, I'm sure she's fine. She had you, right?"

"Yeah. I haven't spoken to her since, but I'm trying not to think about it." Rory suddenly smiles. "So, graduation – are there any spare tickets? I'd love to cheer for you."

"Yeah, absolutely," he says with an easy grin.

"So, how's physical therapy going? At least you're down to a cane."

"It's going pretty well. I have to deal with my health insurance across the pond to continue it over there, but that's a headache for when I get there."

The rest of the lunch is pleasant. They laugh a few times and she thinks that this is the guy she knew he could be. Once they part ways, she calls Finn.

"Hey, Finn – you think you and Colin can help me throw a party for Logan after graduation?"

"Oh, absolutely, my darling. Absolutely."

**

(She becomes so busy buying supplies and contacting all of Logan's friends that she forgets about responding to Jess. Besides, Jess has her own friends now – she doesn't just have Rory anymore, which is a good thing.)

**

At Logan's graduation, she sees his family in the crowd, but she sits away from them, making sure she's one of the loudest along with Colin and Finn and everyone else in the Life and Death Brigade.

The party is a smash, although Rory gets very hot in her blonde wig and eventually tosses it when everyone is too drunk to take pictures. In the early hours of the morning, after everyone leaves, Logan offers her his bed to crash on. He leaves early in the morning and her throat closes with emotions. He kisses her softly in farewell and she waves at him from the doorway of his apartment.

Even though they've been broken up for weeks, it feels more final that now he's moving thousands of miles away.

She begins to clean up the apartment. While he always had someone come every other week to clean, she wasn't going to subject that poor woman to this utter destruction.

On the kitchen counter, she's a letter on one of her notepads that she had left behind.

*Rory -*
Thank you for everything. Be a thorn in my dad's side for me, would you? Someone should have the honor.

Dinner's on me when I visit! Oh, and go get the girl. One of us should.

– Logan

And there's a doodle of a rocket.

Rory reads it over again and gently tears the note off the pad and folds it.

**

When Rory comes back to Stars Hollow she realizes that there's something really, really wrong with her mom.

Of course, it all makes sense once her mom tells her that she and Luke have broken up, but her mom was feeling miserable even before this, she thinks. Since they're both unwilling to think about their respective emotions, racquetball suddenly seems like a viable option.

In the end, her mom has to tell her that she issued an ultimatum, that she couldn't handle being engaged to Luke, that it didn't feel like they were a team. Rory always saw her mom as the most independent person in the world. Rory thought that since Luke was similar in that sense, that it would be perfect, that they could have their own lives, but she supposes there's a balance to be had when wanting to be with someone for life, that sharing and creating a life together is not only inevitable, but necessary.

At night, she takes out the note Logan left her, staring at the doodle of a rocket. It takes her a long time, but once it clicks, she remembers that late night with Logan, *The Twilight Zone*, "The Long Morrow," and how he thought that was true love –

She picks up her cell and calls him.

"Hey. I was told my apartment was close to spotless when Marta came to clean. You didn't have anything to do with it, did you?"

"Of course I did." She looks at the clock and gapes. "Oh my – did I wake you? I'm so sorry -"

"Actually, I'm already at work."

"On a dare?"

He laughs. "No, I wanted to have a good first impression."

She bites her bottom lip. "Logan?"

"Yeah?"

"I don't know if this makes it better or worse, but I think we could've been it. Maybe in another universe?"

"Well, The Twilight Zone was full of them. I'm sure there's one for us."

Rory smiles. "Yeah. Well, I don't want to keep you, but good luck!"

"Appreciate it. Cheers."
"Cheers," Rory says back. Once she hangs up, she looks at the note again, folds it, and puts on her nightstand. She doesn't know if she'll put it in her Logan box, or it'll be something that isn't shut away with all her memories since there is that one part -

Go get the girl.

She lies awake at night for a while.

**

Rory figured that since Logan had stopped being her boyfriend for a decent amount of time that people would assume that the Asia trip she was planning would be cancelled, but everyone in town is still surprised that she's remaining in Stars Hollow. So she's down until her mom brings Asia to home -

But then her dad painfully reminds her she's not thousands of miles away.

Rory is furious – at her mom for being stupid in her grief, at her dad for seeing this as a means of hope, at herself for a lot of things. She ends up walking, abandoning her kimono on the front porch, not paying attention to where she's going.

The last thing she expects while walking down a street behind the lake is Jess Mariano standing at the end of a driveway.

She stops short and she looks up from her phone. They stare at each other.

"Hey," Rory says, feeling like she should probably be annoyed that Jess is here and didn't bother to reach out in a week, but she's already burned through her anger, it's not like Rory has reached out either, and she's just tired.

"Hey. Sorry, I didn't – I just didn't know if you wanted to talk to me, let alone see me after last week," Jess says, shrugging her shoulders self consciously.

Rory tries to smile. "You seem okay." It's the most important thing, at least. "What are you doing here?"

Jess sighs. "Seeing Liz. At least – I wanted to see how she was."

Rory nods. "How is she?"

"She seems good. Luke told me that he'd keep an eye out and...get involved if needs to. He's not perfect, but I'd trust him to not totally fuck up raising a kid."

"You saw Luke?"

Jess nods. "Yeah, trying to do dinner all together." She nods towards the house behind her. "Liz forgot to fix her damn oven, so Luke went out to go food shopping. I left to," she reaches into her pocket and shakes her pack of cigarettes. "I'm quitting after I leave. Or at least going back to just smoking when I drink." Jess narrows her eyes at Rory, her expression otherwise neutral; Jess doesn't want her feelings read. "Luke also told me what you said to him."

Rory winces, feeling her face grow hot as she crosses her arms across her chest defensively. "I'm sorry. I was running on fumes and I was upset and I just lost it. I didn't intend – it wasn't my place. I wasn't trying to fight your battles."
Jess exhales softly. "I know. You just...care."

Rory sighs and drops her arms. "Jess, you've been one of my best friends for years. We dated for months and after all the bad crap afterwards, we still managed become friends again. I love you, and I always will, it's not just care."

Jess looks down at her feet for a moment. "I know I said I was sorry, but I should've said 'thank you.'"

"What? Why?"

"For being with me. For looking out for me. I was an asshole, but I appreciated that you put up with me. I'm...well, you know. I'm just...still wrapping my mind around people having my back."

"I was always in your corner, Jess," Rory says quietly. "I still am. And I think Chris and Matthew are too."

Jess nods and exhales slowly. "Yeah. I'm getting that." She tilts her head to the side. "What are you doing here, anyway? You're not really one for strolls that doesn't involve at least two different stops for sustenance."

Rory swallows. "I don't know if Luke said anything, but he and my mom broke up."

"Yeah, he mentioned it."

"It got so bad in the end that in order for my mom to finish it, she slept with my dad, which I'm furious about. I'm upset that my dad and I are finally getting along again and my mom just does this – so I'm walking around town, trying to calm down and I realize that they messed up because they weren't talking. Which, I mean, we should know how that screws stuff up, right?"

Jess blinks at the information then smiles wryly. "That we do."

"So I'm thinking, I need to be honest."

Jess tilts her head to the side again, but Rory doesn't care about what she's thinking yet.

"I don't know what's going on, exactly, but I'm feeling like I did in high school with you. Like I did with Dean before you, like I did with Logan afterwards – I know it's all the same. But now, it's...there's no confusion or shame in it." Rory smiles, something easing in her chest. "This is probably opening up a slew of other problems, but at least it's better than...all the rest. So, yeah."

Jess bites her bottom lip. "Huh."

Rory can't help but laugh. "Yeah."

Jess looks at her with unmasked fondness. "So, that's the truth, then."

"Yeah. Sorry about it...dropping it on you. Timing could've been worked out better."

"Timing was fine. I, uh...well. You were my only friend and my best friend and – I was in love you with you and now...I think we're on the same page. But I just have a question."

"Yeah, what?" Rory asks, a little dazed.

"Are you willing to be open about it?"
"What do you mean?"

"I mean, are you ready to hold my hand while walking down the street? Are you ready to kiss me hello and goodbye? Are you ready to tell people that you have a girlfriend?"

Rory hadn't thought that far ahead with her confessing.

Jess smiles. "You're not the only one who's changed." She shifts her weight from one leg to the other. "Some of the clandestine rendezvous had their charm, but I don't want to hide, like before. I don't deserve to be hidden like a dirty secret. I know it was new and scary for you and I was willing to do that. But now...we're older, the world I think is changing, but it's going to be slow and it'll be hard, but, I will literally punch out teeth for us – I can channel my anger, so."

Rory swallows. "I know...you deserve to have someone willing to do the same for you."

Jess grins. "You, punching someone?" She takes out a cigarette. "You don't need to stoop down to degenerate behavior. I'm just saying – well, it's not just since it's hard, but. Be strong, brave, firm. Look an asshole in the eye, talk him down or ignore it." She takes out a lighter – light blue – and brings it to the end. Her eyes flicker up to Rory's. "Why don't you think on it for a while? You can let me know. I'm not going anywhere. Well, emotionally. Physically, yeah, I'm getting the fuck outta here at daybreak."

Rory snorts. "Right." She swallows again. "I will. Thanks."


"Time will do that."

"Sometimes," Jess answers thoughtfully. "Although for what it's worth, I think your mom is allowed to fuck up – she's human, right? In the grand scheme of offenses she could make – sleeping with someone when you want to forget someone else? A tale as old as time." She looks at Rory knowingly, the corner of her mouth twitching. Rory flushes. "However, speaking as someone who will never forgive her own mother for thoughtless shit she pulled, I also know that makes me a hypocrite."

"Of course there's a difference between our moms," Rory says at once and instantly regrets it. "Wow, jerk of the year award -"

"You're not wrong. That's the point. The biggest difference is that I'm sure your mom feels like shit about what she did. My mom doesn't have that self-awareness."

"Sorry," Rory says awkwardly.

Jess flicks the ashes off her cigarette. "I know." She brings it to her mouth. "By the way," she says while exhaling smoke. "Nice lipstick."

"Yeah?"

Jess nods, raising an eyebrow.

Rory looks behind her toward the road that'll eventually lead her home. "I better go back."

"Okay."

"So, you're really leaving at daybreak?"
Jess grins. "Well, close to. I can call you – get breakfast before I leave."

"Please do. Good luck with family dinner."


"I know."

"Maybe they'll bounce back."

"Maybe." Rory has a hard time believing it, but Jess throwing the possibility out there means something. "See you tomorrow."

Rory walks back home, finds her mom trying not to cry and failing on the couch, so she just sits next to her in silence.

**

Rory is reading in bed when she's startled by a knocking on her window. She's slow to get up until she remembers the one person who would do that. She's quick to unlock the window and let Jess in.

"Well, this seems familiar," Rory says in lieu of a greeting.

"Hey." She hands over a large coffee through the window. "And…" She hands over a bag. "Leftover doughnuts and a bear claw. Might be a bit stale."

"I'll take it," Rory says, stepping back and giving Jess space to climb through. She stumbles a bit getting her leg through.

"Ah, out of practice," Jess sighs, immediately taking off her flannel shirt and tossing it over Rory's desk chair. She's in a Killers shirt that's large even by her standards. Jess catches Rory staring with a confused expression at her shirt. "Matthew's. It's his fucked up way of making sure I come back because I can't just steal his shirt, especially since it's one of his favorite bands. I have Chris' other Killers shirt in my bag because this is their one, true bond."

Rory laughs. "Really? They only have one album. Who knows what will come after that?"

"Oh, their sophomore album will be called Sam's Town and it's coming out in October." Jess rolls her eyes. "Thing is, I don't hate them either – 'Jenny Was a Friend of Mine' is decent and I get 'Smile Like You Mean It' stuck on my head a lot, but -"

"Don't even say that 'Mr. Brightside' is overrated because that will make you a poseur," Rory interrupts her. "That's a universally liked anthem. Even Lane, who doesn't care for them, loves that song. Impossible to hate."

"I am not so haughty as to not sing along when that comes on," Jess admits. "So, yeah. It's stupid, but, whatever."

"I think it's sweet. They love you."

"Yeah, yeah." Jess goes into the bag and takes out a glazed doughnut. "I'm well fed by Luke, but this period is a fucking bitch. Please tell me you're stocked."

Rory wordlessly leaves her bedroom and quietly goes through the kitchen, collecting bags of chips, cookies, and other random snacks she could find. She comes back in and dumps everything unceremoniously on her bed.
"Ugh, you're the best," Jess sighs, picking up the bag of sour cream and onion chips. "Lower back is killing me this time."

"I'm getting headaches now," Rory shares. "It's horrible."

Jess opens the bag of chips and plops herself on Rory's bed. "So, how's Paris doing? Is she seriously doing med? I refuse to believe it."

"Don't even get me started," Rory says with a groan. "Between that and Doyle's job hunting, I've had just about enough of them."

"What are you doing in terms of living? I hope you're not going to continue living in that shithole, no offense."

"No, Paris and I have found something in a better neighborhood. I don't know how often she's going to stay over since I think Doyle is aiming for the *Hartford Courant*, so I'm assuming they'll get a place somewhere in between Hartford and New Haven."

"Sounds like a prime piece of real estate."

Rory rolls her eyes at Jess' sarcasm. "Snob. Well, that's better than if I were still with Logan – I can't imagine doing long distance with him in *London*."

"Being in the same timezone is immensely helpful," Jess agrees. "Although, you do realize, if we...become something, it would also be long distance."

Rory also did not consider that. "Yeah...I guess. But it's not as far."

"One-hundred-seventy-six-point-two miles."

Rory smiles softly. "That only works once."

"Yeah, it's lame to reuse the same material."

Rory laughs, taking a couple of cookies from the sleeve. "How's the writing coming along?"

"Okay, I guess. Don't want to jinx it. I've been doing more of the layout though for the 'zine."

"Guess we're doing similar things."

"Not for long – I'm ready to kill everyone. I'm surprised Paris isn't actually on the run for murder; I don't know how she was even an editor for as long as she was."

"Honestly, it's situations like that that make me believe in a higher power."

Jess grins and reaches for a cookie in Rory's hand. "I can follow that reasoning." She winces and arches her back a little. "Could I borrow a heating pad?"

"Yeah, of course."

Rory brings her a heating pad and they talk and eat and talk. Before long, it's two in the morning and Rory reaches across Jess' body to turn off the heating pad.

They fall asleep facing each other. Rory wakes up in the same position and Jess is slipping on her flannel shirt. The sun is just rising and Jess looks back at Rory, smiling softly. Rory pushes herself into a sitting position and it's natural for Jess to come back toward the miss and kiss her briefly on the
mouth. "I'll speak to you later."

"Safe drive," Rory says with a hoarse voice.

Jess goes out the window and two minutes later, her mom comes into her room.

"Uh, did I just see Jess coming from the house?" her mom asks, clearly having been awake for a while.

Rory rubs her eyes and comes to a decision. "Mom, I need to tell you something."

**

Rory tells her everything at the kitchen table.

The first time she saw Jess, how she felt. When she learned Jess was bi, her confusion, her mixed feelings. When they started seeing each other behind everyone's backs. All of it.

Her mom listens and doesn't react, doesn't make a comment or jab, which makes Rory incredibly nervous. When Rory finishes, her mom inhales and exhales shakily.

"All those jokes -" she starts.

"I know. It's okay," Rory interrupts her.

"It's not."

"I didn't tell you – how were you supposed to know?"

Her mom nods and looks down at her hands. "You're sure? You're absolutely sure?"

Rory smiles. "I've been trying to analyze it all since I was sixteen. I'm sure. I'm bi and that's just...me." Rory exhales.

"So...are you and Jess...?"

"I have to think about it," Rory answers. "I'm comfortable with myself and with you and a select few, but...I don't know how I feel about everyone knowing. I've never been out, I guess, so. It's something to think on."

Her mom tries to smile. "This is a level of rebellion against society I could never hope to achieve."

"Trust me, I'd rather it not be like that."

"I know. So...what about Richard and Emily?"

"No," Rory says at once, unable to even imagine how they'd react.

"I mean, it's something that may have to be brought up at some point."

"I know, it's just...not necessary right now."

"Okay, just...warn me when you do so I can come fully prepared."

"Prepared with what?"

"Oh, you know, ways to derail the conversation if things get ugly, a lot of gay puns if it goes in a
good direction. Things like that."
"I can't imagine it not being ugly," Rory says.
"Hey, they may surprise you."
"You're just saying that."
"Hey, I'm serious. Even I'm big enough to admit that my parents are capable of decency."
Rory sighs and leans back in her chair.
"Okay, no to the Gilmores. What about Dad?"
Rory wants to say no, but it seems wrong to keep it from him. "Probably. Yeah, I mean…"
"No rush," her mom says. "I won't say anything. I promise."
"Okay, thanks."
Her mom exhales. "Well, my bisexual butterfly, what would you like for breakfast this morning?"
Rory fights tears in her eyes as she grins. "I could eat a house."

**

That afternoon, she goes over to Lane's house and finds her in the midst of packing.
"What's going on? Are you touring again?" Rory asks as she sits on Lane's bed.
"Well, kind of. You know I've been talking to Dave, right?" Lane says as she's folding clothes on the floor.
"Yeah…"
"Well, the guys have been too after that whole...whatever that disaster of a performance we don't talk about."
"Right…"
"So, I guess Dave is in the music scene out in LA and he said that this band he knows out there got violently sick with mono – the entire lot of them. Bedridden for over a week."
"That's bad luck."
"Yeah, and I guess this band was going to be an opener for an opener and Dave showed our recent tapes and they want to book us!"
"Wow! That's amazing! How nice of Dave…" Rory says slyly.
Lane blushes and curls her hair behind her ear. "Yeah, so, we're all packing. We got tickets to fly tomorrow morning – I'm going to have to borrow a drum set, but I'll get used to it." Lane squeals. "LA, baby! I'm so excited."
"You'll have to get someone to film you and take a lot of pictures."
"I will, totally."
"So, is Dave going to play with you guys, or is he just gunning for Mrs. Kim's job?" Rory gasps.
"Mrs. Kim! Is she coming?"

"No, she can't leave the store, but she said that she 'trusts' Dave to manage us, which is basically proof that if Dave and I elope, my mother may only be angry at me and not murderous."
Rory laughs.

"Honestly, no idea about Dave. We'll see when we're out there. Dave seems into the behind the scenes stuff, so who knows. I mean it's not like we'd replace Gill – he's part of the band family."

"Wow."

"Yeah. We only bought a one-way ticket too."

"What?"

Lane shrugs her shoulders. "Well, we're only supposed to help out for about a week, but if we're good...which we will be, then we'll be touring the entire summer, so…"

"It's a lot."

"It's a lot," Lane agrees. "So, what's up?"

"I told my mom."

"Told your mom...what?"

"That I'm bi."

Lane's jaw drops. "What?"

"Yeah, it wasn't planned, but she saw Jess coming out of my window -"

"Excuse me?"

"She was in town visiting her mom and we bumped into each other and later on she just, came over and we talked all night and ate junk food and...we kissed."

Lane is gaping.

"I mean, you know that night when i came into New York to see her, we, uh – it was super brief and not even a kiss, she was just upset, but. Yeah, we kissed and she left and I just...it felt like the time to tell her."

"What did she say? She must've been cool, right?"

"Yeah, I mean, she listened the entire time I babbled and she didn't say a word. I've never seen her listen to a story without interjecting. Then she took it in and asked if I was sure, and I said I was, and...that was it. She called me a 'bisexual butterfly,' so that's something."

"You must feel so relieved."

"Yeah, I feel...a lot better about it. I have to think about everyone else, like my dad and my grandparents, but...this is good."
"Okay, so wait, back to Jess and the kissing – what the hell is going on there?" Lane asks, leaning forward. "Do you...have feelings for her?"

Rory shrugs. "Yeah. But…"

"But…"

"Jess doesn't want to hide it."

"Wait, you talked about it?"

"Yeah, uh, that happened…"

"You had a way more exciting twenty-four hours than I did!" Lane exclaims. Rory laughs. "Well, I guess that's a word for it."

"So, she likes you too, that's...wow! But she wants to be out and proud, hence…" Lane trails off.

"Well, it's part of it. I wanted to tell my mom for a while. But I have to think about being out-out."

"Yeah."

"Yeah."

They sit in silence for a while.

"Do you need help packing?"

"Yeah."

Rory gets on the floor next to Lane and folds clothes.

**

"Did you ever attend a cotillion?" the little girl Charlotte asks.

"No, I haven't, actually, but I had a coming-out party."

"And I totally supported her decision. She shouldn't have to hide her love of women," her mom says with a wink.

Rory's heart stops for a moment.

"Lorelai, there's nothing funny about being a lesbian," her grandma says testily.

"Bisexual, since Rory has loved men," her mom corrects innocently.

"Lorelai," her grandma sighs.

"I'm sure you'll have fun at your cotillion," Rory says to Charlotte with a forced smile.

**

As soon as they leave the house, Rory hits her mom with her purse.

"Ouch!" her mom exclaims.
"Really, Mom?"

"What? I was testing the waters for you!" her mom says, rubbing her arm.

"With that girl there? Come on, Mom."

"Okay, sorry! God, kid, that hurt."

Rory rolls her eyes and gets inside the passenger seat.

"I couldn't resist – the punchline was too good."

"And, there it is," Rory sighs. "Just take me home."

"Can we at least talk about my parents' non reaction to telling them I broke up with Luke because – hello?"

"Yes, we can talk about that."

"Great."

Her mom's subsequent breakdown, questioning whether or not she truly likes the things she likes, is something Rory tells Jess over the phone while she's doing errands in town and Rory's stomach flips when she hears her laughing hysterically.

"Oh, that's too good," Jess snorts.

"She ate all the Poptarts," Rory pouts.

"Seems exhausting to be contrary just to piss people off."

"That's so rich coming from you," Rory laughs. "What was that about dumb stuff you did? I distinctly remember your stealing baseballs."

"Okay, that we me being an asshole. I like what I like. I don't like something more or less because people I can't stand do or don't. Again, that's exhausting."

Rory rolls her eyes. "Fair."

"You tutoring brats today?"

"They're not brats, but yes, I'm tutoring children. I'm heading back to Yale in an hour."

"Paris tells me they're terrible and she's concerned about them inheriting the world."

"You guys need to stop talking, I think."

"Hey, I think I'm the only one holding her back from smacking a child."

"Do not downplay my importance, Jess Mariano. I'm curious now as to what you would've scored on the SAT."

"Fifteen-eighty."

Rory stops walking. "What?"

"I was really bored when I first came to Stars Hollow and took a practice test. So, I got a 1580."
"You bitch," Rory gasps. "You got higher than me!"

"Amazing how it's almost like a fancy education don't always mean shit."

"Hah, hah. Alright, I'm about to get in the car, but I'll talk to you later."

"Say hi to Paris for me."

"Yeah, yeah, bye."


She pauses in front of her car, craning her head to look back at Luke's, which is finally fixed and open again after that horrible accident. Making a decision, she unlocks the car and throws in her bags before crossing the street to Luke's.

It's awkward – he never expected her to come in. She immediately notices the change in hat, what that means.

"I'm sorry," Rory says after he hands her a coffee. "About -"

"No, uh, don't apologize. You were right." Luke nods. "Liz wasn't the best, but...I know she's capable of it."

Rory nods. "I hope so."

"Did you guys...see each other when she was here?"

"Yeah, we did. She said she may try to come up before Liz gives birth, but work seems hectic down there, so."


"Okay...well, great. Thanks for the coffee, I'll...see you."

"Right, see you."

Rory leaves the diner shaking her head. She will admit, though – she's seriously missed his coffee.

**

Having dinner with her dad is thankfully easy – it helps that he doesn't know that Rory knows about him and her mom. In fact, it's almost easy to forget when they're laughing about key lime pie and talking about her plans for her senior year of college.

They're on their way back from dinner when Rory decides to tell her dad.

"Dad, I have something to tell you. It's...probably going to be surprising, but. It's true, it's not a joke. So…"

"Okay, what is it?" her dad asks, smiling as he lowers the stereo.

Rory takes a breath. "I'm bi."

"Bi...centennial? Like that weird Robin Williams movie?"

"No, Dad, I'm bi, like I'm bisexual. I like men and women," Rory clarifies, her hands shaking in her
His brow furrows. "What?"

"Yeah. It's taken me awhile to realize, to...come to terms, but...there it is."

"What are you, Elton?" her dad tries to joke, his mouth twisted in a half smile, but he looks confused.

"Elton?"

"Back in the seventies, Elton John came out as bisexual in The Rolling Stones," her dad explains, his smile widening. "Obviously, he wasn't. He came out as gay later on."

Now Rory is confused. "Okay…so?"

"Why bother coming half out of the closet? It's okay, Ror -"

"Half out? I am out, right now. I just came out – I'm bi!"

"Come on, Rory. Being bisexual is just – you always prefer one over the other."

"I mean, if we're going to keep track, then I guess I prefer men since I've been with two versus the one girl, but that doesn't matter," Rory says, torn between feeling confused and uglier emotions like anger and sadness.

"Who's the girl? The one that makes you think like this?"

"Jess – she was – well she still is – my friend from high school. We dated for a few months my senior year in secret," Rory answers honestly.

"Wait, Jess...that kid who broke your wrist?" her dad asks incredulously.

"That was an accident, Dad, let it go already," Rory scoffs.

"You don't just forgive or forget the fact that someone broke your kid."

Rory's patience snaps. "You're right, then I guess you shouldn't forgive yourself since you may not have broken a bone in my body, you sure as hell broke my heart a good number of times," she retorts.

"Hey -"

"I understand that it might takes some time to come to grips with this, but maybe you shouldn't speak until you're sure about what you want to say because right now, you're not coming across very well," Rory continues, trying hard not to cry.

"Rory…"

Rory wipes her face and doesn't say anything the rest of the way home.

**

Rory goes upstairs to her mom's room and she can hear her parents' low voices in the kitchen. She opens and closes her phone a few times, unable to draft a text to Jess. What is she going to say? The first time she came out and it wasn't well received and she's torn up about it? It's harder that it's someone she loves – she doesn't think she'd be as hurt if it were a moron from one of her classes or a
stranger on the street.

She opens her phone again and drafts a message, waits a minute, then sends it:

From Rory Gilmore:
I told my dad about being bi and he said I was pulling an Elton John – I rocked a feather boa when I turned 16, but I don't know about now. Thoughts?

From Jess Mariano:
Seems a bit gaudy for you.

From Jess Mariano:
He thinks you're half out of the closet, then?

From Rory Gilmore:
That, or I prefer one over the other.

Her phone vibrates.

"Hey," Rory says quietly.

"He doesn't know any better. I'm sure once he learns he'll be okay with it," Jess says at once.

"I should just get used to it – not everyone is going to take it well."

"No, but it stings more when it's someone who was fine with you a few seconds before you said anything. Where are you?"

"Home. My parents are downstairs. I feel like a kid."

"I'm sorry."

"No, don't apologize. I just needed to tell someone who'd understand. Also, I know I apologized for how I responded to you coming out to me, but...did I ever apologize?"

Jess laughs. "Don't worry about it. you made up for it by researching for how many hours?"

"Still," Rory grumbles.

"Look, people change, sometimes it's for the better. You just have to find out if it's worth the time."

Rory hears her parents coming up the stairs. "I have to go. I'll text you."

"Good luck."

Rory hangs up and pretends she's been playing a game on her phone when her dad comes through the doorway, slowly sitting at the edge of her mom's bed. Her mom stands in the doorway, her arms crossed, eyes fixated on her dad.

"Hey, kiddo," her dad says, eyes downcast, mouth twisted in a frown. "I, uh – I'm really sorry. How I reacted – that was...I was a real dick. I may not understand, but I love you no matter what. I'm sorry I made you doubt that for even a second."

Rory doesn't want to cry, but she does anyway. He hugs her tightly and she opens her eyes to see her mom staring at them with teary eyes. She smiles questioningly. You're okay?
Rory nods once.

"So, does this mean that you can talk about hot boys with your mom and hot girls with me?" he jokes as he pulls back.

Rory shakes her head and laughs.

"You can try – it's like pulling teeth for her to admit that Doctor Dreamy is bangable," her mom says.

"In what world would I ever say 'bangable'?"

"Right now!"

"Child," Rory retorts. Her dad laughs and everything is good.

Her dad places a hand on her head and kisses her forehead like he used to when she was little. "Let me know your schedule at the end of the mouth?"

"I will. No key lime pie though."

"Yes, ma'am."

Her mom smiles and says, "I'll walk you out." She shoots Rory another look – are you sure you're okay?

Rory smiles. Yeah.

**

From Rory Gilmore:
We're okay.

Jess' response comes at once:

From Jess Mariano:
Good.

**

The next morning, her mom sits her down and for a stupid second, she thinks her mom is going to come out as well, but she says that she's going to try dating her dad. Rory tells her to be careful, thinking that's too soon, too fast, but her mom has always done what she wanted in the right circumstances, so she just has to trust (or hope) in her mom's judgment.

In the meantime, Rory goes back to school and into the swing of things. Except some things are different, like she texts Lane since she's still in California touring, the time difference just enough to make it difficult to connect. There are pictures online and Rory is so proud of her best friend achieving her dreams (and for the one salacious photo of what's definitely Lane kissing a girl with pastel-colored hair, but there's also another photo of Lane and Dave looking at each other in a way that convinces her that Dave is the one).

There's also Paris coming to Rory once everyone has been dismissed and demanding to write a piece on ‘Coming Out Day' on October eleventh.

"I mean I was considering talking about youth coming out younger and younger – a generation is growing up normalizing gay and lesbian and trans people. Is it a result of almost eight years of
Republican stupidity? Is it part of an inevitable feature of the left swinging back? Are we as a society actually improving naturally? So...what do you think?"

Rory doesn't know where this came from, but she can guess who possibly inspired it. Rory smiles. "When's the first interviewed you scheduled?"

Paris blinks. "Next week."

"I'm coming with you. And, if you don't mind, I think the article should also involve work by someone who is actually part of the community."

Paris raises her eyebrows. "Really?"

Rory exhales and nods. "Yes."

Paris beams. "Okay, great! You're the only one I'd ever want to work on something with, anyway." Her expressions turns more serious. "Are you sure? I mean, nobody has to know -"

"I can't think of a better way to do it."

"And you know what's great? You can always slap someone with a lawsuit if you think you're being discriminated against," Paris points out with a self-satisfied grin.

"Always the practical one," Rory sighs. "Just send me what you've got so far and we'll start collaborating. I have some books I remember reading when I was younger."

"I'll do it tonight. Thanks."

"No, thank you," Rory says earnestly.

"I've got dibs on listing Jess as a reference for the article," Paris says.

"Uh, okay…"

"I mean, the article was my idea first, so I naturally went to the only openly LGBTQ person I knew," Paris retorts.

"Paris, it's fine. I'm just surprised you got her to agree to help." Honestly, Rory is more surprised that Jess didn't tell her about Paris harassing her about this.

"Well, she said no when she assumed it was homework, but she's been cooperative since I told her it was for the paper."

"Huh."

"How's that going? Still friends?"

"Still friends."

"Well, don't screw that all up until after this article is done."

"Noted." Rory rolls her eyes. "Do you want to go to this art show with me tonight?"

"Sorry, can't, Doyle's celebrating his one month anniversary with the paper. Having drinks with the staff bigwigs over at Duffy's."
Rory listens to Paris talk about Doyle's admittedly strange coworkers and dreads having to go to an art show alone.

The art show is as strange and borderline painful as she expected, at least until she meets Olivia and Lucy, who are kooky and fun. She invites them to her apartment and they marvel at her studio system (a gift from Logan that he refused to take back) and the number of snacks she keeps in the kitchen.

At one point, Jess calls.

"Hey!" Rory greets.

"Hey – having a party there?"

"I met two people from the art show and we're just hanging out."

"Who's that?" Lucy asks from the kitchen. "A boyfriend?"

"Wrong gender – her name's Jess," Rory answers.

"A girlfriend? Nice!"

"Oh, well," Rory starts, realizing her mistake.

"Her voice is loud," Jess says dryly. "No use in correcting her."

"Thank you for feeling comfortable enough with us. We are LGBTQ friendly," Olivia calls out.

"Definitely no point."

"Well, it's not like, uh, well...I really wish we could do this in person, but..." Rory stutters quietly, nervous, but it feels far away, as if she doesn't truly feel it but knows she should.

"Noted. I'll talk to you tomorrow – I think I'm making another trip up there for work soon, so, we can do it in person."

"Dirty."

Jess laughs. "Have fun – later."

"Later." Rory grins and hangs up. "You can put that up a little louder," she tells Olivia.

Rory calls Jess at around lunch time. Jess says that some of the bookstores she convinced to carry her book last year were interested in a new print and also wanted her to speak.

"I have to go to at least five," Rory says, putting Jess on speakerphone.

"No, you don't. I can't even imagine what I'd even say. It's stupid."

"I think that they'll just ask you questions – you don't have to give a speech or anything."

"I swear I'll walk right out."
Rory opens her fridge and takes out a soda. "You'll do no such thing. Where do you know you're speaking?"

"Boston, primarily, but I got a call from someone in your neck of the woods – Atticus Bookstore?"

Rory laughs loudly.

"What?"

"'My neck of the woods' – it's basically my backyard! I'm definitely going to that and so is Paris."

Jess groans. "She's not banned from there?"

"No, she's nice to them because their almond croissant is special."

"Geez."

"Speaking of Paris – why didn't you tell me you were helping her out with an article for the paper?"

"It wasn't a big deal – I just pointed her in a few directions. Plus I figured she'd involve you anyway since she can't publish shit without the editor's approval."

"Okay…"

Jess sighs. "I didn't want to seem like I was pressuring, somehow."

"No pressuring. We're co-writing the article together."

"...Really."

"We're aiming for publication on October eleventh, which is National Coming Out Day. I think it's appropriate."

"Rory…"

"Yes?"

"Did you mean what you said last night?"

Rory smiles. "Yeah."

"Your timing is terrible. I'm swamped for like, a month."

"Me too – I have to worry about training the next editor eventually," Rory says with a frown.

"Next editor? They're giving you the boot?"

"It's so there's a smooth transition for next year, since I'm graduating in May."

"Ah, that sucks. I know how much you love being editor."

"Yeah, I know, but I'll still write articles and help with coverage some days."

"And when you graduate you'll work up to being an editor for longer than a couple of months."

Rory swallows. There's a long silence.
"Wow, who'd of thought that I'd be the one talking about the future and you'd be the one clamming up? Life works in mysterious ways."

"I'm trying not to think about it because it's so terrifying."

"I know."

She would, Rory guesses. "Topic change, please."

"I can tell you how we're going to go full stop on Thanksgiving this year."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. We're getting a turkey and we're making all the sides. No Boston Market for us."

"That's slightly terrifying."

"You do realize that I'll basically be the one cooking, right? I'm only having the morons chop and do half of the mashed potatoes."

"Half?"

"They can peel, boil them, and mash them for two minutes and that's about it."

Rory smiles, wiping the condensation along the can.

"I know you usually do Thanksgiving – or multiple Thanksgivings – in Stars Hollow, but...would you consider coming to Philly?"

"I will. You'll just have to make more than one batch of mashed potatoes."

"I'll even buy Boston Market mashed potatoes as a backup and hide it."

"They would definitely sniff that out in a second."

"True. I hate boys, they're annoying as fuck."

Rory laughs. "Tell me about it."

**

Parents' Weekend comes and Rory has never cared much about it. She enjoyed her grandparents taking her out to dinner and her mom sending an amazing care package; she expected the same this year, not...both of her parents showing up and her dad trying to make a point regarding being involved in her life.

It's not the best start to the week, especially having to step down as editor, officially.

She puts on a happy face and relinquishes her position with grace as best she can. One of her last layouts is the October eleventh issue in which the front page article she co-wrote with Paris regarding LGBTQ youth and the age in which they're coming out decreasing with each generation is well received.

(I hope with this heartening, positive trend that this means that less people will experience the confusion, pain, guilt, and self-loathing that I experienced at one point or another figuring out who I am.)
Rory isn't recognized by everyone as the editor of the paper, but the ones who do know, smile at her, thank her for her bravery.

Paris' final words – *Who cares what part of the spectrum you are? Who cares who you like? Being a moron should be criminalized* – was a little controversial, but it's just so Paris that it makes Rory happy.

Her mom and dad are in Paris, so they'll have to wait to read the article, but she's proud of it, at least until -

"Hey, Grandma!" Rory greets on the phone.

"*Oh good, I got ahold of you – there's been a terrible error in your article!*"

"*Error?*" Rory questions, confused and immediately panicked. She and Paris had triple-checked that piece and had two other staff members read it just in case, even though Paris didn't trust them – it was mostly for Rory's peace of mind.

"*Yes – someone wanting to sabotage you must've changed your last quote in the eleventh hour – it reads – it's insinuating that you're part of this...that you're a lesbian!*"

Rory almost collapses to the ground.

For all of her smarts, for all of her careful planning, there was one fatal flaw in this article: her grandparents have been reading every article she writes.

"*Rory?*

She wishes her mom were here to help her, to smooth the path like she did with her dad.

"*Are you at home? I'm going to stop by,*" Rory says, with forced calmness.

"*Yes, yes, come here, we can strategize a way to fix this.*"

Rory hangs up and tries not to throw up.

She practices what to say in her car during the drive. *Grandma, I actually said those things...I was insinuating that I was gay – well, bi...I'm sorry I didn't tell you in person...does this embarrass you? Do you still love me?*

She fights back tears and sits in the driveway for a minute before killing the engine. She forces herself to breathe, her heart slamming in her chest. She considers calling everyone on her contact list from Jess to Lane to Paris to Lucy to Olivia to even Madeline and Louise (how are they even doing now?), but in the end she forces herself to step out of the car and to the front door. The doorbell has barely rung when her grandma opens the door.

"Come in, come in!" her grandma ushers her into the dining room. Her grandpa is already there with a serious expression on his face. She had figured he would be at the school or working.

They talk about issuing a retraction, of finding out the fiend who did this, of getting the Headmaster involved.

"*Grandma? Grandpa? It wasn't a mistake. My ‘original’ quote wasn't replaced by someone else. Paris and I checked that article a number of times and had staff look it over as well. The quote in the article came from me, and yes, I was insinuating that I am...that I'm not straight. I'm not a lesbian – you met
Dean and you know I loved Logan."

Her grandparents stare blankly at her.

"I'm bisexual, meaning that I like guys and I like...girls. I'm sorry you're finding out like this, I really, really am. It's just...I've been carrying this with me years. I can't tell you how many nights I stayed up wondering what was wrong with me, trying to ignore how I felt about someone, and..." Rory's face crumbles, but she refuses to cry. "I'm finally, finally okay with it – myself. I...really hope this doesn't – you don't...I'm still the same person as I was before the article was published – I mean, I can still fall in love with a guy and have a lavish wedding that you can plan and I can still give you grandkids, it's possible, I -"

"Rory," her grandpa interrupts her softly. He's looking down at the table.

Rory snifflies and brings a hand to her mouth, but tears fall fast down her face.

"I was in the Whiffenpoofs for four years and am still dear friends with a good number of them, many of which are gay and living happily with partners. I am very familiar – or, as familiar as I can be – with this." He finally looks at her and smiles. "You're still the Rory Gilmore I expect to take the world of journalism by storm?"

"That's still the goal," Rory answers faintly.

"Good. I loved the article. Heart wrenching, but there was hope." Her grandpa stands up, buttons his jacket, and goes to Rory and kisses the top of her head gently. "You're a person of great heart and great character. And that combination will always win the day. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to prepare for my next lecture. Will I see you Friday for dinner?"

Rory looks to her grandma, who appears frozen.

"Emily?" her grandpa prompts.

Her grandma blinks a few times. "Bisexual," she repeats, flatly.

Rory can only nod.

"So that poor attempt at a joke your mother made at that dinner that Charlotte was in -"

Rory swallows. "My mom's poor attempt at testing the waters to see how you'd react."

"I meant what I said. There's nothing funny about being a lesbian."

"No, there isn't," Rory agrees quietly.

"I doubt there's much humor in being...bisexual either." 

Rory shakes her head.

"Men...and women…"

Rory is concerned her grandma is malfunctioning.

"Have you ever...acted on your...feelings? For someone other than a man?" her grandma questions.

Rory can't read her grandma's facial expression and it scares her. "Once. In high school. I never told anyone about it. My mom only really found out a couple of weeks ago."
Her grandma's eyes widen exponentially. "You kept that secret from Lorelai for years?"

"Yeah."

Her grandma leans back in her chair. She looks and sounds dazed. "My granddaughter...dating a girl..."

"Can you please tell me what you're thinking or feeling? Please, just put me – just be honest with me, please," Rory stutters, begs, pleads.

For a moment, her grandma looks heartbroken, bringing a hand to her mouth as if stopping herself from crying. Maybe she's mourning an easy future. But then, she seems to steel herself, brings her hand to her lap and looks directly at Rory with a resolve and strength that Rory has always admired in both of them – her grandma and her mom. "Do you remember that awful dinner we had with Christopher's parents? You were about sixteen."

Rory furrows her brow at the unexpected question. "Yeah..."

"Do you remember what I told you in the kitchen?"

Rory remembers her grandma saying something comforting, but she still felt a little bitter regarding how her birth tore two families apart.

Her grandma's gaze softens. "I said that your person and existence have never, not even for a second, have been a disappointment. That still stands."

Rory bursts out sobbing – ugly, loud sobs and it takes a long time for her to pull herself together, but her grandpa's strong hand rubbing her back and her grandma hugs her tightly.

**

She misses one of her classes to have tea with her grandparents. Her grandpa seems more understanding, but her grandma seems to be okay once she's developed a strategy to facing questions, snide comments.

"I wish you told us sooner to spare me from that panic attack," her grandma comments, sounding almost normal. "I'll have to see who reacts – maybe at the next DAR high tea you can make an appearance? Remind them who exactly you are."

Whatever makes her grandma happy. "Yeah, of course. I haven't been able to lately because I've always had a class conflict, but if it's kept at the same time before the semester is over, I can do it."

"Excellent." Her grandma smiles. "Now, in terms of your having children – you'll have them when you're ready and established. You don't need to emulate your mother in that regard."

That's an anxiety she'll have to face at a later date – she doesn't have the strength to say that she may very well end up with a girl (maybe even Jess) and then what happens next? But as her grandma said, she has time.

"I better go – I have some midterms to prepare for. I'm sorry about how you found out, but, thank you."

"Does Christopher know?"

Rory nods. "Yeah. He does."
"What did he say?"

"At first? He compared me to Elton John," Rory snorts.

Her grandma gapes, offended.

Her grandpa barks a laugh. "Please, as if anyone with half a brain believed he liked women at all," he says.

"But, now he's supportive, he apologized, so...we're good. Everything is good. Actually, everything is great."

Her grandma seems to stow away that piece of information in the back of her mind and manages to smile. "We love you, Rory, we always will."

"I couldn't ask for a better granddaughter," her grandpa adds.

They hug and kiss goodbye and Rory leaves the house in a much better state than she entered it.

**

She calls Jess on her way back to Yale.

"Hey, what's up?"

"Do you think you can spontaneously take off work and come visit me?"

Pause. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I mean – now I'm fine – I...I told my grandparents. I'm such an idiot – the article – they read all my stuff -"

"Fuck."

"I know, so my grandma called, panicking, and so I had to tell them."

"And it went okay?"

"Yeah," Rory laughs in relief. "I mean it was a shock, obviously, but my grandpa was just like, 'well I've been a member of the Whiffenpoofs and half of my comrades are gay and this doesn't matter' and my grandma started figuring out ways to to sabotage people who question it. It's like...we know the younger generation is always going to be more liberal, but we really don't give enough credit to the older ones, you know?"

"That's great – are you sure – you sound like you've been crying."

"Oh, I was sobbing like a baby."

"I wish I could come, but I really can't, Ror, I could come tomorrow -"

"No, I know, that's okay, I know you're working, it was stupid -"

"It's not stupid. I swear, tomorrow. I'm sorry."

"I'll see you tomorrow." Rory smiles. "And when you're here, we'll plan our next visit."

"Good idea."
"And Jess?"

"Yeah, Honey Bunny?"

"I have something to tell you when you get here."

"...You too."

Rory beams. "Should I call you Butch? You can't be Pumpkin."

"Like Dean was ever cool enough to be Tim Roth, that was a joke. I was always meant to be Pumpkin."

"Maybe you were," Rory says softly at the same time she hears Jess yell, "I'm coming, cool your fucking jets! Sorry, Rory, I gotta finish this. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Bye, Jess."

Rory catches herself in the rearview mirror and her eyes are puffy and red and her skin is blotchy, but she is grinning from ear to ear.

**

Of course, her mood comes tumbling down when she arrives back at her apartment and sees the giant pencil in the corner of the living room and she remembers the fact that while she's already anxious about graduation, the fear of what she'll do and if she'll succeed has increased an astronomical amount. So she pushes it all down and tries to distract herself by calling Olivia and Lucy, hoping they'll help, at least until Jess comes.

Except she ends up crying again, this time on the bathroom floor in front of her friends and with pink streaks in her hair.

The doorbell suddenly rings.

"Are you expecting anyone?" Lucy asks.

Rory struggles to her feet and wipes her face, curious as to who would be coming to the house since everyone in town knows her mom is in France. Her heart jumps to her throat when she opens the door because she realizes at the last moment who it is.

Jess is standing on her front porch with the same duffle bag she's had since high school. "Hey," she says, cool as can be. Then her eyes almost bug out of her head. "Are those real?" she asks, pointing to her hair.

"Fresh," Rory croaks.

Jess steps up to her and touches a lock of pink hair. "Looks good. Lane will be pissed she wasn't here for it."

"I thought you said you were coming tomorrow? And how did you know I was here?"

"I'm a fast worker when motivated. And Chris and Matthew said they'd cover. Would you believe if I said it was intuition?"

Rory stares at her flatly.
Jess grins. "I asked Paris. She said you weren't home, so I assumed you were here. Good thing too because that would've tacked on extra time to an already long ass car ride."

"I can't believe you're here!"

"Rory? Who is that?"

Jess takes a peak over Rory's shoulder. "Lucy and Olivia?" she guesses.

"I needed a distraction. I had a breakdown about the future on top of the earlier breakdown, so clearly today is swell," Rory explains with a sarcastic tinge.

Lucy and Olivia come into the foyer.

"Hey, this is Jess, she was going to come tomorrow, but surprised me," Rory says, turning to the side.

Lucy and Olivia gasp at the same time. "Girlfriend?" Lucy asks excitedly.

Jess raises an eyebrow. "Yeah. Nice to meet you."

Lucy squeals and goes in for a hug. Jess awkwardly pats Lucy's back. "Amazing to meet you – you're beautiful. Wow, your eyes are amazing. Olivia, look at her eyes."

Olivia comes in and stares directly into Jess' eyes. "So nice. Hazel?"

"I guess."

"We're making Rice Krispies Treats right now. Merits of adding chocolate chips in them?" Lucy asks Jess.

"Not that great. Coco Rice Krispies though are great," Jess says, walking through the doorway. Rory shuts the door behind her.

It's one thing for Jess to talk with Paris and Lane, it's another to have Jess meeting her new friends – seeing her fit into this part of her life so seamlessly seems strange, like it should be harder given everything else, but it's easy.

"Would you mind being my muse for a day? You really are inspiring," Olivia says at one point.

Rory cuts herself another square and shoots Jess an amused look. "I don't mind. I'll have to do some homework at one point."

"What kind of art do you do?" Jess asks.

"Mostly post-modern sculpture, but I do dabble in the traditional painting and photography."

"At the publishing house I work at, we're starting to host more sculptures, so if you're ever in Philly, feel free to drop something off for the month. We're getting some buyers now," Jess offers. "We have size restrictions there."

"She made a horse out of soda cans, you need to see that this weekend," Rory says.

"That's cool."

Olivia puts up her hands, mimicking a camera shot.
"Okay, now you're being weird," Lucy says with a laugh.

"Would you be doing this if I were a guy?" Jess asks lightly, picking at her Rice Krispies Treat.

"Yes," Olivia says at once. "I can show you my study of Johnson Liu."

Lucy sighs. "Beautiful body."

"I'm not agreeing to nudes," Jess says at once.

"Definitely not," Rory adds.

"I'm thinking portraits," Olivia says thoughtfully.

After they pack up the leftovers and wash the dishes, Lucy takes Rory's keys and tells her that she'll follow her and Jess back to campus.

"Do you mind? I can drive your car if you want to relax," Rory says.

Jess wordlessly tosses her keys to Rory.

"Thanks for coming," Rory says when she pulls onto the highway.

"You okay?"

"Yeah, it was just...my grandparents. I've always pushed myself to do well, make my mom, my grandparents proud and...I guess now more than ever it's like I feel like I have something to prove. Like I might not be able to get married, although Connecticut is looking promising to change that, but I will be the best damn reporter of my generation. It was that mixed with my not knowing what's ahead after graduation...I was overwhelmed."

Jess sleepily rolls her head to look at Rory. "I know you're always going to have high expectations for yourself. You don't need anyone else pushing their agenda onto you."

Rory smiles. "No expectations from you?"

"I only expect you to do what you need to do to be happy."

"I am happy."

"Then we're good. Although do you have real food in your apartment? Not that the Rice Krispies Treats weren't a true delicacy, but I could use something substantial."

"I have mac and cheese and I can make pasta from jarred tomato sauce."

"That'll work."

**

Before they go back to her apartment, they stop by Lucy and Olivia's. Lucy insists she needs to give back a shirt she borrowed from Rory a few weeks ago, even though Rory had insisted back that she wasn't in a rush to get it back.

Lucy unlocks the door and exclaims, "Boyfriend!"

"Does she always greet people like that?" Jess asks Rory quietly.
"I think Boyfriend's here," Olivia says.

"No way," Rory says with a grin. "Finally get to meet him. It's been a running joke at this point – I've heard about him for ages and I've just never met him," she explains to Jess.

"Not unlike you – we almost didn't believe you were real," Olivia adds.

"...So once we saw the hair, it was like, obvious – girl band. Rory has the most awesome house. You have to meet Rory. Rory – this is Boyfriend. Boyfriend, this is Rory and her girlfriend, Jess," Lucy rambles.

Rory is floored when she sees it's Marty.

"Oh! I -" she starts, but Marty interrupts her with, "Actually, it's Marty. Nice to meet you."

Rory is confused and about to play along when Jess says, "Marty? Is this the same guy you found naked on the dorm floor?"

There's a stunned silence and Rory is so fiercely grateful for Jess. "Yeah, actually, I was just...going to say that I know Marty." She turns to Lucy, who's in a state of shock. "You've never used his name, so I never had a clue."

"Small world," Olivia chimes in, but she's looking at Marty with growing contempt.

"Were you just going to pretend that you didn't know her?" Lucy asks.

"And, I think that's our cue," Jess says, taking Rory's hand.

"I'm going to go work on my final project," Olivia says, following them out.

**

"Well, can't say I'm not surprised why you guys parted ways," Jess says once they're a safe distance away and Olivia has left to go to the arts building.

"Besides the fact that he didn't want to be my friend anymore because he liked me? Yeah, totally," Rory gripes.

"What a fucking weirdo. You know you would've gone along with it too," Jess says.

Rory groans. "I know, I would've. I was about to. I'm an idiot."

"Well, I was there to save you from that potentially blowout. It's a good thing I don't give a shit."

Rory puts an arm around Jess' shoulders. "You give plenty of shits, you just save your shits for what you consider worthy."

"Wow, two shits in one sentence. What's it going to take for you to say 'fuck'?"

"I've said that before!"

Jess stares at her with a disbelieving expression.

"I have!"

"A goal for the weekend."
"How are you going to get me to say it? Dropping something hard on my feet?"

"Mmm, I was thinking of a more pleasant means," Jess says, snaking her arm around Rory's waist. 

Rory gasps. "Like an amazing chocolate cake? So good it'll make me swear?"

Jess snorts. "Get a dirtier mind, Gilmore."

"Oh," Rory says, blushing.

"But first, food. And probably sleep. I'm exhausted. Oh, and a shower. Matthew was a fucking spaz and knocked over my soda onto my lap."

"You had a very rough day."

"We both did. And thankfully it's over."

Rory is surprised when they arrive at the apartment that Paris is gone. There's a note on the kitchen table that says, Staying at Doyle's – call me when you're ready to be around people. Hi Jess – if you screw up my bookshelves, you're dead.

"Lovely note," Rory comments, handing it to Jess.

"I have to meet Doyle," Jess says, going to the fridge.

"Jess, stop, I'll make you dinner. Just take a shower, relax. I'll take care of you."

Jess takes out a water bottle and leans against the door to shut the fridge. "Oh, you will?" she asks suggestively.

"Stop," Rory says with a smile.

Jess comes over to Rory and stands about a foot away. It reminds her of high school except Rory has pink streaks in her hair which she's now considering on removing and Jess' hair isn't as long as it used to be and she's wearing clothes that are almost acceptable to wear to work (no holes to be found, but still so casual).

Jess touches her face with a cold hand, thumb skimming the sensitive skin under her eyes. Rory covers her hand with hers. "Where's the bathroom?"

Rory gestures behind her. "On the right."

Jess opens her water bottle and heads to the bathroom, dragging her duffle bag that she left by the door. Rory pulls out her last box of pasta from the cabinet and boils water. By the time Jess is out of the shower, wearing the Distillers shirt they got together and basketball shorts with her wet hair in a bun, Rory is testing the pasta.

"Now whose are those?" Rory asks.

"Chris'. I tell them that if they ask me to do their laundry, I get to steal any of their clothes. I stole these and his Biggie shirt, but I'll probably give that one back soon."

"Rap, really?"

"I think I'm automatically supposed to like Biggie being born in New York." She takes a seat at the table. "Surprisingly, Lily is into it – the genre."
"Lily – your dad's adopted kid?"

"Yeah, basically. I'm actually thinking about going out there again."

Rory pauses after turning off the stove. "Really?"

Jess shrugs. "Probably would spring for a hotel and not crash in their den, but yeah. I kind of missed her. Weather ain't too bad either."

Rory strains out the water from the pot, then puts the pasta back in to mix with the sauce. "I think Lane is going to move out there with the band," she says.

"She really likes it out there, huh?"

Rory nods, her heart hurting. "Yeah."

"Makes sense. Bigger music scene than here. Unless she was going to move to New York, but…"

"I know. It'll just be hard having her be across the country indefinitely." She dumps the jar of sauce into the pot and mixes it with the pasta.

Jess doesn't say anything, which means she probably has something to say, but is reframing from doing so. Rory sighs and grabs a bowl from a cabinet and fills it to the top. "Sorry, I don't think we have cheese…" She checks the fridge and says, "Yeah, finished it I guess." She puts the bowl in front of Jess and rummages for a fork in a drawer.

"Thanks," Jess says, digging in. She chews for a bit. "Al dente, very nice."

"I'm not a total savage," Rory says, going back to the stove to serve herself pasta.

"Right, okay, says the weirdo who made sushi out of fucking candy," Jess snorts.

"That was my mother and it was surprisingly amazing."

"Sure."

Rory sits down across from her and spears a few pasta. "So, what did you think?"

"Of what?"

"Lucy and Olivia. I mean, we're not close or anything, but -"

"They're fun. Don't get me wrong, Paris is probably one of my favorite people ever, but you definitely need breaks from her," Jess says, not looking up from her food.

"Tell me about it," Rory grumbles.

Jess glances up and smiles. "I wanna get drunk with her so bad."

"Didn't we already do that in DC?"

"Yeah, exactly."

Rory shakes her head in amusement. "She's not one for going out-out."

"Out-out? What does that even mean? And she will since her friend from out of state is visiting. We need a bar and we also need to discuss Cormac McCarthy's new book and Sharp Objects."

"I know. Dark time we're living in though."

They eat in silence until Jess finishes. She brings her bowl to the sink and starts to wash it, which Rory would normally try to stop her, but figures it isn't worth the argument. Instead, she puts her own empty bowl in the sink and flits to the bathroom to change and brush her teeth. "Nice," Jess calls out after her.

Rory laughs and shuts the bathroom door behind her.

**

It's cute that as soon as Jess' head hits the pillow, her eyelids seem become heavy.

Rory shuts off her lap light and says, "Wait, before you sleep -"

Jess hums, eyes already shut, but her mouth moves against Rory's as soon as they meet.

**

Rory wakes up from a heavy sleep to find Jess gone, but a torn out notebook paper on the pillow reading, *Getting breakfast since you have nothing here, heathen.*

Rory smiles and hides her face in the pillow for a moment before slowly getting up. She goes to the bathroom to brush her teeth and comb her hair so it's not so messy. While trying to untangle a knot, she hears Jess opening the front door. Once it's shut, Rory calls out, "Question, what was I supposed to do if I needed to make an urgent trip somewhere and you took my keys?"

"Urgent trip where? The drug store to stock up on Red Vines?" Jess retorts.

"Emergency stash is in my nightstand," Rory says. "Where did you end up going?"

"Diner. I like that you've copied your take out drawer from home. It's totally insane, but it's actually efficient."

Rory smiles and she walks out of the bathroom and to the kitchen, finding Jess in a pair of loose jeans and one of her Yale shirts.

"You look good. Did anyone talk to you about classes?" Rory teases.

Jess is unloading the bag and shoots her a baleful look. "One guy tried to hit on me. It's nine on a Friday – isn't *Thirsty Thursday* a thing? I would think Friday mornings are for quiet and recovery."

"You didn't even drink last night," Rory points out.

"Yes, but I very well could've been. The shirt was a perfect cover."

"And I thought you just wanted to wear my clothes to be closer to me and, or, to show that you were taken."

Jess raises an eyebrow and smiles. "I can kill multiple birds with one stone."

They eat breakfast in silence while reading the paper. Rory and Logan had a near perfect system of sharing one paper, but Jess has taken the liberty of getting one for herself, so there's no alternating sections or rushing to finish the end of an article. Rory had always liked that, but she knows Jess has
always valued relying on herself and no one else; some things just won't change.

"God, fuck Bush," Jess gripes.

Rory grins. "Amen, sister friend."

**

Rory talks about taking Jess on a tour of the campus, but they just end up in bed after breakfast, Rory flushed and hot and quick to take her Yale shirt off Jess, who isn't wearing a bra.

Rory hasn't forgotten what it felt like – certain things, like how Jess' breast fits in her palm or how Jess' thigh is firm between her legs, her body surrounding her. But there are things she's reacquainted with, like how Jess' breath hitches in her throat when Rory kisses her pulse point, how their hips roll, how every time Rory is amazed her own body is capable of such a natural movement.

But she's also changed – she's more confident about what she wants, what she likes, which Jess seems to really like.

It's really just the first time that it feels like equal footing, that they're both in the exact, right place.

**

Eventually, Rory is starving and Jess hops in the shower while Rory lets Paris know that they can be available tonight.

From Paris Geller:

_U sure?_

From Rory Gilmore:

=YES.

From Paris Geller:

_Listen, I don't want to be stood up because you couldn't keep your hands off each other._

From Rory Gilmore:

_You're going to be with your BF and besides, we're not animals._

Rory rolls her eyes and enters the bathroom to brush her teeth. "Paris is so annoying," Rory says out loud.

"Why?" Jess asks from behind the curtain of the shower.

"She thinks we're going to bail on dinner because we 'can't keep our hands off each other,' I mean, what does she think we are?"

"You can always just tell her we're satisfied for the time being after this morning," Jess suggests.

"And early afternoon, _God, I'm starving, hurry up,_" Rory complains before beginning to brush her teeth.

"_How are you still wound up? That is not possible – I went down on you for – it was a goddamn marathon._"

Rory bursts out laughing and gets spit on her mirror.
Once Paris stops commenting about Rory's streaked hair and focuses on Jess, Paris beams, which Rory has rarely seen her do. The hugging is weird since Paris doesn't normally hug and neither does Jess, so despite Paris' extra enthusiasm, it still looks very awkward.

"It's good to see you," Paris says. "I see you've managed to find clothes without gaping holes."

"I decided to wear something special just for you," Jess quips.

If special to Jess means high waist jeans and a soft sweater that brings out the green in her eyes, then Jess would be correct, Rory figures.

"Jess, this is my boyfriend Doyle. Doyle, this is Jess, Rory's best friend turned lover turned ex turned friend turned lover."

"Thank you for that succinct and unnecessary explanation," Rory grumbles.

Doyle reaches out to shake Jess' hand. "Pleasure to meet you. Paris has told me a lot about you. I also read your book – not my taste, but I can't say I hated it."

"I'll take it."

As promised, there's a lively discussion of *The Road* and *Sharp Objects* at the bar and even the bartender – a large man with sleeves of tattoos – gets involved. Jess' smile is charming (and the bartender admits to Jess that his favorite aunt was disowned from the family and lives with a woman in California), which earns them two rounds of drinks comped.

They were supposed to go to a restaurant, but they end up moving to a free table and eating bar food. Jess describes the deliciousness of the tater tots in Cedar Bar Redux and Paris, being the insane personality that she is, starts planning a time to visit.

"I mean, who knows where the hell I'll be, but I'm sure I'll be lookin' in Phil-a-delphia," Paris insists when the drinks seem to hit her all at once in the last fifteen minutes.

Jess smiles fondly. "You're not staying with me."

"Please, like I would sleep at a printing press. And I would eat Matthew for breakfast," Paris retorts.

It suddenly hits Rory that Jess is permanent. She's integrated into her life in a way she never was when they were sixteen, seventeen years old. She can't disappear and Rory can't pretend she was never part of her life. It's a little scary, but it's also a relief.

Paris and Doyle were supposed to go back to his place, but Jess has her arms wrapped around Paris and Doyle's waists as they walk back to the apartment.

"You're very nice," Rory says after they've settled into her room.

"I know they know Krav Maga, but I think they've consumed too much alcohol for it to be useful," Jess says.

"I love that you're friends with Paris," Rory admits drunkenly. "Nobody appreciates her."

"I know, it's criminal."

Rory had plans for tonight, but she just falls asleep with Jess close.
Rory wakes up with a minor hangover to the perfect smell of eggs and bacon and toast.

Jess is wearing Chris' Biggie shirt and underwear while Paris and Doyle are sitting with their heads facedown on the kitchen table.

"Hungover?" Jess asks.

Rory does not understand how Jess can do that without looking. "Small headache, but I just took some painkillers." Rory points to Paris and Doyle. "Are they alive?"

Doyle makes a strange, whiny groan.

"Yep," Jess responds. "How much cheese do you want in your eggs?"

"Yes."

"Okay, then."

Rory takes a seat at the table and hates that Jess will have to leave the next day.

There is a series of knocks on the door, which cause Paris and Doyle to wail in pain.

"I got it, geez," Rory grumbles, getting up to answer the door.

Olivia and Lucy are standing on the other side with shopping bags.

"See, 'Liv, I told you that we shouldn't assume there would be no food," Lucy says.

"I'm sorry, I thought it was a safe assumption!"

"Hey, guys...what brings you here?" Rory asks slowly.

"Yeah, I wanted to come by and say I'm so sorry for Marty's...weird behavior the other day. I don't know why he tried to pretend he didn't know you."

"Oh, it's okay, I mean – it was pretty unexpected. I hadn't seen him in a year," Rory says. "So...are you guys okay?"

"We're taking a little break, but we're meeting next weekend, so...we'll see. I brought food as an apology."

"And supplies for mimosas," Olivia adds.

"You don't have to stand in the doorway," Jess says.

Olivia steps inside and sighs. "You really are a vision. Please, let me photograph you."

"Ror – you have homework this weekend to do?" Jess asks, plating.

"I always do."

"Okay." Jess smiles at Olivia. "Sure."

Olivia squeals and Paris and Doyle start wailing again.
"Alright, let's just eat in silence," Rory says quietly.

**

Rory is admittedly grateful to have a couple of hours to get school work done and not have everything to do on Sunday night. Besides, taking occasional breaks watching Olivia photograph Jess in the arts building, the light streaming in through the floor to ceiling windows, is something.

"I definitely need a copy of that one," Rory says, pointing at the digital portrait of Jess laughing.

By the time Olivia is finished, she's used up three rolls of Polaroids and a good amount of her memory stick on her professional camera.

"These will be fun to work with in between wanting to kill myself on my final project."

They make a trip down to the ground level of the building to the room where Olivia is keeping her larger than life final art project. Rory has no idea what it's going to be and neither does Olivia, but it's definitely worth staring at.

"Do we know if Paris and Doyle survived post-breakfast?" Jess asks as she and Rory make their way out of the building.

"Probably. But in the meantime, do you want to get lunch?"

"Do I have an option of saying no?"

"Not really."

"Lunch sounds great."

They head to Frank and Pepe's because it's the best pizza in Connecticut, which Jess begrudgingly admits is okay, but still nothing like New York.

"I grew up with mediocrity, so this is high end," Rory says once the waiter drops off their pie.

"You poor, sad Connecticut people."

"But the thing is, because my standards are not so high like yours, I can tolerate a wider range. Same with bagels."

"You have abominations, although Connecticut is still way better than Pennsylvania. And California? Forget it."

"I would love to go there one day."

Jess raises an eyebrow. "If I make a trip out there during your winter break, would you come?" Jess takes a bite of her slice.

Rory blinks in surprise. "Really?"

"Yeah, it'll be great. You're the perfect buffer."

"Jess," Rory sighs.

"I know Lily will want to meet you. I told her about you."
"Really?" Rory asks, touched.

"She took my copy of The Fountainhead."

"Wow, she really got under your skin."

"A little."

Rory smiles. "Yeah, sure, let me know what works for you."

"I'll call them."

Jess takes another bite. "Okay, you know Italians run this, I'll give you that."

Rory smiles in triumph and eats her slice.

**

It almost breaks her heart how well Jess fits into Yale. Rory knows Jess never cared for school after having teacher after teacher disrespect her and have low expectations of her, but she's smarter than a lot of people on campus and her personality shines bright.

Rory doesn't voice this out loud, figuring there's no point where Jess is happy where she is. Besides, Rory will soon be joining her in the real world, which is scary, but less so knowing that someone she knows is flourishing.

Saying goodbye is difficult, but Rory feels ready to move forward, which was the point, she supposes.

"Call me when you make it home?" Rory says by Jess' car.

Jess takes a hesitant step forward and Rory closes the distance, kissing her gently. Jess smiles against her mouth.

**

Rory has never been more grateful for creating her schedule so that she can sleep in on Mondays, although that becomes difficult when her phone keeps vibrating.

Perplexed at the number of times her mom has called her and the fact that she apparently felt the need to bring back snails, she agrees to come home for dinner despite the study group she has. Besides, she should use the time to rip the bandaid off and tell her mom that she's dating Jess.

Except when Rory imagined telling her mom that being in a relationship with Jess (again) she assumed it would be nerve racking, and it did feel that way on the drive to Stars Hollow and sitting down in the kitchen, but she never imagined that her mom would one-up her by coming back to the US with a marriage status changed.

"Um...wow. Wow. Um...hey, congratulations. T-that's – that's so great," Rory stutters.

Her dad, oblivious, is thrilled, describing how they got married. Rory can't look at her mom.

"Well, I guess we can celebrate two relationships – I'm officially with Jess," Rory says with a fake, wide smile.

"What?" her mom asks, her smile finally fading.
"Yeah, isn't that great too? I mean, we've been talking about it for a while and it's really been planned, but both are great, right?" Rory says, shooting her mom a challenging look.

"Well, this is definitely worth some champagne! Do we have some?" her father says.

"Uh, in the cooler in the garage, maybe," her mom answers.

Once her dad leaves, her mom questions, "Jess?"

"Oh no, you you don't get to do that. You married Dad."

"You're mad?"

"Yes, I'm mad."

"Rory -"

"Just stop, okay? Don't."

"Okay, but -"

"I can't do this right now. Because Dad is about to come back in here and I just can't," Rory hisses, pained.

When her dad comes back inside, she plasters a smile back on her face.

**

Rory calls Jess.

"My parents got married while in France, so that totally eclipsed my telling them that we're in a relationship – how's your day going?" Rory says.

"Geez – seriously? Married?"

"Yep! Isn't that just great? Isn't it just swell?"

"Feeling like shit, huh."

"I just can't – I mean, how do they get married without me? I get eloping – I understand the appeal, especially after my mom went through with Luke, but oh my God. I wasn't there for one of the biggest moments of my mom's life. How else am I supposed to feel?"

"What did they say?"

"What do you mean?"

"When you said all that, which, valid."

"I couldn't say that to them!"

"I thought the whole charm of your relationship with your mother is that you two can be honest about feelings."

"Not when my dad was there! He was so thrilled, Jess, I couldn't just – ruin that for him."

"But surely your mom knows you're pissed – you can't hide that manic anger in your eyes even with
"Well, I told my mom I was mad when my dad went out to grab champagne, but…"

"Rory, have we learned nothing? Nobody can read your mind or your feelings."

Rory groans pathetically. "Let me be dramatic and angry!"

"Hah, okay, fine."

"Thank you." Luke comes to mind. "Uh, can you -"

"Not tell Luke?" Jess finishes for her. "We don't talk about his personal life. Besides, I'm definitely not getting involved in this."

"Because you're Team Rory?" Rory guesses.

"Obviously."

Rory smiles. "I love you," she says. "I don't know how I functioned without you in my life. Oh, wait, it was terrible. I made bad choices."

Jess snorts. "You were overdue to make shitty choices. You were just making up for lost time."

The next day, after deleting all her voicemails from her mom, she checks her e-mail to find one from Logan:

Hey Ace -

I was just at a company party last night and I met this guy that I think you'd like – Hugo Grace. He worked for the New York Times, Slate, and the Paris Review under George Plimton.

He's starting a new online thing – along the lines of 'Slate meets New York Times' lifestyle section before they sold out' – his words. I told him I had a friend who might be interested in his work. I have his number and e-mail.

Heard about your needing to give up the editor post – their loss. Next time I'm in New Haven, I'll buy you a drink.

Good luck with upcoming finals!

- Logan

Rory stares at the contact information and considers waiting a day or two, but that was never her style, so she e-mails Hugo right away, probably asking too many questions. But Hugo responds timely in a way that Rory really likes and before she realizes it, she's already agreed to write up a piece for him.

Logan -

We can buy each other drinks. Thanks for thinking of me. How's work going?

- Rory

They go back and forth for a few days. She's proud of him – he's proud of her. She ends up calling him to tell him about Jess since it seems cold to do it via e-mail.
"Nice! Can I get a second chance to meet her and not be a drunk asshole?"

"Sounds good. I gotta go, but we'll hopefully see each other soon?"

"Definitely. Bye, Rory."

"Bye."

She has a smile on her face and almost a skip to her step until she makes it to her apartment to find her mom waiting for her. They make up, of course, but she's still not...sold on the marriage.

Maybe that's why she tells her mom that she's already planned to spend Thanksgiving in Philadelphia. Her mom is hurt, but seems to understand.

That night, she calls Jess to confirm and Rory can hear Jess smiling through the phone, which erases any residual regret she may have had about not spending the holiday with her family.

**

It becomes a new normal, her parents being married. It's strange how she dreamed it for so long growing up, but now that it's a reality, it doesn't compute. It feels like…

It feels fleeting.

"It won't last," Rory admits late at night after she's finished a paper.

"I thought I was the cynic in the relationship," Jess says.

"It's not about being cynical, it's about...I know my mom. And I think she'll remember why she was so set on never marrying my dad in the first place."

She hears Jess breathe through the phone.

"I think at one point, it would've worked, maybe. But now...no."

"Maybe it's not about 'working,' but more about proving that it can be done."

"What do you mean?"

"Like, I'm sure there was some sort of insecurity there about not being married, coming close and never making it. And what happened with Luke was the final straw. So marrying your dad wasn't just a means of rebounding, but to prove that she could do it."

"So you're saying my mom marrying my dad is a means of being spiteful."

"Not the word I would've chosen. It's not really about other people, it's about herself."

Rory considers it as she stares at her bedroom ceiling. "Maybe."

"I mean, speaking as someone who is sort of cut from the same cloth. It's probably something I would do."

"You?"

"Well, not marry, but I'd do something stupid just to prove a point to myself."

"Would you want to? Get married?"
"Can't unless it's in Massachusetts, and frankly, I don't want to go there any more than I have to for work."

"Yeah, I know, but like...if it were legalized everywhere, or if you were in a relationship with a man – would you?"

"At this point, I don't think I'm marrying a man, babe," Jess says. "But sure, I mean, with the right person. I don't know why the government needs to be involved, but I guess for tax purposes it may be worth it."

"I think I'm swooning," Rory says with an eye roll.

"Look, this is your mom's thing, okay? It's not mine. I've got my own fucking issues."

"We all have issues." Pause. "Speaking of, do I need to bring anything for Thanksgiving? Cranberry sauce in a can, perhaps?"

"You can bring that and marshmallows and you're golden."

"Great."

"Liz has a feeling she's giving birth before her due date, so I might end up coming up next weekend. We'll see."

"Oh, that would be great. It's Lucy's twenty-first birthday – the party theme is 2002."

"That's...specific."

"I'm digging my Uggs up."

"I'll try to find some clothes circa-2002."

Rory wants to ask about Liz, about officially meeting her, but she trusts Jess to let her in eventually. And even though Rory is expecting her to come any day during the week, she's still surprised when she gets a call in between classes from Jess saying she's on her way up to Connecticut and to save me a handle of anything other than vodka when I get to campus.

When Jess arrives at Rory's apartment, she seems...subdued.

"You don't have to come, really. You can just hang out here," Rory says, handing her a soda and passing her cookies since Rory doesn't know how to comfort her. "That drive is no joke and meeting, well…"

"It's okay, I'll come for a bit," Jess says, nibbling on a cookie. She shoots Rory a fleeting smile. "I said I'd stop by on my way back, if you want to see her."

"Really?" Rory asks, unsure.

"Well, it's mostly so I don't say something mean," Jess admits.

"About the baby? I know the name is a little...strange, but -"

"No, in defense of you."

"I...have a hard time imagining your – Liz reacting…badly," Rory says slowly.
"Oh, no, she's all for gay rights. She'd just make it about her, or something. I don't know." Jess sighs. "Let me change for this thing. I picked up a handle of Ketel One as a gift."

"Anything is better than Absolut and Smirnoff."

"My thoughts exactly."

Rory bends down and kisses Jess' temple.

"I'll get dressed." Jess hands Rory half of her cookie.

Rory eats it, but doesn't really taste it.

**

Rory keeps an eye out on Jess, but she's lightyears away from being eighteen and imploding, which Jess had acknowledged before they entered Lucy and Olivia's dorm.

So eventually, Rory stops checking in on her and focuses on Marty, who has been awkward since bumping into each other a few days ago.

And after enough drinks, she's sitting on the couch with Marty, almost like it's freshman year.

"Oh, you've been working out," Rory jokes.

"Can't you tell? I'm huge. I'm massive. I'm Marty Schwarzenegger," Marty snorts.

"I can tell. You're looking good," Rory says, shaking her head.

"And you are more beautiful than ever."

Rory looks to him in shock, but he's staring at her with hooded eyes – drunk, obviously – but -

"Hey, what's going on here?"

Rory jolts when Jess sits on her lap, crossing her legs and wrapping an arm around Rory's shoulders. Jess' cheeks are a little pink, but her eyes are sharp as she stares at Marty.

"Just...reminiscing about freshman year…" Marty says awkwardly.

"Hmm," Jess hums.

"I think you should be out there with Lucy," Rory prompts him.

He gets to his feet and goes to her.

Jess looks to Rory. "What did he say?" she asks lightly.

Rory puts a hand on Jess' back. "He's so drunk," she starts.

"I know how drunk he is. I'm asking what he said."

"Does it matter?"

"You looked upset. I'm curious." Jess sighs. "So that definitely means it's worthy of being punched in the mouth."
"You're not doing that – it would ruin Lucy's birthday."

"You're lucky I like her. Now – what did he say?"

Rory sighs. "He said...I'm more beautiful than ever," she says quietly by Jess' ear.

Jess pulls back. "I'm going to punch him in the mouth -"

"Jess, no – it's not a big deal -"

"It is a big deal, Rory." Jess sounds...sad. "He made you uncomfortable, he has a girlfriend, and you do too."

Rory looks to Lucy and Marty, who are kissing and smiling at each other. The tequila drinks Marty had made her are churning in her stomach.

"I'm ready to go home," Rory says.

Jess slides off her lap and stands up, offering her hand.

"Let me say goodbye," Rory says.

"Sure."

The goodbyes are quick, mostly because Olivia seems to have disappeared at some point and Lucy was primarily interested in Marty. Rory snakes a hand around Jess' waist as they leave the party.

"Sorry, I was an asshole," Jess starts to say, which makes Rory snort. "What?"

"You think that was asshole behavior?" she says with fondness. "I think you and Paris will single-handedly destroy the patriarchy."

"Paris doesn't need me for that."

"I've never had much experience with guys. I still find them confusing. But I know alcohol can make you say and do stupid things." Rory chews on her bottom lip. "I want to forget it happened. He probably won't even remember he said that. He made this drink that...I can't even think about because it makes me sick."

"Tequila is nobody's friend. Do you want to eat?"

"No, I just want to go to bed."

So they arrive back at Rory's apartment, brush their teeth, change out of their clothes, and go to sleep.

**

After eating an insanely large breakfast, they drive to Stars Hollow in separate cars. Even though Rory has met Liz briefly, this is obviously under much different circumstances. She hopes for Jess' sake that it goes smoothly.

The baby – Doula – is sleeping soundly in her crib. She looks...odd, to be honest, but Liz explains that babies don't start really looking cute for a couple of more weeks.

"Liz," Jess says to get her attention. "Got news for you."
"What?"

Jess nods to Rory. "We're dating."

Liz looks between the two of them. "That's nice," she says absentmindedly. Rory finds that an incredibly strange response. "And this makes you happy?" Liz asks Jess, like Rory isn't even in the room.

Jess can't hide her surprise. "Yeah."

"Great!" Liz exclaims. Suddenly she brings a hand to her breasts and winces. "Sorry, gotta pump." She leaves the room.

Rory looks to Jess and smiles brightly. Jess looks bewildered, but then she shrugs and offers a smile in return.

**

After they part ways, Rory heads back to campus, directly to Lucy and Olivia's room. Lucy, sporting a hangover and slowly sipping Gatorade, thanks Rory for bringing Paris, Doyle, and Jess.

Rory hates to do it, but she tells Lucy about Marty. How they were friends – good friends – and how they stopped being friends because Marty liked her and Rory had liked Logan.

She tells her what Marty had said the night before. She hates how Lucy's face falls. "I'm so sorry to be telling you this, I hate that I'm hurting you, but I care about you so much -" 

Lucy smiles sadly. "I know. And I think I should be wondering what you said or did to make him say that, but I know you didn't do anything. I know Jess is basically your soulmate."

"You deserve someone who only thinks about you," Rory insists, putting aside Lucy's statement for now.

"I know."

"I'm sorry I'm telling you this now while you're already feeling crappy."

Lucy waves her hand dismissively. "Better to get it all out in one go, yeah? But thanks. For telling me. You're a great friend."

Rory smiles and looks down at her lap. "Soulmates?" she questions.

Lucy raises her eyebrows. "Obviously. You're an inspiration."

"I don't know about that – we were together in secret for a few months, stopped talking for almost two years, and not a year passes of reconnecting, we start dating long distance. Not that inspirational."

"But that's the thing – you've been through so much – together and apart – and yet you're still great for each other." She pauses. "Inspirational," she adds dramatically.

Rory smiles. "Thanks, Lucy."

"Want to grab dinner later? The thought of eating right now is making me feel worse, but I think in a couple of hours I'll be a ravenous pig."
"Sounds good. Feel better." Rory looks around. "Is Olivia okay?"

"She might've passed out. Has been vomiting all night and morning."

Rory grimaces. "Well, give her my best."

Lucy waves her goodbye and curls herself onto the couch, grabbing a blanket to wrap herself in. Rory smiles and shuts the door as quietly as possible behind her.

**

On the drive to Philadelphia, Rory speaks to her mom for half of it. "I'm sorry I'm bailing -" Rory says again.

"Don't – you should be able to spend time with Jess. I'll save some leftovers for you to pick up on Sunday."

"I have the best mommy."

"Mommy also has a list of the closest urgent care facilities in case you get food poisoning."

Rory frowns. "I'm not going to need that."

"I'll text them to you. Give me twenty minutes."

Rory rolls her eyes.

When she arrives, she has to rush up the stairs to use the bathroom because drinking a large iced coffee on a road trip is never a good idea. But as soon as she steps out, Jess pulls her into her room and says, "Hope you don't mind my stealing you."

"I think this would be considered rude," Rory says, wrapping an arm around Jess' shoulders while Jess' hands grip her waist.

"They'll live. You look nice."

"Really? New sweater."

"Beautiful. Should go great with my floor," Jess says with such casualness that it takes Rory aback before she ends up hysterically laughing.

"Seriously?"

"And your pants and everything else," Jess adds with faux thoughtfulness. "Although -"

"Oh, just kiss me, you dork."

**

It's strange, not being in Stars Hollow for Thanksgiving break, but Truncheon is boisterous and Rory truly, honestly, loves Chris and Matthew.

So does Jess, apparently, for when they go around the table saying three things that they're grateful for, all of which have been frivolous things from the release of Sam's Town (Chris and Matthew high-five each other), the existence of those giant plastic containers of cheese puffs (Rory is alone on this one), and the marriage of Avril Lavigne and Deryck Whibley ("Who?" Jess demands,
condescending. "Oh come on, you know 'Fat Lip,'" Chris scoffs. "Stormin’ through the party like my name's El Niño, when I'm hangin' out drinking in the back of an El Camino..." Matthew sings, clearly tipsy. Jess rolls her eyes. "I don't want to waste my time, become another casualty of society," Rory supplied unhelpfully. "I'll never never fall in line, become another victim of your conformity and back down!" Chris and Matthew scream more than sing.

When it comes to Jess' turn she half shrugs. "You guys," she says. "Although that emo shit almost made me change my mind."

Rory smiles.

"You're a sap, Mariano!" Matthew exclaims.

"Yeah, yeah, eat your fucking plate."

That's a high point.

**

The low point is Chris disappearing for awhile and Jess, fiddling with her hands, itching for a cigarette, says to Rory in a low voice, "He's the black sheep, for lack of a better term."

So Rory goes outside and finds Chris on the stoop, shoulders hunched. It's freezing, but Rory sits down next to him.

"You know, my older brother went to Yale. He's a doctor now. My sister went to Julliard and is a violinist with the Cleveland Orchestra. I'm a slacker who graduated community college and is working at a dinky publishing house." He smiles grimly. "I'll have to go back for Christmas, but Thanksgiving's the worst since it used to be my favorite."

Rory doesn't know what to say. She understands disappointing family, but not to the extent that Chris does or her mom. So she just pats him on the back awkwardly.

Jess comes out to end the awkwardness and she places her hands on his shoulders, standing over him, but his hair touches under her chin. "Hey. How much longer do you need to mope? Matthew needs his horrible karaoke buddy. He's way more entertaining than your brother who has a stethoscope up his ass."

Chris snorts. "Yeah, yeah, comin'."

Jess steps back when Chris gets to his feet. She holds out a hand for Rory to take.

"Holidays are the worst for those with shit families," Jess says in a low voice. "Speaking of holidays," she continues in a normal tone, "I'm officially going to LA for Christmas."

"Really? Wow."

"Yeah, Jimmy bought my tickets. I called and mentioned it once, and I check the mail a few days later and there they are. Want to come?"

"What?" Rory stops walking.

"He got me another ticket. Guess Lily told him I was seeing someone."

Rory looks at her. Jess's hair is crazier than normal given the amount of cooking she's done throughout the day and her eyes are a little hooded from drinking, but she seems happy and Rory is
so happy, so…

"Yeah, I'll come. I'd love to meet your dad and...step sibling?"

"They're not married, but...basically."

Jess goes more into depth about her time in LA. Even though it wasn't a good time for Jess – that much is obvious – she still speaks about it with some fondness. Plus, with Lane living out there now...

Her mom will be upset, but hopefully she'll understand.

**

Rory has to go out of her way to Philadelphia to fly to LA, but that means she can sit next to Jess and swap books. Jess is a good flyer, although in turbulence, she grasps Rory's hand and takes a while to let go.

When they land, Rory calls her mom while Jess waits for their bags. Rory had imagined LAX to be more...glamorous for some reason.

Jess seems surprised that Sasha and Lily are waiting for them, but it's obvious that they love her, especially Lily, who immediately starts talking about five different books she's read in the last month. Her horn-rimmed glasses make her eyes look huge and she doesn't act like an fourteen-year-old Rory knows.

Lily clings to Rory once she's properly introduced and Rory...thinks she's amazing. Almost like her, in a way, but a little like Paris in not caring what other people think about her.

"California really is a liberal paradise," Rory says softly while they're sitting on the beach, but Lily overhears.

"I don't know about that, but...I don't care. Like, who cares if you love a guy or a girl or...whoever people identify? It's...as long as you're not hurting anyone – it's nobody's business."

Rory's eyes sting, but she smiles. "I wish the rest of the world thought like that."

"I'm sure it'll change. Progress, right? We're getting there."

"I like your enthusiasm."

"It's the youth, apparently. So, Yale? Worth it? Or would you recommend somewhere else?"

"You're thinking about college already?"

"Weren't you?"

Jess comes in and says, "Not my doing!" before dashing away, probably to grab coffee from the boardwalk, which Rory greatly appreciates.

Rory shakes her head. "I was, but I was admittedly influenced by other factors, but...yes. I'll give you the inside scoop."

The truth is, she loves Yale, for better or for worse. She grew up there, she has a lot of fond memories and not-so-fond memories, but there's something...realistic about it. Nowhere is perfect, nothing is perfect. She grew up in a picture-perfect town that actually was close-minded and hated
change and hated a lot of things. It just took a long time for her hindsight to be twenty-twenty and not through rose-colored shades.

"You just have to find a school that...you think the good will outweigh whatever bad exists," Rory concludes.

Lily pushes her glasses up with her pointer-finger and looks up thoughtfully. "Okay. I'll keep that in mind."

Rory puts an arm around Lily's shoulders because it feels natural and Lily seems okay with it.

"We'll see where I end up, but if I check out the east coast, you will be the first to know," Lily says. "Sounds good."

**

It's...eerie. Jess' dad, how similar they are. They spent one day together before Jess' eighteenth birthday and yet they have so many overlapping interests – books, artists, films. There's something to be said about genetics and Rory knows how much it torments Jess, even though she claims she's come to peace with it all.

"It's weird, right?" Jess' dad – Jimmy – asks with a self-deprecating laugh and shake of his head, drinking his beer.

Rory kind of hates him, but that's a given. But he seems like he's grown up from the asshole youth that he was, abandoning his girlfriend and their baby girl. Sometimes Rory thinks he seems haunted.

"A little, but from what education I received, I always saw it as a mix of nature and nurture, so…"

Jimmy smiles. "You're very nice. Kind."

"So I've been told," she says, somewhat bitterly.

Jimmy gives her a secret grin like he knows. "I'm sure."

(Rory kisses Jess with everything she has late that night and places a hand over Jess' mouth so when Jess comes, her scream is muffled. She makes Jess come a few times that night, and Jess knows there's something going on, but she's the most understanding person when it comes to needing to take a breath and think.)

**

It's weird celebrating Christmas in this warm weather, but California has their own means of being festive, like lights on palm trees and Santas in bathing suits and ice skating rinks in enclosed spaces.

Even though Jess is a quintessential New Yorker, she fits in L.A. She wears giant sunglasses and tans in the sun and even has a smoothie at one point, which Rory laughs about for almost two days.

Sasha is someone that Rory's mom has to meet one day. She's laid back and cool and so, so supportive.

When Rory goes to refill her soda during dinner, she looks back at the round table where Sasha, Lily, Jimmy, and Jess are sitting, talking, and it's a nice little family.

Later that night, Jess tells Rory that Sasha and Jimmy are thinking about a ceremony of sorts. They're
not sure if they want a proper wedding, but Sasha thinks she would like pictures and dancing and even though Lily is too old to be a flower girl, she could still do it.

"I would've come back here without the excuse of a wedding or wedding-ceremony-equivalent," Rory says with an excited grin. "That's exciting! How do you feel about it?"

Jess shrugs. "Okay. I mean, they've been dating and living with each other for a while. Whatever makes them happy. Although I think Lily will be the happiest of them all."

At one point, Jess disappears with Jimmy and Rory and Lily and Rory are sitting with dogs on their laps in the front yard.

"Where did they go?" Rory asks.

"Probably to talk, but they're both very bad at it, so it'll be a lot of long pauses and it'll take a lot longer than necessary," Lily says.

Rory laughs. "I think Jess has gotten better at it."

"This is true, but Jimmy has struggled way longer than Jess."

"Men," Rory scoffs.

"Men," Lily agrees.

Eventually they do come back. Jess seems okay – she doesn't seem interested in talking for now, but Rory know she'll hear about it eventually.

It's nice how she can fully trust Jess, that Jess trusts her. There only problem is the long distance, but it's okay for now. Besides, there's something to be said how well they work even with the limited amount of face-to-face time.

Rory even gets to see Jess writing, which turns Rory on quite a bit, and Rory doesn't know if it's from hanging out with Olivia a lot, but she appreciates how Jess looks in the sun writing in a Moleskin notebook.

"Moleskin is the go-to gift for writers, so I have about ten of these," Jess explains since Rory knows they're not cheap and Jess has never been one to splurge on things for herself. "Two of which were from Paris as Hanukkah gifts."

"Aw, that was nice of her! I got a planner that was pre-filled out with things that I'm sure she'll tell me about once the new semester starts. What did you get her?"

Jess smiles mysteriously and doesn't say anything. But funnily enough, a few hours later, Paris calls Jess and squeals regarding the paper Jess wrote comparing Jane Austen and Charles Bukowski.

"It's not really a paper – I did not properly cite," Jess argues over the phone. "I provided a page range," she adds, looking at Rory.

"We are having a discussion about this when you next come here. Two hours."

"No way, one."

"An hour and a half!"

"Fine, but you are not spending part of that time fixing every damn citation attempt."
"...Fine. You've got a deal."

Jess rolls her eyes with a smile.

"I can't believe you wrote a paper. Like, willingly," Rory says.

"Admittedly part of the reason was because I had to spot someone money and didn't have much to work with, but I figured I tortured her enough. She really lets nothing go," Jess says with a shrug.

"Who did you have to spot?"

"It was nothing – a guy at the print shop was short on his rent and he needed to be tided over until he got paid a few days later. It's fine, I got it back and he gifted me a box of doughnuts."

"Oh, well, that's good. When did this happen?"

"After Thanksgiving? It wasn't a big deal – sorry I didn't tell you, but I was fine, really. I ate my meals and did work, I just skimped out on some stuff. You know how it goes."

"Yeah, I guess." Rory shakes her head, feeling embarrassed. "Sorry, I don't know why I'm being weird about it."

"I mean, it was something I did keep from you, but it wasn't...eating away at me. It was a no-brainer. The guy has helped us out of tough situations and I knew he was good for it. Plus those doughnuts were worth it – it's from a specialty bakery where they make these crazy flavors beyond the traditional glazed, strawberry frosted, chocolate – like, they made one that was basically Cinnamon Toast Crunch in doughnut-form."

"Excuse me, you should've express mailed that to me."

"I don't think it would've survived the postal service. But I'm sorry, I didn't intend to keep it from you. It's just something I did. It's something I'll do."

"Okay. I get it. Sorry for being weird."

"Okay, now that that's out of the way...I'm assuming you're going to want to read this paper."

"Um, yeah."

"Can't – I mailed her a handwritten copy."

"Are you kidding me?"

Jess is obviously a little uncomfortable with the family aspect of Christmas – everyone sitting in their pajamas, blasting holiday music and eating cookies that "Santa" left behind. Rory's a little uncomfortable too since this is her first time spending Christmas without her mom, but it's nice experiencing the enthusiasm of a child opening up gifts that are total surprises.

Jimmy gives Jess an envelope and even though Jess only peaks inside and doesn't take anything out, Rory figures there's a check inside worth quite a bit of money. Jess looks up at Jimmy with an are you effing serious glare and Jimmy nods so Jess looks to Sasha, who has a kind smile on her face.

"Think of it as a culmination of all the missed holidays," Jimmy says after a minute of silence.
"I -" Jess starts.

"You're grateful and appreciative and you will use that money to invest, or buy something nice for yourself?" Lily finishes for Jess with a challenging stare.

Jess flashes her a grin. "Sure."

Rory breathes a little easier.

"What do you even know about investing?" Jess questions and that sparks a discussion that ends with Sasha proving to be ridiculously more business savvy than Rory ever imagined.

All in all – it's a nice Christmas.

**

The last couple of days in LA, Rory spends with Lane, who is living in a small apartment in West Hollywood with the band. Lane says she sometimes escapes to Dave's apartment off the USC campus to just have a bathroom to herself.

Lane looks so at home here in a way she never did in Stars Hollow. She's wearing the clothes she always tried to wear as a teenager, she's leaning back into Dave's chest as they sit at a coffee shop with too many different kinds of kombucha.

It's nice to see Dave too, even though Jess was right – his taste in music did shift a little, and not necessarily for the better, but Lane doesn't seem to care about that.

Rory hugs Lane for a long time when they part ways.

"I'm going to come back in May, I think. Around the time you graduate," Lane tells her.

"You better."

**

When Rory gets back to the east coast, she stays a night with Jess in Philadelphia before heading back to Stars Hollow. She's still off with the time change, but it's nice to be home, even though she really did not miss the freezing temperatures.

It's awkward, taking into account that it's just not her and her mom anymore, that they'll need to incorporate her dad and Gigi. Rory has always considered herself more flexible than her mother, but even she's tested by this.

But what Rory is more worried about is her mom thinking about Luke, how her mom can't seem to let go, can't let herself process her grief. Rory considers what it's like, but quickly realizes that maybe she has a better understanding than she gives herself credit for.

Her mom stops bringing up the letter once they return from the mall, after bumping into April and Luke, but Rory figures her mom found the right words.

But at one point, she slips into Luke's before closing to have a mug of hot chocolate and coffee, which Luke adds peppermint syrup – a mistake in the order for the week, Luke insisted – and she tells him about California with Jess.
Rory gets back to school and finds out what the planner is for – she sees all the dates and projects listed on white boards titled *Operation Finish Line* and she feels the need to sit down and breathe.

"Please distract me from the insanity that is Paris Geller," Rory says to Jess once she picks up.

"*What, you're not into Operation Finish Line?*"

"Oh, screw you," Rory laughs. "She's so crazy."

"*She's your friend.*"

"She's yours too!"

"*Semantics. Excited for your last, first day of classes?*

"I'm sad, honestly," Rory admits. "But I'm super excited. My classes are going to be great."

"*Even Econ? I know your grandpa is teaching it and all, but, still. Econ.*"

"Yes, I know it's not exactly in line with my usual schoolwork, but that's why I'm taking it – my grandpa will definitely make a dull subject interesting."

"*If you say so.*"

"So, what's new on the agenda for Truncheon?"

"*Well, not Truncheon, but I have something. I'll tell you about it afterwards because I'm going to psych myself out and it may not mean anything.*"

"Wow, it must be something because that was very close to a Gilmore rambling."

"*I could use some pom poms right about now.*"

Rory smiles. "You're amazing, Jess. You're one of the best people I know. And Paris is willing to vouch to your being one of the smartest people she knows, which is probably the highest praise you can receive in the universe."

Jess snorts. "*Thanks. I promise I'll tell you afterwards.*"

"Okay, love you."

"*Love you too.*"

Rory ends up having a great first day, at least until she gets to her Econ class and she watches her grandpa have a heart attack.

**

Rory rides with the ambulance and she calls her mom until she picks up. She calls Jess, who says she's in New York and can make it to New Haven in two hours. Rory doesn't have the mental capacity to question why Jess is in New York and didn't tell her.

She's thankfully not alone in the waiting room for her long, her mom seemingly have broken every speed limit to get there. Then her grandma arrives, trying to appear put-together, but her mind is whirling hundreds of miles an hour.
Every time Rory asks about her dad, her mom brushes the question aside.

Jess arrives and Rory stares, unable to comprehend that Jess seems to be wearing a *blazer* and a *long coat* and are those shoes without laces? "Excuse me, you look a lot like Jess Mariano, but you can’t possibly be her," Rory jokes weakly.

"I'm letting that go for now," Jess says, pulling Rory into a much needed hug. "How are you doing?"

"It was so awful, Jess, he just fell."

"Jess?" her mom asks, seemingly torn between confused and amused as her eyes rake up and down her body.

Jess gives her mom a tired look.

"Who is this?" Rory's grandma asks.

"Uh, Mom, this is Jess Mariano, Luke's niece. And…" her mom trails off.

"My girlfriend. We've been together for a little while now," Rory finishes almost seamlessly.

"I'm sorry we're meeting under these circumstances," Jess says.

"Yes," Rory's grandma says in a daze.

"I was about to find coffee – can I get you anything?" Jess asks, eyes flitting towards Rory's mom then grandma.

"Oh, I just asked. She doesn't want anything," her mom says at the same time her grandma says, "Tea would be nice."

"Sure. Lorelai?"

"I'm good, thanks."

Jess raises her eyebrows at Rory before leaving.

"Girlfriend?" her grandma questions once Jess is out of hearing distance.

"Yeah. I'm sorry you're finding out like this – I didn't think she'd come. She lives in Philly."

"There's no way she got here from Philly in such a short amount of time unless she teleported."

"I know, she was in New York today," Rory says, biting her lip.

"Oh. Well...she's very pretty," her grandma says. "Striking face."

Rory smiles. "Yeah."

"Speaking of partners, where's Christopher?"

Rory knows her mom too well and knows something is wrong, but the doctor saves her mom from potentially lying.

**

Rory remembers her grandpa being hospitalized six years ago and she hated it then. She hates it now.
They only have a few minutes with him before the nurse comes to prepare him for surgery. Jess is saving their seats in an obnoxious way by having her coat draped over two chairs and her sitting in one and having her legs dangle off the armrest of the next to hers.

"And the illusion is shattered," Rory jokes.

"Hey." Jess swings her legs over so she's sitting properly. "The coffee is atrocious. Why wasn't I warned?"

"I thought it was a given that hospital coffee is terrible."

"I can't even remember the last time I was in the ER. Maybe when I was five and I had a fever of over a hundred and three."

Rory winces. Jess' phone buzzes in her hand.

"It's Chris, hold on," Jess says as Rory sits down next to her. "Hey, what's...yeah, I'm here. MetroNorth is pretty consistent, it's not like traffic is an issue." Jess listens for a little. "I'll tell her. He's going for an emergency bypass, but it should go well."

Jess offers her hand to Rory, who takes it gratefully with both of hers.

"You've got to calm Matthew down. We'll talk about it when I get back – and tell Matthew I don't know when that'll be and he should take a chill pill, preferably one that starts with an 'X' or a 'V.'"

Rory smiles at Jess rolling her eyes dramatically.

"No, do not put him on." Jess shuts her eyes. "Matthew, please. I'm trying to be an emotional pillar for my girlfriend. Our shit can wait." Jess exhales sharply and she stares at the wall in front of her. "It's not off the table, I promise. We will talk about it when I get back. Goodbye, Matthew." Jess shuts her phone and slouches in her chair.

Rory is about to ask what is going on, but she hears her grandma down the hall saying "-Whatever gave Suzanna Shaw the idea that the rest of us share her barbaric interest in Cormac McCarthy is beyond me -"

Jess looks to Rory with an affronted expression, which makes Rory laugh. Then her face morphs to a confused expression.

"Oh, no. Not him again. What's he doing here?" her grandma says, following Jess' gaze.

"Luke?" Rory questions. "Did you call him?"

"No, didn't think about it," Jess says, getting to her feet.

"Jess?" Luke says with surprise.

"Hey, Uncle Luke."

Luke's eyes bug out of his head when he notices what she's wearing.

"Don't ask," Jess says dryly. "Next meeting I'm wearing jeans and a crop top, you guys are annoying."

Rory snorts and leads Jess away from her mom and Luke. "Let's get you some more terrible coffee."
While Rory is driving out of the hospital with Jess, she gets a call from Logan. She puts it on speakerphone.

"Hey, Rory – I heard about Richard, is he okay? How's he doing?"

"He had an emergency bypass, but he's going to be okay." Rory says before mouthing Logan to Jess in case she didn't recognize his phone. She did, judging by her neutral expression.

"I'm so sorry. I'm glad to hear he's going to be okay. Do you need me to get you anything? I'm already in New Haven for Mitchum bullshit."

"You are? Maybe we'll try to catch you before you go back to New York."

"We?"

"Me and Jess."

"Oh, yeah! Absolutely. I don't want to take up your time now – just let me know when is good for you and I'll make it work. Give my best to Lorelai and Emily, would you?"

"I will. Thanks, Logan."

"Bye, Logan," Jess says.

"Oh, hey – uh, well, bye."

Jess smirks and looks out the window.

**

"Okay, you have to tell me," Rory says as they're packing up stuff to bring back to the hospital for her grandpa. "What were you doing in New York?"

Jess sighs. "This isn't really the best time."

"If it'll distract me from this, then please."

Jess purses her mouth in an eerily similar way to Luke. "I was with Chris and Matthew."

"Okay...for what?"

"A meeting."

"I kind of figured since you're dressed like Corporate America."

Jess rolls her eyes.

"Who was the meeting with?"

Jess hesitates for a second. "Random House."

Rory stares at Jess, waiting for her to crack a joke or laugh or do something to indicate she's joking. After a few moments, she still has a straight face. "What?" Rory questions.

"Yeah, I know. They're interested in what we print – the literature, a few of the poets."
"You. They're interested in your work."

"Part of it," Jess acknowledges, "But really the whole package."

"Do they want Truncheon to be an imprint?" Rory whispers excitedly.

"Maybe. We just sat down to talk. I think Matthew is starstruck by it, but I don't know how I feel being one of many. Also need to know how much control we'd be giving up."

"Okay, but what if -"

"The deal was perfect and I had nothing to complain about?" Jess finishes for her. She shrugs. "I don't know. It would be nice being protected by a large corporation, I guess."


"I don't know about that, you're jumping, like, light years ahead and probably to another dimension."

"What? You know I think your book is amazing – and your short stories, I mean, I actually felt like I was sucker-punched in your last 'zine. You're amazing, Jess."

Jess almost looks flustered as she looks away from Rory. "Too much pom poms."

"Okay, okay. But, it's okay to think big."

"Don't you mean dream big?"

"No, because it's possible. Really possible. So think big."

Jess exhales and smiles softly, bringing a hand to the back of Rory's head and gently kissing her forehead.

"So you'll let me know if you're going to be part of Random House?"

"If. And yes, of course I'll tell you. Sorry I was weird about it before. I'm not used to…" Jess sighs. "Not used to good shit happening, to put it bluntly. Working on it."

"I get it. Didn't want to jinx it."

Jess' phone rings and she says, "If this is either one of those shits – oh, Luke, hold on." Jess picks up the call. "Hey, what's going on?" Jess blinks. "Uh, yeah, actually, that would be great. Just jeans. I can borrow a shirt from Rory's." Jess then rolls her eyes so hard Rory thinks they may get stuck there. "Do not worry about that. Thanks – I'll see you there." Jess hangs up and groans. "Luke asked about undergarments. That was the word he specifically used."

Rory reaches over to pat Jess' shoulder. "Poor baby."


Rory laughs out loud.

**

Thankfully, the surgery goes well and Rory is happy to speak with him a little bit, even though he's groggy and falls asleep quickly.
"Is Jess planning to stay?" her mom asks.

"Yeah, I think so. She asked Luke to bring her pants since I think she's ready to burn her clothes, which, can't say I blame her. Dress pants are pretty annoying."

"She seems to be doing very well."

"Yeah, she's...she actually may end up working for Random House."

Her mom's eyes widen. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. I mean, they're just talking with them now and I'm sure lawyers will having to be long involved before anything happens, but...seems promising."

"Wow...who'd of thought the hoodlum would turn out to be a respectable member of society?"

"I did."

Her mom smiles. "Yeah, I guess you did."

Rory exhales. "Mom...do you know where Dad is?"

"No, hun. For all I know, maybe he's in Philadelphia."

Rory doesn't know what's going on exactly, but she knows this: her father better have a damn good reason for not being here.

**

Visiting hours come to an end and Rory and Jess scarf down burgers that Luke had left while her grandma reluctantly takes a bite of a lobster roll and tries to pretend she doesn't care for it, but it's obvious she likes it.

"Luke makes a great lobster salad – not a lot of mayo, nice size chunks of lobster," Jess says.

"I'll take your word for it," Rory says with a grimace.

"I forgot, you have the palette of a five year old."

To Rory's surprise, her grandma snorts. "Grandma!" Rory gasps.

"You're not wrong," her grandma says to Jess, but smiles with fondness at Rory.

Rory offers to stay with her grandma in Hartford, but her grandma insists she will be fine and she has plenty more work to do tomorrow and would like peace and quiet to get the work done.

Her mom hands Jess a shopping bag of clothing that Luke had left with her and Rory offers to go back to Stars Hollow, but her mom brushes her off saying that it would be better for one person to be in New Haven, just in case.

So Rory and Jess go back to her apartment with the rest of Luke's food. Rory doesn't know when Jess let Paris know, but she's grateful that she doesn't have to talk about it.

"Fucking finally. These pants are the worst," Jess gripes when she walks into Rory's room.

"Dress pants are a relic of the patriarchy and should be eliminated!" Paris exclaims from the kitchen,
eating a slice of pie from Luke's as Rory shuts the door behind her.

"Absolutely!"

Rory leans against the door with an exhale. "Have I thanked you enough for today?"

"Stop, seriously, I'm glad I was useful. And hey, met your grandma and she didn't kill me."

"I don't think she fully processed, so we'll see in a week or so. I'll give you fair warning."

"Sounds good." Jess rubs her abdomen where her pants were digging into her skin.

Rory's heart aches considering a future – maybe it's soon, maybe it's distant, maybe, as Jess had said earlier, a future that exists in another dimension where they come home from work and this is part of the routine.

Maybe she's exhausted and needs a good night's sleep so she can be alert for her grandpa tomorrow.

"Want to shower first?" Rory offers.

Jess pulls off her shirt, revealing a respectable bra that matches her skin tone. Rory raises her eyebrows in surprise.

"Like I'm going to wear a red bra under a white shirt with Corporate America," Jess says, walking out of Rory's room to the bathroom.

"It's like the universe knew my eating a second slice of pie was a bad idea – why am I friends with two people who have hot bodies?" Paris laments.

Rory drops her head into her hands.

"You have a hot bod, Paris," Jess calls out.

"She's right, babe!" Was Doyle here the whole time?

Rory grabs her basket of toiletries and follows Jess into the bathroom.

**

Rory and Jess head to the hospital in the morning, but are told by her grandpa's doctors that he'll be tested upon most of the late morning into the mid-afternoon.

"Have a big steak for me," her grandpa says sleepily.

Her mom leaves to go back to the Inn to work for a few hours and Rory calls Logan to see if he's available for lunch.

They meet him at a new restaurant in New Haven and as soon as they sit down, Logan says, "I just want to start off by apologizing for how I acted the last time I saw you. I was an asshole. Drunk, but an asshole. I hope we can start over." He sticks his hand out across the table.

Jess raises her eyebrows. "Sure, Logan Huntzberger." She shakes his hand. "Let's do that."

The lunch is surprisingly pleasant. Logan – who seems to have remembered a lot of what happened last year – asks questions about Jess' work. They have a decent conversation on Truncheon and running the printing press. Jess asks questions about Logan's work, which involves a lot of business
terminology that Rory isn't really sure if Jess is following since Rory keeps losing track, but she puts up a good front that she does.

They actually have a conversation about books, even though Rory doesn't know how either of them have time to read since they both seem so busy.

At one point, Jess leaves to use the restroom and Logan leans forward. "She's so cool," he says in a whisper.

"I always thought she was cool, even at sixteen."

"God, that's amazing."

When Jess comes back, she sits down, turns to Rory and says, "I like him."

Logan laughs and looks down in embarrassment. "If you'd ever decide to get into a more cut throat line of work, I think you'd do very well," he says.

"My entire life has mostly been cut-throat, I'm over it."

"Fair enough. So...I don't know about you guys, but I saw someone getting a sundae and it looks amazing, even though it's thirty degrees out."

"Sold on sundae," Rory says at once.

When the bill comes, Logan is quick to give the waitress his credit card at once. Jess stares at him blankly.

"Trust me, I owe you. Next time, even split," Logan says with his hands up.

Jess exhales. "Fine. Thank you."

He grins. "My pleasure."

They're saying their goodbyes outside the restaurant when a sleek black car pulls to a stop in front of them. Mitchum Huntzberger steps out.

"There you are. Is this what you've been doing instead of preparing for our three o'clock?"

"Relax, I've got it all planned," Logan says, annoyed.

Mitchum looks over to Rory and says, "Hello, Rory. Long time."

Could've gone longer, she's tempted to say. "Hi, Mitchum."

"Dad, this is Jess Mariano, she's Rory's childhood friend," Logan lies.

To Rory's immense surprise, Mitchum's brow furrows. "Mariano...why does that sound familiar."

It gets weirder when Rory realizes that Jess' eyes are alight. "Probably because your team reached out to me a couple of months ago. You seemed very interested in acquiring my publishing company. Or me. Not really sure what angle you were going for."

"Ah," Mitchum says, remembering. Rory can tell he's annoyed. "I take it we weren't convincing?"

"No. But then again, I had written off the Huntzberger dynasty as something akin to another family
that, as a native New Yorker, I'm not very keen on."

Rory's eyes widen and shift to Logan, who is watching this exchange like a tennis match.

"I hope that wasn't an unsubtle comparison to the Trump family. That would be quite rude."

"Of course, you're not criminals, but there is something to be said about the use of intimidation to get what you want that I find uncanny," Jess quips.

Mitchum Huntzberger's entire ensemble is probably worth a collective couple thousand dollars. Jess is wearing a discount coat from Burlington Coat Factory, jeans from high school, and a sweater of Rory's, and a pair of Chucks that Paris typically wears while doing community service. There's no comparison there, and yet, Jess has a way of staring down men who seem so much larger and bringing them down to size.

"Hm. Well, good luck trying to stay afloat. Small publishers never last."

Jess smiles cryptically. "We should go, Rory. Your grandpa should be done with testing by now."

Pause. "You did hear, I'm sure, about Richard? I'm assuming you didn't since I'm sure that would've been the first thing you said beyond long time."

Mitchum stares at Jess, his jaw clenched, before he turns to Rory. "I'm very sorry about Richard. I'm glad to hear he's recovering. Shira will be relieved."

"Thank you," Rory says simply.

"Nice to meet you officially, Mitchum. Have a great day," Jess says. She nods to Logan, who is immediately pulling out his cell phone to text.

A minute later, Rory receives a text:

From Logan Huntzberger:
JESS IS A HERO FOR THE PEOPLE!

Rory laughs and shakes her head, handing her phone to Jess, who types a response back: you give me hope for your family – Jess

Rory smiles and puts her phone away. "I think he's going to be a lot better than Mitchum Huntzberger when he's ready. Also, that was so hot."

Jess grins. "That got you hot and bothered?"

"You know how much I hate him."

"I know."

"That moment is going to endear you to my mom and my grandparents. It may just help my grandpa's recovery process."

Jess throws her head back and laughs.

**

Recounting what happened with Mitchum Huntzberger doesn't suddenly cure Rory's grandpa, but he does laugh and her grandma looks at Jess with appreciation and her mom...
"I think I like her," her mom says when Jess leaves to give the family privacy.

"I'll keep her," Rory says.

**

Rory ends up missing two days of classes. Jess offers to go in her place while Rory stays in the hospital, but Rory tells her that she's no longer in large lecture halls anymore and it'll be obvious that Rory Gilmore of the first week of school looks very different from the Rory Gilmore afterwards.

Jess stays with her for a day and then with a crisis in Truncheon, Luke saves the day and offers to drive Jess to Philly.

"You really don't have to -" Jess starts.

"I've already filled the truck, we're going," Luke says over the phone.

"That'll be a fun ride, full of prolonged silences punctuated by arguments on what music is playing in the stereo."

Rory doesn't exactly know Luke's taste in music, but it can't be great if her mom always had control over it while they were dating. "Just put on a classic rock station. That's your safest bet."

"You think it would be, but it ends up being a disaster."

"It'll be fine. I'll keep you posted about coming to you for Presidents' Day Weekend."

"You better because it's Matthew's birthday."

"No."

"You can pitch in on whatever gift Chris and I decide on, if you want."

"We'll see, maybe I'll try to beat you in gift giving."

"I'm not competitive."

Rory rolls her eyes and doesn't bother bringing up Dean.

When Jess leaves, Paris says, "You know, I never imagined you and Jess being long term, but I can see it."

"Thanks...I think."

"Now that things are back to normal, you have some major catching up to do. Remember, I have twenty-one resumes."

"Who can forget?"

**

Things do seem to go back to normal until her mom comes to her apartment at six in the morning to let her know that she and her dad are splitting up.

Rory hated to think it, but she figured.

In the meantime, she researches newspapers across the country. She applies for the James Reston
Reporting Fellowship and tries to calm her nerves since they only take four people. Of course it's every reporter's dream to work for The New York Times, she's not unique in that regard, so she aims lower, like…

"Really? The Philadelphia Inquirer?" Jess asks cautiously.

"It's a perfectly respectable paper," Rory says, biting her lip. "Besides, wouldn't it be nice if we were in the same city?"

"It would be great," Jess admits, "But I know how much this means to you. I don't want you to limit yourself. If you get a good opportunity anywhere, you should take it."

Rory tries not to sigh and drops the subject for the time being, bringing up other newspapers like San Francisco Chronicle, Detroit Free Press, and The Seattle Times.

And even though she tries to her best to not think about The New York Times, her hopes continue to rise when Hugo Gray offers his contact at the paper to her and she schedules a meeting over coffee in New York.

So she squashes it down by distracting herself by going to North Carolina to Mia's wedding. During a quiet moment in the reception, when Mia asks how Rory is doing, Rory tells her about Jess and doesn't feel nervous about it. Mia smiles and asks to see a picture, which makes Mia laugh in surprise.

"I always knew you'd like a little danger," Mia says with a wink.

"You know, she's actually very stable now. But she can definitely rock a pair of fishnets."

"Atta girl."

Rory is sad to say goodbye, afraid that she won't know when she'll next see Mia again. Mia makes Rory promise to let her know where she ends up after Yale.

On their way back, they stop near Philadelphia and Jess comes out to meet them with Philly cheesesteaks.

"What on earth?" Rory's grandma questions, staring at her sandwich in horror.

"Mom, I swear, these are heaven," her mom says.

"You're so nice," Rory says to Jess, ignoring her mom and grandma.

"I know. So, I may actually come up to Stars Hollow – Liz wants to baptize Doula."

"You're kidding."

Jess grimaces. "I'm only going because I get to see you."

"Who's going to be her godmother or godfather?"

"Me and Luke."

Rory's jaw drops. "Really? Wow."

"It's really not a big deal," Jess brushes off. "It doesn't even make sense."
"It's kind of sweet. Are you going to wear a dress?" Rory asks teasingly. "It has to be a long one though."

Jess scrunches her nose at her, which makes her laugh. "Maybe, but you better make use of the easy access," she responds quietly.

Rory blushes and darts her tongue to her bottom lip.

"Think of me tonight, won't you?" Jess requests innocently.

"Only if you think of me, babe," Rory retorts back.

"Okay, we should hit the road, Jack," Rory's mom says, interrupting them.

"Let me know what day you'll come up," Rory says, bringing Jess in for a hug.

"Can I get a kiss?" Jess asks in her ear.

Rory pulls back and presses her lips gently to Jess'. She smiles nervously and Jess takes a look at Rory's grandma. "I think she'll be fine," Jess says to Rory. "I love you so very much, Honey Bunny."

"As do I, Pumpkin."

When they're back in the car, Rory's grandma says, "You two look very sweet together."

Rory hides her grin behind her hand as she stares outside her window.

When she gets back, she gets a call from a newspaper she didn't much care about when she first sent in her application: *The Providence Journal*. She agrees to the interview and spends hours preparing. She makes a large binder with all the articles she's written, the articles she's edited, drafts of stories she hopes to write. She researches the newspaper, which even though it's small, it has a long, rich history – even Paris admires them for their work with uncovering the Nixon tax scandal.

It's definitely not what it used to be, but maybe it would be a good start.

She takes Amtrak to Providence, which takes an hour and a half and she ends up being close to a half hour early, but Kate Hessel greets her with enthusiasm and admits that when she first interviewed at *The ProJo*, as they call it, she was over an hour late and ended up walking aimlessly around.

The interview goes so well that Rory is shocked when she leaves and finds over an hour had passed. Kate is smart and charming and was interested in what Rory had to say. Kate explains her management style, how she's open to collaboration and wants her writers to be independent and foster creativity. It all sounds…

"It honestly sounds perfect," Rory says on the phone to Jess once she gets off the train.

"Well, if there's one thing I've learned as a functioning adult is that it's hard to find a decent boss," Jess says.

"We'll see, I may not get an offer."

Jess snorts. "Yeah, okay. So, want to hear about my awful goddamn journey because it starts with a
"Well, soon I'll be in Stars Hollow and then you can show me your pretty dress you plan on wearing."

"I actually thought about wearing one of yours."

"I think it'll be a little tight in the chest."

"I will happily make a priest sweat."

"Evil."

"A little. Get over here!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming!"

It's a good thing Rory had already packed her bag before her interview and put it in her car because she drives straight from the New Haven train station to Stars Hollow.

**

Rory arrives at the diner to find April and Jess talking behind the counter.

"Are you actually helping out your uncle?" Rory asks.

"No, I'm waiting for you to whisk me away," Jess retorts. "Want coffee?"

"Please and thank you. Hi, April! It's nice to see you."

April gives Rory a big smile. "Nice to see you too! You're graduating Yale this year, right?"

"Yeah, really soon, actually."

"Wow, that's just so crazy. Are you super excited to go into the real world? I know I can't wait."

"Hold onto your youth," Rory advises.

"We're still young," Jess points out.

"Okay, but we're not young young."

"You mean we're not minors?"

"I'm tired, let's not do this," Rory complains.

Jess wordlessly pours Rory coffee.

"Thank you."

The corner of Jess' mouth quirks up.

"You guys act like an old married couple," April points out.

"Thanks, I think," Jess says.

"Want to come home with me? I brought some dresses for you to try on for your – for Doula's
baptism."

Jess turns to April. "See ya, kid."

"Bye, Jess, bye, Rory!"

Rory loops her arm through Jess' once she comes around the counter and ignores the stares.

"Are you working your way up to it?" Jess asks once they're outside.

"Kind of. Sorry, I hope that's okay," Rory answers with a wince.

"I get it. So, how many options do I have?"

Rory unlocks her car. "I brought three from school, but I have a couple in my closet here."

"Wonderful."

Rory shoots her an unimpressed look at her sarcasm. "You could've bought your own."

"Waste of money to buy something I'm only going to wear once."

"Then hush."

**

While Rory lays out Jess' options on her bed, Jess takes her shirt off without ceremony, revealing a black lace bra that doesn't have a function beyond looking…

Jess smiles with a fake innocent smile as she takes off her jeans revealing matching underwear.

"That's...new?" Rory ventures, flushing.

"Yep," Jess answers. She picks up the dress closest to her – something pink and almost goes to Rory's knees, so it should be respectable for a church on Jess. "Too fancy." She tosses it back on the bed. She takes a step closer to Rory and picks up another one – it has a flower print and when Jess brings it up to her body, Rory has to admit that wasn't one of her best picks. "You're joking, right?"

"I can admit my errors," Rory allows.

Jess tosses it with the blue one. She steps closer and picks up a gauzy blue one. After staring at it for a moment, she slips it on. With a regular bra, it would be too tight, but right now, the black peaks through the top and Rory can't stop staring. Jess picks up the skirt of the dress and moves it from side to side. "A contender."

Rory steps closer. "Yeah."

"What do you think you're doing?" Jess asks teasingly, leaning forward to press her forehead to Rory's.

"Admiring you."

Jess flashes her a genuine smile.

"This is quite a respectable outfit for you," Rory says with forced casualness, a hand playing with the fabric of the dress against Jess' hip.
"I know. I was thinking of wearing something red under it. Too much?"

"Probably. But I'd love to see it in red." Her hand slips down, down, gripping the hem.

"I bet you do," Jess teases.

Rory finds skin under her hands and she's a little too impatient, sliding up to reach Jess' underwear. She's already wet, but so is Rory, so it's nothing to really be proud of.

Rory doesn't even bother taking off the dress, too desperate to have Jess under her, and by the time they're lying on their backs, panting, she realizes that she definitely has to put that dress in the washing machine.

"I'll call this a winner," Jess says in between breaths.

"I'll wash it for you."

Jess grins lazily. "This will definitely keep me occupied during church."

Sacrilegious in a way that would probably offend Lane, even, but Rory laughs anyway.

She gets a call from Kate at The Providence Bulletin and has to keep her cool as she thanks Kate for the wonderful opportunity and I will let you know by Monday, thank you again.

Her mom is ecstatic, visibly so, but there's something about Jess' knowing smile that makes Rory feel over the moon.

"It's a good job," Rory says as they walk to Weston's for pie.

"It is," her mom insists.

"Yep," Jess agrees.

"It's a really good job. I can't really imagine living in Providence though. I mean, I don't think there's a lot going on there."

"Not the best," Jess admits. "But there are colleges around there."

"Yeah, which would be great if I hadn't just spent the last four years in college at a college town. It's a great paper, though. I guess that's the part to focus on."

"Yep."

"But it's kind of small."

"Sometimes it's better to start off small," Jess says.

"You could be the big fish in the small pond," her mom adds.

"Yeah, which means I would actually get to write some articles, which would be great. But I don't know. Is it better to be a small fish in a pond where I'm going to learn more and have career-advancement opportunities?"

"You don't have to decide until Monday, and between now and then, you can eat a lot of pie."
"Yes, if we ever make it to Weston's."

"Seriously."

"God, fuck Taylor and this stupid hay maze," Jess gripes. "Weston's is not this far away."

"We're definitely burning off a lot of calories, so thank goodness you ordered an extra pie."

"Two extra pies, actually," Rory corrects her mom happily.

"Nice!"

Rory sighs. "To be quite honest, this is one of the best jobs I could imagine getting."

"That's really great."

"I know, but it's just one of, you know? It's not the best. It's just," she sighs again. "I don't know. I mean, if I take this job, I'm giving up the chance at the Reston fellowship."

"Which you want," Jess concludes.

"I'd be giving up The New York Times, you know? But then, is it idiotic to give up a great job for this chance at another job? Not even a job. The fellowship's only a six-week paid internship."

Jess holds out her arm to stop Rory from walking. She forces Rory to look at her. "Look, Rory, I know you're a very lucky girl, but...the odds for getting that fellowship? Are pretty slim. Is it worth the risk?"

"Aren't you all about risk?" Rory retorts.

"Come on, Rory, I worked nonstop to have money in my pocket since I was twelve. I don't do risks when it comes to financial stability," Jess says. "With Providence, you'll have a salary, you'd be a full time writer, you'll have a 401k, you'll have a boss who you already get along with...it's like April said. It's the real world. That shit matters."

Rory looks to her mom, who is staring at Jess with respect. She'd thought she'd never see the day.

"Look, if you want to take a gamble and wait on the fellowship, which, by the way, is not a guarantee way to get full time employment? Okay. But if you ask me? It usually takes a hell of a lot more work and time to get to where you want to be, but it's worth it." Jess looks to Rory's mom. "Right, Lorelai?"

Her mom's breaths are shakey. "Couldn't have said it better myself."

Rory swallows thickly.

"It's not the only way to make it to The Times. There's no rush. You're twenty-two."

"Hear, hear," her mom exclaims. "Wait, I think I see Weston's! Hallelujah!"

**

Rory doesn't know what her mom and Jess talk about when she goes inside to pick up the pies, but when she comes back out, they're actually smiling at each other.

"So, now that you two are officially getting along, which is the pie that's going to commemorate the
occasional – cherry, banana-cream, or strawberry-rhubarb?"

Her mom and Jess scrunch their noses at the same time, which makes Rory laugh.

**

(The thing is, the one thing she doesn't bring up about Providence is that it's even further away from Philadelphia than New Haven is.)

**

"Jess?" Rory asks once they enter the maze. "I know you're for Providence, but...you do realize that if I take that job, we'd be even further apart from each other than we already are?"

Jess stares at her with a serious expression. "Yeah. Obviously," she says slowly. "But since I've known you, this has been your dream. I'd never want to get in the way of that."

"Okay, but not to be cheesy, but can't you be part of my dream too?"

"That's really fucking cheesy," Jess says in a strained voice.

"I know we're doing okay with long distance, but I don't want this to be forever. This sucks."

Jess drapes an arm around Rory's waist. "Do you have anything planned after we get through this stupid maze?"

"No..."

"Okay. Let's go somewhere."

Rory furrows her brow, but nods along.

**

It takes less than two hours to get to Providence.

Rory is surprised by the similarities to Philadelphia – more in terms of the focus on creativity. The layout is strange too – it's certainly not like a grid and will be difficult to learn.

It's also surprisingly diverse, almost like New York in that regard.

Rory gets a coffee from a local shop – and there seems to be so many of them – and the barista shares that the reason she picked Brown to study at is because she found out Providence has the most coffee and doughnut shops per capita of any city in the country. "I don't know about you," she finishes, "but I love both of those things." She adjusts her pride flag pin on her apron and gives them both a smile.

When Rory steps out, she says, "I think I like Providence."

**

First thing on Monday morning, she calls Kate to let her know she accepts the job, requesting to start at the beginning of July.

"If it's possible – I would just like time to relax a little after graduating and take the time to settle," Rory rambles.
"I totally understand that. I have to figure out the start of a new pay period, but I'll get back to you on your start date. We're really excited to have you on board!"

When Rory hangs up, she feels...at ease.

**

Rory shouldn't be surprised that Paris got into every medical and law school she applied to, but seeing all the acceptance letters spread out on the kitchen table is...a lot.

"You're making my post-graduation plans seem terrible," Rory says.

"At least you know," Paris wails.

Rory decides to leave her alone for the time being since there's no reasoning with an anxious Paris Geller.

It all seems like things are falling into place. Everyone is talking about where they're going after May – even Olivia and Lucy have already signed a lease on an apartment in Queens (when Rory told Jess where exactly it was, Jess actually said *yikes*).

She even gets an ego boost when she e-mails Hugo Gray to let him know that she will be unable to send him anymore articles, but she appreciated the opportunity to work with him and his online magazine.

*Congratulations, Rory. I should've moved faster and snagged you first. Keep in touch.*

His response adds a little skip to her step.

**

Rory doesn't know what to do with Paris, who says things like *this wasn't supposed to happen* and she wasn't supposed to meet the guy – now, in college, when things are still so uncertain.

Rory wishes she didn't give up her beer.

Rory gets it – she's starting to think maybe this is it for her too, but Doyle comes in with a romantic speech about following her and while that's lovely...Rory doesn't know what will happen with her and Jess. They're both so independent and focused when it comes to their passions that it's hard to see when they'll finally be in the same place.

**

Her grandparents are thrilled and proud about her job. Her grandpa spends half of the dinner discussing restaurants and places he's been to Providence on business trips. Her grandma talks primarily about Newport, which is about forty minutes outside of Providence.

"Oh, the mansions, they're to die for," her grandma gushes.

"I'll add that to the list of things to do," Rory says.

After dinner, she comes back to her apartment to find Jess sitting at her kitchen table eating what's let of the erotic cake from Paris' medical school peer gathering with Paris. Paris is explaining the details, asking for Jess' opinion of who to watch out for.

"I don't know, Tim could be trouble," Jess says, stabbing her fork directly into the neck of the cake.
"I know. But I still keep thinking about Karen, I mean, I can crush her, but I think there's potential in her, you know?"

Jess looks to Rory and flashes her a wide smile. "Surprise."

Rory smiles. "Is that cake still good?"

"Not bad when you wash it down with beer. There's two left in the fridge."

"You could've told me we were low – I would've picked up something,"

"And ruin the surprise?"

"I knew you were coming to my graduation, I just thought you were coming Friday night." Rory goes over and sits on Jess' lap.

Something's wrong, Rory can tell by Jess' smiles not reaching her eyes, but she won't bring it up in front of Paris and Rory is selfishly excited to have Jess over days earlier than expected.

So Rory takes Jess' fork and eats some of the leftover cake, which is actually very good, and tries to ignore the fact that it came from an erotic bakery.

While Jess is in the shower, Rory notices that she has at least ten missed calls from Chris and Matthew. Given that neither of them have reached out to her, Rory figures they know where Jess is, but now Rory is curious – what is going on with Jess?

But Jess even though seems committed to not sharing anything, she's quite pleasant about it in a way that's refreshing. She even agrees to go to Woodbridge for karaoke with most of Stars Hollow, which Rory knows would've never happened years ago. She doesn't socialize with anyone besides her, her mom, and Lane, but she at least doesn't make it obvious that she can't stand most of the Stars Hollow residents.

Rory begs her mom to sing karaoke, ordering shots to ensure it. Jess helps her mom finish the tray.

And at first, when her mom starts singing, she can tell her mom is embarrassed, putting on an act, but then, Rory notices the change in her mom's singing almost at once. Jess turns to the bar where Rory's mom is staring (what is Luke doing here?), looks to Rory's mom, and there's sympathy. Rory's heart aches at the way her mom sings we both know I'm not what you need.

Rory's heart is in her throat by the time her mom finishes the song.

When her mom runs off stage, Jess immediately gets up, swaying a little on her feet. "Go find your mom," she says to Rory. She turns to Lane. "Lane, want to duet?" before heading up to the stage.

Lane stares after her in shock for a second before scrambling out of her chair.

"Jess!" Rory hisses, but Jess has already made her way onto the stage. Rory gets up and goes toward the stage, pausing only when the opening notes to "Paradise by the Dashboard Light" start playing. "You're joking!" Rory exclaims loudly.

Jess takes the mic and shoots her a large smile, shrugging. "Want to be the boy or the girl, Lane?" she asks, whipping her head to Lane.

Lane answers by singing, "I remember every little thing as if it happened only yesterday..."
Rory shakes her head and wishes she brought a video camera to record this. She finds her mom by the bathroom. Thankfully, her mom seems to be okay—very drunk, but not as emotionally devastated as Rory feared.

Her mom furrows her brow. "Who's singing?"

Rory sighs. "Jess and Lane."

"Really? ‘Paradise by the Dashboard Light’?"

"Stop right there—I gotta know right now…" Jess sings and hey, she's not bad.

"Okay, she's pretty cool," her mom admits.

"I think so."

"Remind me to thank her tomorrow."

"I will."

They go back to the table and by that time, Lane and Jess have forgotten about who is supposed to be singing the boy's or girl's part, Jess singing *it was long ago and it was far away, and it was so much better than it is today* while Lane sings *it never felt so good, it never felt so right*. In another life, Jess could've passed for a cool rockstar, Rory thinks. Miss Patty laments out loud about missing an opportunity to rope Jess into her productions.

"I think this will be Jess' first and last time performing," Rory laughs. "She will never live it down."

Bless Miss Patty, who attempts to connect with Jess once she and Lane come back to the table, but Jess says, "No," flatly and turns back to Rory. "How's your mom?" she asks quietly.

"Okay. Thanks for that. Ambitious and so obnoxious to choose an eight minute song," Rory says.

"I know, right? Never again. I hate Meat Loaf."

"Sure you do."

**

The next two days are spent packing up the apartment. Paris is a master haggler, managing to sell all the furniture, including their bed frames. Rory ends up sleeping on her mattress on the floor.

Jess seems content to leave her cell phone in Rory's room. Two days before Rory's graduation, when Rory asks how Truncheon is doing without her, Jess says, "Fine," in a clipped tone. Rory gives her a pointed look.

"Sorry," Jess says. "It's fine. Busy. We're moving forward with the contract."

"Well, that's good."

"Mmm."

Rory rolls her eyes and continues spackling the wall by the window.

At the end of the day, Rory considers a way to force Jess to sit down and talk when she gets a call from Luke.
"Hey, Luke...what's up?" Rory asks.

Jess looks up from her book.

"Hey, Jess has friends at my diner and they're refusing to leave until they see her. So I don't know what she's done with her phone, but please let her know she needs to get rid of them!"

"Hold on." Rory brings the phone to her chest. "Uh, apparently Chris and Matthew are at Luke's."

"What?" Jess gets up from the couch and takes the phone from Rory. "Excuse me?" she demands.

Jess isn't on the phone long with Luke before she's hanging up and going to grab her bag.

"Hey, hold on a minute!" Rory says, going after her.

The drive is uncomfortably silent during the first few minutes and Jess drives way too fast.


The knuckles of Jess' hands on the steering wheel are white. "Random House wants me to have a separate contract from Truncheon."

Rory furrows her brow. "Why?"

"Because they value me more as a writer."

Rory's eyes widen. "They want to make sure they have you for good in case Truncheon fails?" she ventures.

"Yep."

"Jess..."

"I won't do that to them."

"It's not – Jess, this is an opportunity of a lifetime. Do you know what people would do to be picked up by Random House?"

Jess jaw clenches and won't say anything else for the rest of the drive.

She parks in front of Luke's and slams her car door shut. Rory follows her into the diner.

"What the fuck?" Jess demands, bursting through the door.


Chris and Matthew are sitting on the counter and stand up.

"Look, we know what happened," Chris says.

"And we get it – like, if Truncheon fails, that's probably it for us, but you can't just throw away this opportunity of a lifetime, which is exactly what this is," Matthew adds quickly.
"We're a package deal, I thought we agreed on that," Jess answers stiffly.

"Look, I got sculpture Alicia's sister who's in law school at UPenn to look at the contract and it's fine, there's nothing weird in it. I mean, obviously we're going to get a lawyer who's passed the bar to look at it too, but, Jess, come on -" Chris begs.

"You're forgetting the fact that I'd have a deadline forced on me, right? I wouldn't be able to work full time at Truncheon," Jess retorts.

"We can handle it! And it's not like you'd be forced completely out! And it's temporary, yeah? Until you finish your book, so just write fast."

Jess rolls her eyes at Matthew.

"Rory, please, knock some sense into her," Chris begs.

Rory looks to Luke, who is gobsmacked, but once he catches her gaze, there's something…pained in his expression.

"Jess," Rory says softly. "This is a good thing."

"It's too good," Jess says at once.

"No, I think it's good. And you've earned it."

"It's not about earning."

"Sometimes it is."

Jess inhales sharply, looks at the floor, then looks past Chris and Matthew to Luke.

"It's your life, Jess," Luke says, eyes soft. "I know you want to be sure, but sometimes it's okay to take a leap."

Rory thinks about her mom singing "I Will Always Love You" and wonders when he'll take that leap himself.

To Rory's immense surprise, Jess' eyes are glassy. "You don't care?" she asks Chris and Matthew in a forced, even tone.

"I believe we said this was an opportunity of a lifetime, so obviously yes, we care. We're happy for you," Chris insists.

"I think you deserve more than a couple of hundred readers," Matthew says.

Jess swallows and looks down at her feet. She clears her throat. She looks up again and her eyes are dry, her expression stern. "Okay. Fine. But if anything goes wrong -" she starts, but Matthew and Chris' cries of jubilation drown her out.

Rory lets them have their moment and goes over to Luke, who looks a little teary-eyed.

"How much do you want to bet that Taylor will milk the fact that Stars Hollow would have hosted a New York Times Best Seller author?" Rory asks.

"I think Jess will take him out through sheer brain power," Luke says happily.
Frankly, Rory cannot wait for that day to happen.

**

Chris and Matthew end up crashing at Rory's house since it seems cruel to have them drive back to Philadelphia so late. After Rory changes into pajamas and brushes her teeth, she looks for Jess and finds her sitting on the front porch with a beer and a cigarette.

Rory sits down next to Jess. "I thought you quit," she says.

"I know. Need a better coping mechanism, sorry," Jess says, bringing the cigarette to her mouth.

"I'll buy you the patch. Or the gum."

"Thanks."

Rory smiles.

"I'm sorry for not...telling you. I know I said I would, it's just...you know I'm not used to good shit happening."

It's something that genuinely frustrates Rory, but she knows Jess is doing the best she can. "I'm glad you came to me, even if you didn't tell me what was going on," she tells her.

"I'm working my way up to being better."

"All we can do is try."


Rory blinks. "What?" she asks stupidly.

"Well, I can't work full time at Truncheon, so my location can be flexible. I figured I'd live with you in Providence and come back to Philly once a month." She shrugs. "I didn't mind Providence."

Rory is so elated she's surprised she's not floating. "I would kiss you, but I just brushed my teeth," she says faintly.

Jess crushes the cigarette against the sole of her shoe and drops it into her beer. She wordlessly stands up and holds her out to Rory, who takes it and follows her back inside.

**

Her grandparents' cocktail party celebrating her graduation is nice. The song is too sweet and it's good to see her dad again. Rory introduces Jess as her girlfriend and people are either very accepting, or too polite to be contrary. Rory is nervous about her dad and Jess meeting, but they seem to get along fine sticking to harmless topics like music and how Diane Keaton's career has gone down the toilet.

Jess also looks very pretty in a little black dress – she even broke her own rule and is wearing proper heels. (They're wedges and closer to a flat platform, but still a step up from Vans and combat boots.)

At the end of the cocktail party, Jess changes into sneakers that she had stuffed into her bag and they go to a campus apartment building which Olivia and Lucy said is hosting a large party spanning two floors.
"I sincerely hope Paris and Doyle sneak in some Hindi music," Jess says with a laugh. "That India trip is going to be nothing short of a disaster."

"I know – their stomachs are just too sensitive," Rory says with a sigh.

Paris and Doyle, do, in fact, sneak in Hindi music, but they only manage it because Jess is an immense help and she's always been one to cause a ruckus.

"So, like, when are you moving to Providence?" Lucy asks loudly.

"Next month. My mom and I want to do a trip together for a couple of weeks. Jess may move there first, I don't know yet."

"Wait – you and Jess are moving in together?" Olivia interrupts.

"Yeah, she's...gotten a career opportunity, so at least for a year, we'll be living together," Rory says, stumbling through an explanation. Jess doesn't want people to know quite yet.

Lucy and Olivia squeal. "We have to talk to her about the best city spots," Lucy says.

"Jess has never lived in Queens," Rory reminds them.

"We'll be all over, baby. We will not be limited by our apartment's zip code!" Olivia exclaims.

"Wait, Liv, you need to tell Rory about those pictures you took of Jess," Lucy gasps.

"What? Did someone buy all of them?" Rory jokes.

"I mean, the gallery I'm working at wants to feature them in their amateur viewing in November," Olivia says.

"Oh my God, Jess is going to flip," Rory says with a laugh.

"I don't flip," Jess says, popping into the conversation.

"You will when you find out your face is going to be featured in an art gallery in Queens."

"Ew, Queens," Jess scoffs.

"That's all you got from that?"

"Paris told me – she found out."

"Paris should be a spy," Lucy says in awe.

Jess is the one who takes Rory, Paris, and Doyle back to the apartment, murmuring that they will thank her in the morning for not having major hangovers.

Which, Rory does appreciate when she wakes up with the next morning with butterflies in her stomach, all due to excitement and nervousness.

Jess can only go to the ceremony because Paris was generous enough to give one of her tickets away. She ended up making close to eight hundred dollars selling two of her others – her nanny is the one one who can attend.

Even though you're not supposed to clap or cheer until every name is called, her parents ignore that
and do both. She can hear Jess whistle obnoxiously loud, but she at least remained seated.

Rory's a little emotional when she sits back down and it doesn't seem real, but once she throws her hat up in the air – not too high since she needs it back for pictures – she starts to come to terms with another chapter in her life finishing.

**

(She hovers by the doorway of the apartment and she almost feels like crying, but she eventually turns off the lights, shuts the door, and leaves New Haven for the last time in a long time.)

**

Rory makes sure to say goodbye to Paris and Doyle before their trip to India. Paris promises to bring back a souvenir for her and Jess while Doyle is packing a bag that's exclusively dedicated for every sort of stomach health medication.

By the end of the week, Doyle has already posted a handful of pictures on Facebook and thankfully neither of them looks sick – in fact, they look very happy.

Dave surprises Lane by arriving in Stars Hollow, and Rory doesn't want to assume anything, but Mrs. Kim actually seems okay with the relationship.

There are a lot of things up in the air, despite the fact that she has her job in place. There’s still a matter of where exactly in Providence she and Jess will live in, which has involved a lot of research and phone conversations deep into the night, debating the merits of the North Side versus the South Side. There’s also a rollercoaster trip her mom has been trying to plan, limiting to just to east coast.

She thinks Luke may finally take that leap since before Jess left, she supposedly called him out on his behavior, but that remains to be seen.

There is also the open invitation to Friday Night Dinner for Jess since her grandparents want to properly sit down with her, which Rory is only slightly nervous about, placated a little by the fact that her grandpa read The Subsect and thought it was ‘quite good,’ which is high praise for a man who hates most of what’s on the New York Times Best Seller List.

But overall, Rory is excited about what's going to happen next – it used to scare her, but now she rather likes it, how it's all wide open. Besides, there are some things that are always going to be the same no matter what – her mom, Lane – even if she's on the other side of the country, Paris, who will only be an hour away at Harvard Medical School, and, well –

"Hey, so Chris and Matthew are morons and want to take a Truncheon Field Trip, yes, Mathew, it sounds that stupid so I'm going to say it in that tone – they want to take a trip to Providence and scope out the city," Jess says over the phone. Rory can hear Chris and Matthew arguing in the background.

"Yeah, sure, if you want, I'll pick you guys up from New Haven so you're not on the train for over four hours," Rory says with a shake of her head.

"Oh no, this is the stupid thing. They want a road trip." Rory hears, it's not stupid! It's young adult fun! from Matthew.

"Oh boy."

"Yeah, oh boy. So fair warning, if you hear about a random murder off the Jersey Turnpike, you'll
know who it was. Just protect my Moleskins, publish them for a few bucks, and tell Paris she can suck my dick."

"Wait, why?"

"She'll know why."

Jess is there.

So, Rory will be just fine.

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